

## **East West Rail Meeting**

**Monday 9 October, 6-7pm**

**Wyboston Village Hall, Morris Walk, Wyboston, MK44 3AS**

Mayor Tom Wootton – Elected Mayor of Bedford Borough

Craig Austin – Director for Environment (Meeting Chair)

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

**Question:** Is East West Rail really going to happen?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): We must assume that yes, it is going to happen. We have to proceed as if it is going ahead to enable us to be prepared. Bedford Borough Council are currently collecting data and evidence for the statutory consultation, which EWR has 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. We have also employed JBA who are a flood risk consultancy to review the flood risks that EWR has 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. This is the “best case scenario” for EWR and we don’t imagine construction will begin before 2027. We imagine that construction will start in Bletchley in 2027 and so construction will reach the Wyboston area in around 2030. During the statutory consultation, the council will respond and everyone will get a chance to write in and give their opinions.

**Question:** What consideration will be given to construction traffic on village roads?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): When building a new railway, EWR will have to put forward a Construction Management Plan. An independent inspection will take place and EWR will need to provide justification of why these works are necessary before anything can proceed. The council will be asking EWR to pay for staff to deal with the complaints we will have coming in as we don’t currently have out of hours staff to be able to deal with such issues. Until we see their draft plan, we cannot comment on the details of how it will work.

**Question:** What about unplanned road widening where HGVs chew up the edges of narrow roads?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): The issue is that it’s difficult to find the vehicle which is causing the damage and then take action. We are aware that it is a problem and we may have to put weight limits in place.

**Question:** Will the Council's study be made public?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): Yes, it will be made public.

**Question:** EWR have said that 70% of people in the area want the railway, but they have given no figures or stats to support this. Will the council do a survey to everyone in the borough so we can respond to EWR's stats?

**Answer:** (Craig Austin): EWR have given us no details or statistics, and the data that 70% of people want the railway is not statistically valid as far as we are aware and cannot be taken into account. (Tom Wootton): They have no business case and they keep telling us things that are useless. We will do everything we can to show them that this is not a good idea.

**Question:** We can't come to terms with why EWR are choosing the most technically difficult and expensive route, how can they justify this? Has the logic been explained?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): Having the railway go through Bedford at Midland station is better economically for the town. If the railway was to bypass Bedford to the south, you would have to get on another train to get to Bedford. EWR has chosen to go north from Bedford station to avoid having to reverse, as reversing can take 10/12 minutes and would not help their business case. They believe that taking the southern route would attract less people into Bedford.

**Question:** What is the situation with Wixams station?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): Wixams station won't work as a connection to the mainline as they would have to knock down many more houses. (Craig Austin): The station was supposed originally to be funded by the developer and Network Rail, and many people bought houses in Wixams expecting a station to be built. Despite the developer agreeing to continue to fund their part of the initial agreement, Network Rail pulled out of funding this station and so the council stepped in to make sure this station was delivered.

**Question:** If it is necessary to bring the track right into Bedford, why isn't it necessary to take it into the centre of Milton Keynes?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): That wouldn't be viable given the location of Milton Keynes Central station.

**Question:** Do we know if the trains will be diesel or electric? Surely diesel doesn't fit with the government's plans to become net zero?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): The EWR team would prefer for their trains to be electric as this is cheaper and more eco-friendly. The Minister has mentioned there may be a possibility for hydrogen and battery trains in the future. They are likely to have diesel trains to start with but hopefully they will move onto electric, hydrogen or battery powered trains.

**Question:** Will the council welcome all of the cars that will be bought into the town and the station?

**Answer:** (Tom Wootton): We have a problem with cars and congestion already. EWR have said they will fund a new hospital car park but we cannot take their word on that.

(Craig Austin): We do not want more cars coming into the town because of air quality and other issues. We will need more air monitoring stations along the line to better understand our air quality so we can have our own evidence. This is the same with flooding, we are collecting our own evidence that we can bring to them when they give theirs.

**Question:** What are your personal thoughts on EWR? (Directed at Craig Austin)

**Answer:** (Craig Austin): I am here as the director of environment, not as an individual. I am here to serve the council and listen to what the residents want. Everything we do will be based on evidence.

**Question:** Has any research been done on how many people will be using these trains every day?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): I'm sure they have done this but they have not shared anything with us. EWR have been slow at sharing data with us.

**Question:** Does EWR affect the local plan and new housing developments?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): The government want more houses than we feel is justified. We plan to build the majority of these new houses near railway stations.

**Question:** I am concerned about where the power lies, if you are unable to even receive information from EWR, will you be able to stop them from doing this?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): The power lies with the government. We went to see the minister and he informed us that EWR should be supplying us the information that we request. They have started to do this, slowly, but of course we haven't seen a business case yet as it has not been written.

**Question:** In regards to the business case, we were told that this was being written for the government and this has nothing to do with us.

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): It is correct that it is being written for the government, but we will be able to review it.

**Question:** Who will be responsible for rebuilding the roads when the roads are damaged from this?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): We will be responsible. We may be able to get EWR to contribute the money but it will be our job.

**Question:** Did Buckinghamshire ever make headway when they were in a similar situation to us?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): They did manage to make a bit of headway and things did improve for them over time..

**Question:** Should we write to EWR or to the Council with our EWR concerns?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): We would urge you to write to EWR during the statutory consultation.

**Question:** What are the planning teams' view of EWR?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland): In terms of the local plan, we want the railway as we plan to build houses around the stations; but we are agnostic about the route taken between the stations. We have to go on what the Council voted for on the route of EWR, which was for a northern route.

(Tom Wootton): We will likely have another vote soon.