East West Rail Meeting Minutes. 19/05/23.

Attendees:

EWR: Beth West, Martin Catchpole, Jeff Jardine, Jordi Beascoechea

Bedford Borough Council: Laura Church, Jon Shortland, Craig Austin, Mayor Tom Wootton, Trevor Roff and Cllr Andrea Spice

Power point Summary Presented by EWR

Part one – Background to EWR and journey to date

-EWR explained what they are and what they hope to achieve.

-EWR explained they are owned by the Secretary of State for Transport and so they are bound by Government rules.

- EWR explained that it is down to the Government Ministers to make the final decisions.

- EWR declared their purpose and vision - to create jobs, expand communities, draw people to Bedford, and to provide easy and reliable transport. They aim to offer a cheap, quick and green service.

- EWR touched upon the three configuration states. Stage 1- Oxford to Milton Keynes (in delivery). Stage 2- Oxford to Bedford (in development). Stage 3- Oxford to Cambridge (in development).

- EWR provided a high level overview of the development process and of their emerging Business Case – but with no detail.

- EWR explained what they considered to be the Local Authorities role in the process.

- EWR outlined the stages of the Business Case. Stage 1- Strategic Outline Business Case - this is to figure out if it is a good strategic fit. Stage 2- Outline Business Case- this is to decide how well it meets objectives. Stage 3- Final Business Case- where it is determined if it can be delivered.

- EWR stated that the Business Case to date is not solely focused on Oxford to Cambridge, but also the areas in between (e.g. Bedford) are key to deliver the Government's aspirations for economic growth too.

- EWR shared their expected benefits of investing in EWR, e.g. ease congestion, provide greener travel, provide employment etc.

Route decisions

- EWR talked through some of the proposed track options during the 2019 non-statutory consultation. Routes A, B, C, D and E were shortlisted and consulted on in 2019. In 2020 the preferred route option was E due to receiving the highest score on four of the five key Assessment Factors: transport user benefit, environmental impacts and opportunities, contribution to enabling housing and economic growth.

- EWR informed the meeting of the 2021 consultation feedback and engagement (Route option B-BFARe adapted proposal). EWR explained this route would have resulted in a lower frequency of

services to Bedford and some services would bypass Bedford completely. They stated the tracks may cross large areas of floodplain, best-grade agricultural land, heritage assets and areas of woodland. They stated it would have resulted in the demolition of homes or it would have crossed the formed landfill site at Elstow which would have been very complex and expensive.

- EWR stated that they had looked at an alternative South Option which would have re-used the former varsity line. This would have required a track bed upgrade, increase risk of flooding, have significant impact on Country Wildlife Site, Local Nature Reserve, Priory Country Park. It would have also led to the relocation of Bedford St John's Station- this would have been further away from the hospital and the town centre.

- EWR shared more points on why they believe a 6-track northern route will have the most benefits and the least negative impact.

- EWR said that they aim to provide 4 trains per hour from Bedford to Cambridge.

- EWR stated that they will begin with 1 new freight path per hour in each direction along the EWR route during the day time. However this was challenged later in the meeting.

- EWR declared there will be no to little freight paths during elongated peak periods for now.

- EWR declared that the Wixams train station project has support but there are concerns around increasing dwell times at the platforms and would make 4 tracks more challenging.

- EWR reported that the main issues with sharing the slow lines - the relationship between the freight and the GTR services would prevent EWR from meeting its aims. Sharing the slow lines would also increase the risk of knock on delays.

- EWR reported that if they were to use the space between the current MML freight paths, this would cause challenges in aligning and integrating at both Bedford & Cambridge of the full EWR timetable

- EWR reported that they are required to fit their timetable around the already existing timetables or other railway services in the area.

- EWR reported that if they were to share the 900m in Bedford of the MML track on the slow lines, this would be detrimental to EWR's performance due to new complex signally requirements.

- EWR stated that having 6 tracks in Bedford is a similar cost to 4, but will have huge benefits and will mean that EWR services will not be constrained by other services.

- EWR stated that they intend to continue to work with Bedford Borough Council to make the most of the investment. They have stated they will help to redevelop the station area, relocate St John's Station resulting in a new station at the hospital, reduce land take and impact of properties etc.

Discussion

- Officers asked EWR is they planned to support the local authority on the DCO process. Beth West said that this is something that can be discussed.

- Officers asked when the OBC consultation will be and Beth West stated it will be in the first half of 2024, before the general election.

- Officers asked if EWR will be operating as well as designing and building the system. Beth West explained that this is what they had intended but they cannot guarantee this as the legislation may not come forward. EWR plan to design as if they were operating but they are allowing for all opportunities.

- Beth West commented that she is positive about ticket pricing but they are unable to commit to prices as they may not be the operators. It is their aspiration to keep fares as low as possible. Beth West explained they are designing in a way to make the travel as reliable and easy as possible to use.

- Beth West commented that they are aware of plans within the Wixams development and this is in discussion and routes/tracks are being considered. But were very vague.

- EWR stated that they are designing in a way that means the tracks will be suitable in 50 years' time. They explained that they are looking into the future at other potential projects that may happen and they are preparing for these possibilities.

- Officers strongly challenged EWR about the amount of freight trains per hour as the tracks will allow space for 18 per day. Beth West explained that they will begin with 2 freight trains each way per day and eventually the number will increase. Beth West's opinion was that there will not be many freight trains within the first year.

- Officers challenged EWR about their claim that EWR would have to work around all other existing routes and fit into long established routes which would cause significant delays and other issues. Officers explained that this is due to GTR (Govia Thames Link) not using routes in Bedford and they would not be interacting with EWR trains. EWR said that the 'indirect interdependency' will effect EWR. They stated that GTR would take priority then freight trains are modelled to fit through and then EWR will have to work around that. Borough Council Officers stated again that they did not agree with this but the discussion was moved on.

- Officers asked Beth West how many houses will be demolished as a result of EWR. EWR informed officers that they believe it will be 19 demolitions and 38 affected. Officers asked for EWR to specify what 'affected' means. EWR stated that when they say an 'affected home', they mean a home that is having part of their land removed, e.g. all or some of their garden. EWR stated that their next steps are going to include looking into this in more details and deciding what land will need to be taken. EWR stated that they cannot say which exact area of houses will be affected yet. Officers remained seriously concerned at the impact on residents.

- Officers asked EWR why they do not include the houses that will suffer from noise and vibration in the 'affected' houses. Officers stated that, in reality, the number of affected houses is greater than the 38 proposed due to the amount that will suffer. EWR are further reviewing how they use the term 'affected'.

- Officers asked EWR why they require a 6 track and why they can't make use of the space between the MML tracks. EWR stated that in their opinion there is not enough room.

- Officers asked EWR about their use of diesel freight trains. EWR stated that the use of diesel in a freight train depends on where they are starting and stopping. EWR stated they are looking into non diesel freights- i.e. the electrification of the freights/the funding involved. EWR stated that there is a lot of drive towards decarbonisation and many freight companies are being driven towards hybrid and quieter trains.

- EWR stated that their proposed red line will hopefully narrow down throughout further consultations.

- Officers asked about screening the route across country to make it less visible. Beth West confirmed that EWR were looking at screening maybe 20m from the line, which would also allow the creation of a lineside cycle route.

- Officers asked for further discussion on the level of demolition and major negative impact on local areas and EWR agreed that they are happy to arrange another conversation regarding this.

- Officer asked what their plans were for the homes they purchased until they are demolished. There is concerns that these will remain empty with associated anti-social behaviour. EWR suggested that they will be put in temporary use rather than boarded up

- Officers asked how wide they plan for the route consultation corridor and EWR said that currently they estimate approx. 500m but they are hoping to narrow this down by next year.

- EWR stated that they are also in discussing with National Highways regarding the A1.

- EWR confirmed that there will be a new station built somewhere south of St Neots.

- EWR confirmed that with the DCO to be submitted in the first half of 2024, the timetable would allow construction to start in 2027.

- Officers stated that they need to view the more technical documents that has led to this preferred route and they will then arrange another discuss about this.

- Officers questioned EWR on what local residents can do to voice their concerns and their objections. EWR explained that they will be holding sessions for people to come and engage and share their views. Officers stated that these need to happen ASAP and they need to be held in the areas that will be most affected. EWR stated that they will be publishing these sessions soon.

- EWR reminded officers that any final decisions are made by the Secretary of State and that all Government Ministers have to agree and this is what they have proposed is the best option. EWR stated that national government does not always align with local government.

- EWR have stated that they want to get local residents out of limbo ASAP and inform them of the plans.

- Officers stated that they want to be given the same amount of detail on the routes that weren't chosen as the one that has been chosen. EWR stated they are happy to pass this over.

- Officers bought up the Need to Sell Scheme and queried the criteria, stating that the criteria put out by EWR may not benefit several affected residents.

- Officers asked about the new Bromham Road bridge facilitating a cycle bridge and explained that this is a must- EWR appeared to take this on board.

Mayor Tom's Views

Tom's views were made abundantly clear throughout the meeting.

Despite this the meeting ended on good terms with both parties respecting each other's position.