



Transport & Infrastructure Committee

24 January 2025

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| Title: | East West Rail Consultation Response |
| Report of: | Tim Bellamy, Assistant Director Transport |
| Lead Member: | Councillor Anna Smith, Chair of Transport and Infrastructure Committee |
| Public Report: | Yes |
| Key Decision: | No |
| Voting Arrangements: | No vote required |

Recommendations:

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| A | To note the Combined Authority's response to the East-West Rail Company's non-statutory consultation. |
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Strategic Objective(s):

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

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| X | Achieving good growth – the East West Rail project will unlock new economic opportunities and foster sustainable development across the region. By improving access to jobs, education, and key services, it will support the creation of thriving communities and stimulate investment in housing and businesses. The rail link aims to drive productivity by reducing journey times, enhancing transport reliability, and connecting high-growth areas such as Cambridge and Oxford. Through its commitment to sustainable transport, East West Rail aligns with environmental goals, ensuring that economic growth is achieved responsibly and inclusively. |
| X | Increased connectivity – the East West Rail project aims to enhance regional and inter-regional connectivity, creating links between major employment hubs, research clusters, and urban centres. By providing an efficient, sustainable alternative to car travel, the project aims to reduce congestion on key roads, improve accessibility, and encourage the use of public transport. |
| X | Enabling resilient communities – the East West Rail project aims to play a crucial role in building resilient communities by offering reliable, sustainable transport options that reduce dependence on car travel and help mitigate the impacts of climate change. By connecting communities more effectively, the rail link will enhance access to vital services, support social inclusion, and foster greater economic self-reliance. |

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to present the Committee with the Combined Authority's response to the East West Rail non-statutory consultation. The consultation response outlines the Authority's position on key issues, aligning with strategic objectives and ensuring that the region's priorities are effectively represented. In line with the delegations secured at the 18 September 2024 Transport and Infrastructure Committee meeting, the Combined Authority response will be submitted by the Assistant Director for Transport on 24 January 2025, in collaboration with the Chair of the Transport and Infrastructure Committee to adhere with the consultation deadline.

2. Proposal

- 2.1 The Government committed to EWR in the Budget in October 2024 when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, said: "We will deliver East-West Rail to drive growth between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge with the first services running between Oxford, Bletchley and Milton Keynes next year and trains between Oxford and Bedford running from 2030."
- Following this announcement, East West Rail Company (EWRC) has initiated a non-statutory consultation for the eastern section of the route, extending from Bletchley to Cambridge and further to Cherry Hinton. This consultation, a critical step in refining the proposed plans and engaging with stakeholders, had experienced delays due to the general election held earlier in 2024. The focus on this consultation underscores the importance of EWRC gathering feedback from local communities and stakeholders to shape a rail network that aligns with regional needs and priorities.
- The consultation for the EWR project is open from 14 November 2024 to 24th January 2025, providing an opportunity for various stakeholders to engage and contribute their views.
- 2.2 The Local Transport & Connectivity Plan outlines the Combined Authority's commitment to champion and support the delivery of EWR.
- In line with this, the Combined Authority has prepared a single strategic, cohesive official organisational response to the consultation, ensuring a unified voice on behalf of the region. The Combined Authority response focuses on the broader implications and strategic concerns in relation to the project. Whilst it is acknowledged that more localised and community-based responses will be provided by constituent Councils and members, reflecting the specific concerns and perspectives of the communities they represent.
- To shape this response, the Combined Authority have actively engaged with key stakeholders, including Members of the Combined Authority Board, Transport & Infrastructure Committee, Environment and Sustainability Committee and the Business Board. A combination of existing forums and planned meetings was utilised to facilitate these discussions.
- Two briefing sessions were held with members and officers to provide clarity on the Combined Authority's approach to the consultation. While the official response has been prepared collectively, Elected Members and Business Board Members have been encouraged to submit their own detailed responses, alongside their contribution to the overall organisational submission.

3. Background

- 3.1 **Introduction**
- As outlined in the Combined Authority's Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP), EWR has the potential to offer transformative benefits for connectivity, economic growth, and sustainable transport. As a strategic rail link between Oxford and Cambridge, EWR aims to bridge a historic gap in east-west travel, enabling faster, more reliable journeys and creating seamless connections between some of the UK's most dynamic economic and research hubs.

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| | <p>The project has the potential to unlock substantial growth opportunities, not only for the urban centres along its route but also for smaller towns and rural communities that will gain improved access to jobs, education, and services. In doing so, EWR aligns closely with the priorities set out in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough LTCP, supporting good growth, enhanced connectivity, and resilient communities. The LTCP states that the Combined Authority will “champion and support the delivery of East West Rail”.</p> <p>As the project progresses, including the non-statutory consultation for the eastern section of the route, it is essential for the Combined Authority to engage proactively, ensuring that local priorities are reflected in the plans and that the region maximises the benefits of this transformative investment. This paper provides an overview of the consultation process and outlines the Authority’s proposed response, emphasising the importance of securing a rail network that meets the long-term needs of our communities and economy.</p> |
| <p>3.2</p> | <p>Key Dates</p> <p>Outlined below are several key dates that were instrumental in enabling officers to prepare a comprehensive and well-coordinated response to the consultation. These dates reflect the structured approach taken to ensure timely and effective collaboration, incorporating input from both officers and members alike.</p> <p><u>December 2024</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thursday 14th – EWRC commences the EWR consultation • Wednesday 18th – TIC/ESC/Business Board/Board members session with EWRC • Thursday 19th – Place Directors’ Meeting with an agenda item to discuss EWR <p><u>January 2025</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monday 6th – Circulated initial draft to LSM, TIC, ESC and Business Board members and key officers (CEXs and Place Directors) inviting comments • Wednesday 8th – Leaders’ Strategy Meeting • Wednesday 8th – TIC/ESC/Business Board/Board members session • Friday 10th – Deadline for comments / feedback • Tuesday 14th – Recirculate draft for review • Thursday 16th – Final draft response • Friday 24th – TIC Meeting & submit consultation response <p>As per the recommendation from the 18 September 2024 meeting of the Transport and Infrastructure Committee, delegation was sought and secured for the “<i>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.</i>” Therefore, the consultation response outlined within this paper will be submitted in line with this recommendation.</p> |
| <p>3.3</p> | <p>Basis of the consultation response</p> <p>EWR promises to create a fast, reliable, and sustainable transport corridor, addressing regional connectivity challenges while supporting economic growth and sustainable development. While strongly supportive of the project’s vision and alignment with the objectives of the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP), the Combined Authority has outlined several key areas requiring attention to ensure the project’s success.</p> <p>EWR aligns with the Combined Authority’s commitment to an integrated and sustainable transport network. It complements ongoing initiatives such as the bus reform programme, active travel networks, and A428 improvements. By strategically aligning EWR with these projects, the region can achieve a seamless, multimodal transport system that maximises accessibility and reduces reliance on private vehicles. The project also offers opportunities to bolster other key developments, such as the Eastern Gateway initiative at Cambridge Station.</p> |

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| | <p>The environmental impacts of EWR are a significant concern, particularly regarding biodiversity loss and habitat fragmentation. The Combined Authority emphasises the need for rigorous Environmental Impact Assessments, a commitment to achieving biodiversity net gain, and the adoption of innovative solutions to minimise ecological disruption during construction. Integrating green infrastructure into the project will further support the preservation of natural habitats and enhance the project’s sustainability credentials. In addition, the Combined Authority have sought to have EWR fully electrified from the outset thereby ensuring long-term sustainability, maximises operational efficiency, and aligns with national net-zero carbon targets.</p> <p>EWR’s success lies in its ability to improve connectivity both regionally and locally. This includes ensuring high-quality first and last-mile connections via active travel infrastructure and integrated bus services. Unified ticketing systems, aligned schedules, and accessible station designs are vital for creating a user-friendly transport experience. The Combined Authority also stresses the importance of extending EWR’s benefits eastward to Suffolk and Norfolk, ensuring robust connections to regional and national rail networks.</p> <p>The Combined Authority urges close alignment between EWR and other major infrastructure projects, such as the A428 improvements and the Cambridge to Cambourne (C2C) scheme. Collaborative planning between EWR and these initiatives can reduce duplication, enhance multimodal connectivity, and support the region’s broader growth and sustainability goals. Innovative design solutions, such as shared platforms for seamless transfers, should be explored to maximise user convenience and operational efficiency.</p> <p>Acknowledging the challenges posed by large-scale infrastructure projects, the Combined Authority recommends robust measures to mitigate construction impacts. These include clear community engagement, traffic management plans, noise and vibration controls, and funding mechanisms to address unforeseen disruptions. Lessons learned from similar projects, such as the A428 corridor upgrades, should inform EWR’s delivery phase.</p> <p>The Combined Authority highlights the risk of physical and social severance caused by rail infrastructure. To address this, the project must incorporate pedestrian- and cycle-friendly crossings, accessible station designs, and community-led planning processes. These measures will help maintain community cohesion and ensure equitable access to services and opportunities.</p> <p>EWR represents an opportunity to set new benchmarks for sustainable transport infrastructure. The Combined Authority advocates for electrification, green infrastructure, and integration with emerging freight strategies. By supporting rail freight options and leveraging EWR to facilitate sustainable logistics, such as materials transport for regional developments, the project can significantly reduce road freight dependency and its associated environmental impacts.</p> <p>EWR’s development presents opportunities to support planned growth areas and address regional challenges, such as educational "cold spots". Safeguarding land for potential future stations near St. Neots and Wintringham is essential to align rail connectivity with sustainable development objectives. Integrating EWR into local planning processes will maximise its role in fostering economic growth and meeting community needs.</p> |
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4. Appendices

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| 4.1 | Appendix A – The Combined Authority’s response to East West Rail Company’s non-statutory consultation. |
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5. Implications

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| Financial Implications | |
| 5.1 | None. |

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| Legal Implications | |
| 5.2 | <p>Whilst non-statutory public consultations, provide flexibility, they carry an expectation of fairness, transparency, and compliance with broader legal principles to maintain legitimacy and public confidence, therefore it is essential that the Combined Authority adheres to these principles when providing a response in order to avoid legal challenge.</p> <p>As per the terms of reference of the Transport and Infrastructure Committee, as set out in the Combined Authority Constitution, one of the functions of the committee is to, 'Respond to key transport consultations that will impact on the Combined Authority'.</p> |
| Public Health Implications | |
| 5.3 | <p>EWR has the potential to bring both positive and negative public health implications. On the positive side, EWR could promote healthier lifestyles by encouraging active travel through the integration of walking and cycling routes along its corridor, reducing air pollution by decreasing reliance on private vehicles, and improving access to healthcare, employment, and recreational opportunities. These benefits can enhance physical and mental well-being, particularly in underserved areas.</p> <p>However, there may also be challenges to public health, such as potential noise and air quality impacts during construction and operation, as well as the potential disruption to communities along the route. To maximise health benefits, it will be essential to implement measures that mitigate negative impacts, such as noise barriers, air quality monitoring, and community engagement initiatives, while prioritising active travel and connectivity to foster a healthier, more sustainable transport network.</p> |
| Environmental & Climate Change Implications | |
| 5.4 | <p>The delivery of EWR has significant potential environmental and climate change implications. On the positive side, EWR could provide a more sustainable and low-carbon mode of transport, helping to reduce reliance on car travel and contributing to a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions. This aligns with broader efforts to mitigate climate change and support net-zero carbon targets. However, the construction and operation of the railway could also impact local ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural habitats, particularly in sensitive areas.</p> <p>As outlined within our consultation response, to maximise environmental benefits, it is essential to integrate robust mitigation strategies, promote biodiversity enhancements, and incorporate renewable energy solutions. Additionally, careful planning of route alignments and grade-separated crossings can minimise disruption and safeguard natural landscapes, ensuring that EWR supports both connectivity and environmental sustainability.</p> |
| Other Significant Implications | |
| 5.5 | None. |
| Background Papers | |
| 5.6 | East West Rail update paper from 18 September 2024 - East West Rail Update.pdf |
| 5.7 | East West Rail Consultation 2024 Website - East West Rail Consultation 2024 |