

Mayor Tom Wootton meeting with Lord Hendy – BBC Notes of Meeting



Date: Thursday 16 th April 2026	Time: 2.30pm – 3pm	Venue: Committee Room 4a House of Lords, Palace of Westminster
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Invited parties		Attended
LH	Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill OBE – Minister of State Department for Transport	Y
AT	Andrew Towers – Department for Transport - EWR Team	Y
AA	Anisa Alimi – Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister of State for Rail	Y
TW	Mayor Tom Wootton – Mayor of Bedford Borough BBC	Y
NG	Councillor Nicola Gribble – Councillor for Renhold and Ravensden, Portfolio Holder for Environment BBC	Y
JBB	Joanne Branson Budd - Head of Capital Projects, Infrastructure and Sustainable Travel BBC	Y
CC	Cara Cosson – Personal Assistant to Mayor Tom Wootton (Notes for Mayor Tom) BBC	Y

*NB These notes are not formal minutes but are a summary of the discussion which took place.

No	Item
1	Apologies None received.
2	Introductions Anisa and Andrew arrived and introduced herself and Andrew, Mayor, Cllr Gribble and all from BBC introduced themselves. Lord Hendy arrived and greeted all. Mayor advised there is a handout <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CC distributed a copy of the “How to save 1bn by going south” document and enlarged EWR Route E and BFARe “Southern Option A3 map and the terrain profiles
3	Discussion Mayor explained the reason for the visit, he is the Mayor of the Borough of Bedford and has been dealing with EWR for a very long time, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • referring to the handouts TW advised he had been sending these messages up, but every time he gets a letter back from EWR, if he complains about EWR or their conduct, a couple of months later he will get a letter back not very satisfactory which is part of the reason he wanted to speak with Lord Hendy, • Mayor is fed up with them “marking their own homework” and he feels they have missed a massive opportunity to make EWR go a lot quicker. Lord Hendy acknowledged the comment. Mayor continued and advised:

- EWR have chosen the most difficult and hard to complete, will take years longer and also doesn't open up any ground for development.
- Route E has been driven through north Bedfordshire, which is all single-track roads, whereas if they went to the south of *the (Bedford)* town and there is this alternative.
- *(Referring to the map in the handout provided)* This shows the heights of both rail lines – (route E and the Southern option), EWR are telling you that this is the best route.
- If you compare the routes the southern route alters less than a metre from start to finish, and *(referring to EWR Route E on the map)* you are looking at something that will take at least 2 years longer to build and be £1bn more expensive.
- This is why we feel it needs somebody not from EWR as they have already made their minds up, but we would like someone from the Treasury to carry out a cost benefit analysis, at the minute with the southern route you can still catch up and save a couple of routes.
- *(Referring to the Route E on the map)* this route goes straight through the middle of Bedford, you will have to build 2 new train stations, 2 new multi-story car parks, a hospital car park, right through Bedford, knocking down 70 odd houses at least...

Councillor Gribble stepped up to clarify the routes on the presented map in more detail referring to the proposed route, EWR Route E that they are consulting on and they have their heels dug in on

- We have Universal there *(indicated to map)* which was not in the mix.

Lord Hendy acknowledged – indeed

Councillor Gribble continued, hold that thought, here this is a proposal *(and indicated on the map the Southern Route)*:

- Parkway Station
- Transport Hub - into Bedford
- This is a proposed line and what Mayor Tom didn't mention is that there we have the Black Cat roundabout, 6 carriageways to get across
- Here all the way down, East Coast mainline and the government's objective are met, quicker and we reckon £1bn cheaper and that is a conservative estimate.

Mayor Tom advised, referring to the Southern route:

- It ends up at Tempsford - the new town which could be served better from the south
- It would be easier to build
- And all this area *(pointing to map)* has better roads

Councillor Gribble pointed out the A421 on the map which goes to the Black Cat roundabout and advised:

- Bedford is the only town with the route going through and identified all new track bed.
- Pointed out Kempston Hardwick, where Universal is there (near the Southern Route proposal)

Mayor advised what we can't understand why this Route E was chosen and we have been asking for about 3 years, why choose a route through Bedford to knock down houses, cause congestion and problems, why not choose an easier route and save yourselves £1m?

- This is just from one protest group – BFARe, there are about 4/5 southern routes, and all are cheaper
- EWR will not consider southern
- We did work and analysed them, we did the work for them, but they won't look at it because they said the decision has been taken for the northern route *(Route E)*.

Councillor Gribble advised the decision has been taken but I feel the challenges are actually dawning and Jo will help as she is our technical expert at the Borough, and Cllr Gribble asked:

- What aren't they (EWR) seeing?
- The commitment we would like from you is to go to the Treasury, money talks, £1bn but also
- The economic damage, chaos in the town and environmental damage and people will be affected....

Mayor advised there is a huge amount of houses that have got to be knocked down, but the Southern route proposal speeds the job up, if you look at this you can get EWR delivered quicker and you don't have to knock down houses, you don't have to build a 12-storey, not just one but 2 multi storey car parks and in the 3 miles we are talking about the (Route E) proposes to build 3 new stations.

Councillor Gribble advised the train station is at Midland Road and they are talking about building another one 130 meters down.

Mayor advised that a lot of the houses they are knocking down are not for the railway but to make their (EWR) life easier (*to build it*).

Councillor Gribble and Mayor advised there is a solution that saves the government a lot of money and someone from Treasury has got to ask – why did we choose that route (*Route E*).

Mayor advised, Route E will be a hell of a lot harder to maintain, to keep running, it's cuttings, it's bridges

Councillor Gribble interjected, it's huge viaducts

Councillor Gribble and Mayor advised the Southern proposal is absolutely a doddle to build, there's none of the Black Cat issues, the road is going to be amazing, well it is already.

Mayor advised we have an opportunity to do a lot of development along the line (referring to Black Cat) but by EWR closing down saying they are going to go north I feel they are missing a trick, especially with the new town Tempsford.

Lord Hendy enquired if a southern route was ever one of the projected routes?

Councillor Gribble confirmed it was.

Lord Hendy asked at what stage was it ever a route.

Mayor advised in the days of the Tory government.

Councillor Gribble advised in 2019 it went to consultation and at the time this northern route (Route E) was significantly more expensive. The Southern route was cheap. It came out, when it was decided, somehow it had flipped and the northern route (Route E) significantly cheaper, which no one believed - it's going up a hill!

Mayor advised EWR have not laid a spade in the ground yet to build, they have started to do the archaeology and there is still time for someone from the Treasury to look at this and ask "what on earth are you doing, why are you choosing this route and knocking the heart out of Bedford?". Mayor invited Jo to explain further:

Joanne Branson-Budd advised:

- Some information is not forthcoming, when it does it presents us with challenges, the additional properties identified in Ashburnham Road for demolition was a late and big

surprise to us and we tried to understand what discussion and what optioneering had been done prior to that decision being made.

- We have external technical experts looking at that at the moment.
- We have asked for a copy of the constructability and option selections report, which hadn't been forthcoming but is a significant impact: it's 53 individuals / properties, businesses and residents
- The engagement has not been excellent, so Mayor Tom has asked officers to engage with residents, so they are more informed, as they don't feel informed by EWR.
- In terms of coming through Bedford, the impact that it will have during construction, in how they are proposing to sequence the works must be absolutely clear so you do not bring Bedford to gridlock.

Councillor Gribble advised that had reminded her that the proposed southern route has no demolitions at all which is incredibly important.

Lord Hendy acknowledged this comment.

Mayor advised

- 3 or 4 years ago Network Rail moved 1 bridge in Bedford, Bromham Road bridge, we have the figures for this, and we can prove to you the effect of 1 bridge being knocked down and rebuilt. The effects on the council, car parks and the footfall in the town was disastrous.
- EWR are talking about doing all the bridges in the town – including this one that has just been done – it is going to a congestion nightmare.
- Bedford has a unique problem in that we have a river with very few bridges and congestion comes with the territory.
- EWR are going to take a tiny town, with a huge amount of congestion and put a railway right through the middle and think it is going to be better.
- No one can work out how we are going to make it work.
- With that and the loss of the hospital car park, how to work a hospital with the loss of the car park during construction a multi storey car park is astounding.
- Regarding Universal, they haven't asked for anything, they are on the midland mainline in all of England this is the closest and they just want to be connected to this, they are not worried about going onto Cambridge, their passengers will come down and along. They are on the road network where they are. Passengers can be brought up that line straight from France.
- We also have an ambition that the train station to be built at Wixams has extra on the platforms. Passengers can be brought up that line straight from France. There would be a minor change required to support this at St Pancreas.

Mayor advised great work was being carried out at Wixams until a letter from the government was received telling them to stop but this would enable work to be carried out for Universal and it would power the economy but it doesn't make sense that at the same time this is going to be built other areas would be smashed up.

Councillor Gribble advised we are talking years of construction.

Mayor advised that the southern area is green field so could be built easily.

Councillor Gribble advised the southern area is also flat.

Mayor again reiterated:

1. He has never had a straight answer why they (EWR) chose to come through Bedford.
2. Why turn down an opportunity to build along the southern area and want to build in the wolds of north Bedfordshire which are all tiny B roads.

Councillor Gribble reflected initially it had been asked Lord Hendy to visit Bedford and the invitation is still there.

Mayor confirmed the invitation.

Councillor Gribble felt the map says it all, it is like day and night for a comparison of the northern (Route E) and southern (proposal).

Lord Hendy had been looking at the "How to save 1bn by going south" document and enlarged EWR Route E and BFARe "Southern Option A3 map and the terrain profiles, throughout the meeting and advised:

- He wasn't familiar with this until it had been explained today
(*Councillor Gribble advised she had previously emailed this to his office*)
- He could see where Mayor and Councillor Gribble were coming from.
- He knew where EWR is in terms of its progress towards approval and it is quite a long way down.
- He would look at what had been given to him and see what he could make of it, but this will have to be left to him to do.

Mayor reiterated we all really wanted, although we need the railway, we someone from the Treasury to look at it as what we do not need is someone at the 11th hour saying we can't afford it - £1bn is an awful lot of money.

Councillor Gribble advised it may be £1bn build out but that doesn't include the economic knock on our (*Bedford*) town.

Joanne Branson-Budd advised regarding the hospital:

- There are proposals to redevelop the hospital and expand the hospital site, to create an elective care centre.
- As a consequence of that, EWR have committed to construct a multistorey car park, but it is about the parking strategy and how that will be managed.
- The expansion of the hospital is key to Bedford.
- It is important how the patients will get to the hospital and how the car park phasing will align with the expansion of the hospital.

Councillor Gribble advised there appears to be no joined up thinking about the needs/impacts for Bedford at all.

Mayor advised they (*EWR*) haven't joined up how you get across the Black Cat, the largest road construction site in England.

Councillor Gribble advised she has a lot of dealings with (Highways England) they are both engaging and well engaged and they listen.

Lord Hendy advised he would look at it because Mayor and Councillor Gribble had asked him to, but it would have to be looked at in the context of how far EWR had gotten in the scheme.

Mayor advised this is why all are so anxious that someone outside of the EWR world looks at it and acknowledge that EWR have not put a spade in the ground, you have only down some work on archaeology.....

Councillor Gribble interjected they have only put some lines on the map.

Mayor advised they could still do the southern route proposal and because it does not require digging out, flyovers it could be built quicker and cheaper. Plus, someone has got to maintain this so I would be interested in what the rail people have to say.

Councillor Gribble advised with Universal it's an opportunity to say shall we look at it again, without anyone being worried about having egg on their face, given we haven't started let's reevaluate it.

Mayor advised Universal have advised they are going to pen and leave a grassy strip for EWR if they show up.

We have a problem around how EWR are going to price it because EWR has said in public meetings he doesn't want to be the park and ride for Universal, whether that is a negotiating position that the Head of EWR is taking, but every single car park will be vulnerable to people who want to use and get on the train, how do you stop that?

Joanne Branson-Budd confirmed this and advised David Hughes suggested in the interview the other day phasing methodology was being used / reviewed to bring that element forward but she didn't think confirmation of date had been provided as yet.

Lord Hendy advised they had certainly looked at the previous plan and how the Universal development interacts with it.

Mayor advised Bedford is at the heart of everything the government wants to do, Universal, Milton Keynes new town, Tempsford, Black Cat roundabout the largest road project, and over the hill Luton Airport. We have everything happening on our doorstep and then EWR, we need the least construction and impact from this as possible, less problems not more.

Councillor Gribble advised it seems that Bedford is being seen as collateral.

Mayor advised:

- This phrase has been used a number of times and all these old Victorian and Edwardian houses are being knocked down to expand the railway, when you don't have to – there is an alternative, you don't have to build multi-storey car parks and hospital car parks, you don't have to build new stations; you just have to use a slightly different route which is quicker and easier to build and opens up ground for development and will deliver quicker.
- We have been asking to see you for some time and EWR is putting the lid on everything Bedford is trying to say for a very long time.
- I feel I have to ask the people at the Treasury, through you, why aren't you looking at this alternative route because it is so much cheaper?

Councillor Gribble advised

- She had spoken to David Hughes at the launch and basically it was "hard cheese this is it".
- She wasn't looking at this as a fight; she was looking for it to provide best value for money for everyone.
- And it's about people as well.

Lord Hendy acknowledged and could see the passion around this issue, he advised he was not familiar with any of the details.

Mayor offered to a host a team of Lord Hendy to come to Borough Hall, to meet protester groups and to look around the route to see the steepness of the hills which would give you a real understanding. There must be somebody who had an understanding of HS2 to compare.

Lord Hendy advised not to compare to HS2.

Councillor Gribble advised this is not to do with his government, it was the last government, but she couldn't understand what people are not seeing about Route E, it's much like the Emperor's New Clothes.

Lord Hendy advised:

- Mayor and Councillor Gribble had explained it all to him
- He was not familiar with it
- He would have to look at in terms of how far it had got and the government's expectations
- He would look at it carefully
- He was not going to promise to come (to Bedford) as requests for visit were many

Mayor thanks Lord Hendy for giving them a fair hearing which was appreciated.