

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board Minutes

26th February 2026

11:00 to 13:00

Virtual

Present:

CLlr Katie Thornburrow
CLlr Alexander Nicoll
CLlr Nicola Gribble
CLlr Robin Wyatt
CLlr Tumi Hawkins
CLlr Brian Milnes
CLlr Judy Roberts
CLlr Thomas Broom
CLlr Richard Butler
CLlr Peter Martin
CLlr Tracey Grant

Cambridge City Council
Suffolk County Council
Bedford Borough Council
Cambridge & Peterborough Combined
Cambridge City Council
South Cambridgeshire District Council
Oxfordshire County Council
Buckinghamshire Council
West Northamptonshire Council
Buckinghamshire Council

Apologies:

CLlr Steven Broadbent
CLlr Alex Beckett
CLlr Liz Leffman
CLlr Phil Smart
CLlr Jennifer Wilson-Marklew
CLlr Lesley Wagland
CLlr Tom Daly
CLlr Graham Plant

Buckinghamshire Council
Cambridgeshire County Council
Oxfordshire County Council
Ipswich Borough Council
Milton Keynes City Council
Essex County Council
East Suffolk Council
Norfolk County Council

EEH Team Members Present:

Adam King
Fiona Foulkes
Hanane Elmaarouf

Head of Policy & Partnerships
Capability, Excellence & Governance Manager
Business Unit Co-Ordinator

1	Introductions and apologies Cllr Katie Thornburrow welcomed everyone to the meeting. Members were asked to introduce themselves when speaking.
2	Minutes of last meeting Minutes Corrections: to amend the previous minutes to correct Cllr Neil Shailer's designation and to record that Cllr Phil Smart attended the Milton Keynes meeting rather than giving apologies. Subject to those amendments, the minutes were agreed. Katie Thornburrow said that all actions are complete and there are no ongoing actions.
3	Chair's Update Cllr Katie Thornburrow opened the meeting and said this was the first meeting of 2026 and reflected on developments since the extraordinary November meeting. She said announcements had been made by East West Rail Company regarding the configuration of the Marston Vale line, a proposed solution for the London Road level crossing in Bicester, station changes at Bletchley, Bedford, Cambourne and Cambridge, the acceleration of Tempsford Station and the potential for East Cambridge station. She said she remained concerned that passenger services had not yet commenced on the Oxford to Milton Keynes section and described the continuing delay as deeply frustrating. She said the delay postponed economic benefits, undermined confidence in infrastructure delivery and affected communities that had experienced prolonged disruption. She said a draft letter to Government urging commencement of services would be considered later in the meeting.
4	East West Railway Company Update Tom Wilson provided an update on the Active Travel Partnership Programme. He said the programme was designed to support local authorities in developing active travel schemes that complemented East West Rail and improved sustainable access to stations. He said the programme was underway with Cambridgeshire, Central Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedford, and that scheme cards and prioritisation frameworks were being developed to support delivery and funding readiness. Cllr Thomas Broom said he considered Buckinghamshire's inclusion in the programme disingenuous in light of concerns regarding the proposed train maintenance depot in rural Buckinghamshire. He said the decision had been taken without meaningful consultation and expressed frustration at the environmental impact and communication approach adopted. Tom Wilson said the Active Travel Programme was separate from depot matters and said Natalie Wheble and Ed Leech would address broader issues in their update. Cllr Robin Wyatt said he welcomed proposals for active travel and asked whether schemes could include wider connectivity such as walking and cycling routes along the corridor rather than only localised access to stations. Tom Wilson said there was flexibility provided schemes supported connectivity to East West Rail stations.

Cllr Tumi Hawkins said East West Rail Company should not suggest that active travel support was optional and said villages affected by the scheme required meaningful benefit.

Tom Wilson said East West Rail Company was required to mitigate impacts and confirmed engagement was underway with South Cambridgeshire officers.

Julian said he was the relevant officer and confirmed discussions were ongoing, with further clarification being prepared for members.

Cllr Judy Roberts said Oxfordshire was keen to engage further on active travel proposals and confirmed strong interest in collaboration.

Cllr Brian Milnes said clarity was required regarding the different funding categories and how connectivity to Cambourne North would be delivered in practice.

Tom Wilson said further engagement with members would be arranged.

Natalie Wheble said East West Rail Company was continuing design development following publication of the update report and was preparing for a route wide consultation in the spring. She said design update sessions had taken place in Bletchley and Bedford and further sessions were planned in Bicester and Cambridge.

Cllr Thomas Broom said referring to the depot site as “Bletchley West” was misleading and said the site was in rural Buckinghamshire. He said there had been no meaningful consultation prior to the announcement and described the communication approach as unacceptable.

Cllr Katie Thornburrow said the concerns had been strongly made and requested that follow-up engagement take place outside the meeting.

Cllr Judy Roberts asked whether both the underpass and footbridge options remained under consideration at Bicester.

Natalie Wheble said both options were still being consulted on.

Cllr Robin Wyatt asked whether specific design engagement would take place between Bedford and Cambridge, including areas such as St Neots.

Natalie Wheble said engagement plans would include relevant areas along the route.

Action: East West Rail Company and relevant local authority officers to provide clearer information to members regarding active travel scheme lists, funding categories, prioritisation, and member engagement, particularly in South Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire.

5	Lessons Learnt report Fiona Foulkes introduced the item and updated the board on the context and key findings of the Lessons Learned from Oxford to Milton Keynes project Fiona Foulkes said she was seeking Board approval of the draft Lessons Learned report covering the planning and construction of the Oxford-Milton Keynes section. She said the report identified fifteen lessons across six themes including construction impacts, communication, collaboration and speaking with one voice. Cllr Peter Martin said the report felt overly positive and did not reflect Buckinghamshire residents' experiences, particularly regarding construction impacts and ineffective day to day contact. He said the Aylesbury spur remained undelivered despite housing commitments linked to it. Cllr Thomas Broom said the Board should adopt a more sceptical approach in scrutinising East West Rail Company. Cllr Judy Roberts said the broader Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project process required examination as local authorities often felt overruled. Cllr Robin Wyatt said stronger accountability mechanisms for community benefits should be considered. Fiona Foulkes said she appreciated the feedback and would strengthen the tone where appropriate while maintaining balance. Cllr Katie Thornburrow said the report was not finalised and that further input from Buckinghamshire councillors would be incorporated before approval. Action: Fiona Foulkes to incorporate further feedback, particularly from Buckinghamshire members, to ensure the report more accurately reflects construction impacts and community experience before finalisation. Board agreed the draft report on Lessons Learned from Oxford to Milton Keynes
6	Opening of Oxford-Milton Keynes section Adam King introduced the item and updated the Board on the delay to opening the Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail. Adam King said passenger services had not commenced despite infrastructure completion and that Chiltern Railways had been announced as operator. He said a draft letter to Government urged resolution of the dispute preventing passenger operations and emphasised the economic and behavioural risks of delay. Cllr Peter Martin asked about a Great Western Railway Intercity Express train that had been observed on the line. Adam King said he would investigate and report back.

	Cllr Katie Thornburrow said the Board's priority was commencement of passenger services as soon as possible. Action: Adam King to investigate and report back on the reported Great Western Railway Intercity Express train seen operating on the Oxford–Bletchley section. Action: Board members to provide any comments on the draft letter to Government urging commencement of passenger services, and Adam King to finalise and send the letter on behalf of the Partnership. Board agreed to write to the Secretary of State for Transport urging that services on the Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail commence as soon as possible
7	England's Economic Heartland workstream update Adam King introduced the item and updated board members on a range of England's Economic Heartland work priorities which touched upon East West Rail. Adam King said progress had been made on the Oxford to Swindon to Bristol service, with Great Western Railway applying for access rights and Government support indicated. He said work continued on integration, advocacy regarding Ely Junction and ensuring that route studies reflected Board priorities including the Aylesbury link. Board noted updates from EEH on its work, with partners, which involves East West Rail.
8	Eastern Section Update Cllr Alexander Nicoll said this would be his final meeting in this role and reflected on the long term vision of coast to coast connectivity. He said communication failures could undermine public trust and said East West Rail Company representatives should attend full Board meetings rather than only specific agenda items. Alastair Southgate said the Eastern Section Board had focused on Greater Anglia timetable changes and the importance of Cambridge East as a stepping stone rather than an endpoint. Cllr Katie Thornburrow said the Board strongly supported extension beyond Cambridge. Adam King said he would write to East West Rail Company regarding full meeting attendance. Action: Adam King will write to the East West Rail company to request their presence for the entirety of future partnership meetings.
9	Future Meeting Dates • 23 April 2026 • 09 July 2026 (Virtual) • 22 October 2026 (In Person)