

East West Rail Meeting

Friday 22 September, 6-7pm

Wilden Village Hall, 2 High Street, Wilden, MK44 2PB

Mayor Tom Wootton – Elected Mayor of Bedford Borough

Cllr Jim Weir – Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Environment, Highways and Transport

Craig Austin – Director for Environment (Meeting Chair)

Jon Shortland – Chief Officer for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Growth

Question: What are Bedford Borough Council's plans to stop EWR?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) Bedford Borough Council are collecting a range of evidence to be submitted during the statutory consultation period.

Question: What are your plans before EWR make the development consent order application?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) Bedford Borough Council are currently collecting data and evidence for the statutory consultation, which EWR have said is due to take place in the first half of 2024. Bedford Borough Council has employed SLC, an independent rail consultancy who are reviewing the pros and cons of four routes (2 northern routes previously promoted by EWR and the alternatives proposed by BFARe and ERTA). We have also employed JBA who are a flood risk consultancy to review the flood risks that EWR have suggested some routes impose. Both of these consultancies should provide Bedford Borough Council with reports by the end of 2023, which can be used as evidence for the statutory consultation. After this process, EWR will need to make a development consent order application which is a planning application to central government. This is expected to happen at the start of 2025 and if approved could lead to construction beginning in 2027.

Question: How soon until Full Council agree on a route?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) I can put it on the Full Council agenda at any given time. What is important is that there is enough evidence supporting our decision. It is a very political subject.

Question: I have read information which states that the construction around the flyover in Bedford could cause flooding. Is this true?

Answer: (Craig Austin) We are using flood consultants to get an objective and scientific view on flood risks proposed by EWR. Please send the information you have read to Jon Shortland so he can see the exact information.

Question: What are the economic consequences for Bedford if EWR does not go through the centre of Bedford?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) We have previously used SYSTRA to undertake an economic analysis of EWR. The analysis showed that EWR would economically benefit Bedford town centre. The analysis showed that there were more economic benefits if EWR trains stopped in Bedford town centre compared to the south of the town centre.

Question: It took one year to do work on Bromham Bridge. EWR will impact multiple bridges, will Bedford be completely shut?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) EWR will need to do work on 5-6 bridges. Bedford town centre suffered from Bromham bridge shutting and it was awful for the town. EWR will only do one at a time but the effect will be bad for Bedford businesses.

(Jon Shortland) EWR have to provide us with a construction management plan as to how they will do this. We have not seen this plan yet so we can't comment on it but we will comment on it once we receive it.

Question: Will the financial disadvantage of EWR be taken in account vs the financial advantage?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) The planning inspectorate should take both advantages and disadvantages into account.

Question: Will every EWR train stop in Bedford?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) As far as I am aware, all EWR passenger trains will stop in Bedford.

Question: Has the council got a budget to spend on fighting EWR?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) There is a specific reserve budget of a six figure sum. If we do not have sufficient funds, we will speak with the Mayor's office to see how we can progress.

Question: Will Bedford Borough Council have evidence ready for the statutory consultation?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) We are aiming for our evidence to be ready for the statutory consultation.

Question: What are the different economic returns for each route?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) We have asked EWR for the economic case for the train line coming through Bedford, but have not yet had answers.

(Jon Shortland) We have been asking for the economic case which has not been provided. None of the information we have requested from EWR has come to us quickly.

Question: Are Bedford Borough Council liaising with any other local authorities being impacted?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) I am not aware of Bedford Borough Council working with other local authorities on EWR. From a political point of view, Milton Keynes, South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City previously supported the northern route. Only Central Beds supported a southern route.

(Mayor Wootton) There is no liaison at a political level either.

Question: Can each officer confirm if they are for or against EWR?

Answer: (Craig Austin) We cannot take a personal view. We look at the evidence provided to us. I have a politically restricted role. Officers will do things fairly, based on evidence provided.

(Mayor Tom Wootton) Officers implement the policies set by Councillors.

Question: If there is a General Election and a change in government, is there a chance EWR could be scrapped entirely?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) We don't have a yes or no answer for this. It is really important that the evidence we have is as strong as possible.

Question: Is it fair to imply that because of the evidence you need to collect, that decision by EWR was flawed?

Answer: (Craig Austin) Any planning development as large as EWR will require the evidence collecting process that we are currently going through.