



Transport & Infrastructure Committee

18 September 2024

Title:	East West Rail Update
Report of:	Robert Jones, Transport Programme Manager
Lead Member:	Cllr Anna Smith, Lead Member for Transport
Public Report:	Yes
Key Decision:	No
Voting Arrangements:	Recommendation B: Simple majority vote

Recommendations:

The Committee is asked to:

A	Note the contents of this report
B	Delegate authority to the Assistant Director for Transport to coordinate a timely response to the East West Rail consultation, in collaboration with the Chair of the Transport and Infrastructure Committee, should the consultation timeline preclude further discussion at the November meeting.

Strategic Objective(s):

The proposals within this report fit under the following strategic objective(s):

x	Achieving good growth By providing a faster, more reliable transport link between key regional hubs, East West Rail will stimulate sustainable economic development. It will attract businesses, create jobs, and support housing growth, ensuring that development is balanced with environmental and community needs.
x	Increased connectivity The rail line will enhance regional connectivity, bridging towns and cities across the east-west corridor. It will improve access to employment, education, and services, reducing travel times and offering an alternative to road transport, which can relieve congestion and lower carbon emissions.
x	Enabling resilient communities By improving transportation infrastructure, East West Rail will contribute to the resilience of communities by supporting access to essential services and employment opportunities. It will also strengthen local economies and enhance the capacity of communities to adapt to future challenges, such as population growth and climate change, through better mobility and connectivity.

1. Purpose

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 1.1 | This report offers an update on the ongoing collaboration between the Combined Authority and the East West Rail Company (EWRC), emphasising critical milestones. It outlines key areas of focus, including strategic discussions aimed at addressing regional transport needs, and highlights the anticipated next steps. In particular, the report details plans for a forthcoming public consultation exercise, which will provide a vital opportunity for stakeholders and the wider community to contribute feedback and influence the evolving design and implementation of the East West Rail (EWR) project. |
|-----|--|

2. Proposal

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 2.1 | The Committee is requested to note the contents of the report, which outlines the ongoing progress and strategic collaboration between the Combined Authority and the EWRC concerning the EWR project. The members are asked to authorise the Assistant Director for Transport to take this action if the consultation timeline does not permit further discussion at the November Transport and Infrastructure Committee meeting, ensuring the Combined Authority's input is delivered on time and reflects regional priorities. To assist this, it is important to understand TIC members' concerns, issues, and opportunities in relation to EWR project. |
|-----|--|

3. Background

3.1 The East West Project

The East West Rail (EWR) proposal aim to significantly enhance connectivity across central England, linking key economic hubs and fostering regional growth. Launched through the East West Rail Company (EWRC) in 2017, the initiative aims to re-establish direct rail services between Oxford, Milton Keynes, Bedford, and Cambridge, through an east-west link. By bridging this gap in the national rail network, East West Rail would reduce travel times, alleviate congestion on existing routes, and offer a more sustainable alternative to road transport. It may open opportunities for new economic and residential development by providing connectivity with the innovation assets of Cambridge and Oxford as well as more widely.

The project aims to deliver connections for communities between Oxford and Cambridge by:

- Upgrading an existing section of railway between Oxford and Bicester;
- Bringing back a section of railway between Bicester and Bletchley;
- Refurbishing existing railway between Bletchley and Bedford;
- Building brand new railway infrastructure between Bedford and Cambridge; and;
- Services will be introduced in three connection stages.

At present, the easternmost section of the East West Rail (EWR) route, extending from Bedford into Cambridge, has secured government funding to advance through the critical planning stages, culminating in the submission of the Development Consent Order (DCO) by 2026. However, it is important to note that, while funding for this phase is in place, HM Treasury has not yet committed financial backing for the subsequent implementation and construction of the project. This creates an element of uncertainty regarding the delivery timeline for this vital section, which remains contingent on future Government funding decisions.

3.2 Background Position

On 26 May 2023, the preferred route for the eastern section of the EWR project was officially outlined. This proposed route included the development of new stations at Tempsford and Cambourne. This route would approach Cambridge from the south, with East West Rail Company (EWRC) outlining that this aligned to future growth plans for the region, while also supporting improved transport links across the wider east-west corridor.

	<p>When announced, Mayor Dr Nik Johnson welcomed the announcement but challenged government to go one step further and finally approve and progress the Ely Area Capacity Enhancement programme to unlock the full potential of East West Rail.</p> <p>Concerns were highlighted about the lack of commitment to electrifying the rail line, an omission highlighted given the climate considerations outlined within the Combined Authority's Independent Commission on Climate. The continued reliance on diesel engines was and continues to be seen as a missed opportunity to provide a fully electric, environmentally friendly rail service. The mayor also reiterated his call for all future rail developments to be electric and is committed to lobbying the government to ensure the line's electrification.</p> <p>The mayor remained committed to collaborating with regional partners and ensuring that all local perspectives are represented as the EWR project progresses to the next round of statutory consultations. The focus will continue to be on securing a sustainable, efficient rail network that meets the region's long-term needs.</p>
3.3	<p>Current Engagement</p> <p>In July 2024, the Mayor, alongside the Combined Authority's CEO and Assistant Director for Transport, held a key meeting with David Hughes, the newly appointed CEO of EWRC. The purpose of the meeting was to present the Combined Authority's concerns and challenges regarding the project, ensuring that EWRC leadership is fully informed of the region's priorities. This discussion marked an important step in strengthening collaboration and addressing critical issues that could impact the successful delivery of project.</p> <p>At a technical level, the Combined Authority, with representatives from Cambridgeshire County Council, the Greater Cambridge Partnership, South Cambridgeshire District Council, and Cambridge City Council continue to collaborate closely with the EWRC in relation to their Door-to-Door Strategy (First and Last Mile). This is focused on aligning the transport needs of EWRC with those of the constituent Councils to ensure that the evolving design proposals for EWR are fully in line with the principles set out in the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan and look to deliver a truly integrated transport network.</p>
3.4	<p>Future Expectations</p> <p>EWRC have informed the Combined Authority that a public consultation is now scheduled to take place before the end of 2024. This consultation was initially planned for earlier in the year but was postponed due to the general election. The upcoming consultation will provide an opportunity for the public and stakeholders to engage with and influence the latest proposals, ensuring that community voices are heard as the project progresses.</p> <p>Following this, a second statutory consultation is planned for 2025, providing further opportunities for public input on the proposals. Despite the previous delay, EWRC have informed the Combined Authority that the submission of the Development Consent Order (DCO) remains on schedule for 2026, ensuring the project stays aligned with its long-term delivery timeline.</p>
3.5	<p>Feedback Sought</p> <p>In preparation for the upcoming public consultation, officers from the Combined Authority are actively seeking input from members of the Transport and Infrastructure Committee on the key elements of the Authority's initial response. This collaborative effort aims to identify the critical issues and priorities that should be addressed, ensuring the response is comprehensive and reflective of the region's transport and infrastructure needs. By gathering valuable feedback from Committee members, the Combined Authority can formulate a well-rounded and strategic position ahead of the consultation.</p> <p>Some of the critical areas of concern that have previously been identified where further feedback from TIC members is sought on the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electrification from Day One: Advocacy for the full electrification of the line from the outset is essential to avoid reliance on diesel locomotives, supporting net-zero carbon emissions and avoiding costly retrofitting in the future.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing Biodiversity Ambitions: EWRC is being urged to adopt more ambitious plans to enhance biodiversity along the route, implementing stronger measures to protect and nurture natural habitats. • Minimising Impacts on Public Health and Wellbeing: Key concerns include mitigating negative effects on noise, air quality, and community severance. Ensuring that infrastructure does not disrupt roads, footpaths, or public rights of way is vital to safeguarding public wellbeing. • Supporting a High-Growth Economy: EWR must provide adequate transport capacity to support long-term economic growth, with station locations strategically aligned with Local Plans to promote sustainable development. • Linking to St Neots and Exploring the Potential for a New Station: Investigating the possibility of connecting EWR to St Neots, or establishing an additional station in the vicinity, could present a significant opportunity to stimulate growth and regeneration. Furthermore, integrating EWR with the East Coast Mainline would bolster regional connectivity, offering smoother and more efficient travel across the region, while positioning St Neots as a key transport hub in the expanding rail network. • Seamless Integration with Existing Transport Networks: EWR should be designed to integrate smoothly with existing infrastructure, including roads, rail, active travel routes, and bus services, enhancing the overall efficiency of the region's transport network. <p>These key issues will continue to be refined in internal discussions, ensuring that the Combined Authority's response is comprehensive and aligned with regional priorities for growth, sustainability, and community wellbeing.</p>
--	--

4. Appendices

4.1	N/A.
-----	------

5. Implications

Financial Implications

5.1	None.
-----	-------

Legal Implications

5.2	As per the Transport and Infrastructure Committee's terms of reference, the Committee has a role to 'Respond to key transport consultations that will impact on the Combined Authority', and on this basis can delegate its responsibility to the appropriate officer.
-----	--

Public Health Implications

5.3	EWR will have important implications for public health, necessitating a focus on minimising potential adverse effects while maximising health benefits. Proper management of noise pollution, air quality, and visual impacts is essential to protect the wellbeing of communities along the route. The reduction of road traffic through increased rail usage can lead to improved air quality, thereby reducing respiratory issues and other health conditions associated with pollution. Additionally, thoughtful planning to prevent the severing of communities by ensuring safe and accessible connections, such as footpaths and cycle routes, can promote active travel and encourage healthier lifestyles. By prioritising public health considerations throughout its development, EWR can help create healthier, more connected communities, contributing to an overall improvement in quality of life.
-----	--

Environmental & Climate Change Implications

5.4	The EWR project will have significant environmental and climate change implications that require careful consideration and proactive planning. As a major infrastructure initiative, EWR has the potential to contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions by shifting more freight and passenger transport from road to rail, thereby decreasing reliance on fossil fuels. However, the project's environmental footprint must be managed to minimise negative impacts on biodiversity, air quality, and local ecosystems.
-----	--

	<p>The decision to electrify the rail line from the outset is crucial for ensuring that EWR aligns with the broader goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions. Additionally, the project must address concerns related to noise pollution, visual impact, and the preservation of green spaces to protect public health and wellbeing. By integrating sustainability into every aspect of its design and construction, EWR can play a pivotal role in supporting climate resilience while promoting sustainable growth across the region.</p>
<p>Other Significant Implications</p>	
<p>5.5</p>	<p>N/A.</p>
<p>Background Papers</p>	
<p>5.6</p>	<p>N/A.</p>