

## East West Rail Meeting

Thursday 14 March, 6:30-7:30pm

St Marks Church Community Centre, Calder Rise, Brickhill, MK41 7UY

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

### Current position: (Jon Shortland)

- Route update announcement from EWR in May 2023. Confirmed preference for northern route, this was a statement not a consultation.
- In June 2024 EWR will start their statutory consultation, unlike previous consultations, this one counts as it goes to the Inspectorate and they ultimately decide the route. This consultation will be in two parts; the first part will offer some limited options and seek everyone's views. Part 2 will be likely to run in March / April 2025 and will have worked in that feedback and EWR should have more detailed plans.
- Development Consent Order will then go the Planning Inspectorate for adjudication. The Inspector has 6 months to hold hearings if anyone, including the Council objects to what has been put forward.
- The Secretary of State will have the final decision on the recommendations and whether to agree with the route put forward by EWR. If the scheme gets support, EWR will probably look to start building 2027/28, starting on the section from Bedford to Bletchley first.

**Question:** As a resident of Brickhill of 27 years I have seen many changes to the rural landscape and feel the Parish Council and EWR need to be made accountable for not holding a public consultation, many people feel this a done deal. Given the expected economic benefits for the northern and southern routes are about the same, which route do you now think is best for Bedford and the wider industry given that the current freight lines are only currently used at 27% capacity?

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) I disagree that it is a done deal and believe that it is something that is worth fighting for, people in Poets are relying on us to defend their homes and community. There is no reason to demolish the Edwardian homes in the Poets area, there is enough capacity on the current 4 tracks. EWR have not explored all the options, the difference between a northerly and more southernly route is about a billion pounds. This is because the southern routes are shorter, flatter, easier to build and a year's less construction time and it is my belief that EWR have not done enough exploring around the routes, which is what the Council has done.

(Jon Shortland) Our reports show that the slow tracks are currently used at 27% so there is a lot of accommodation EWR can make without the need for extra tracks. Our research shows that any routes coming into Bedford from the south are better for freight, this is because most freight lands at Felixstowe and heads to the Midlands and North and there is no value in entering Bedford from

the north as trains would be facing the wrong way and would need to reverse. A southern route is heading the right way for the Midlands, so for freight a southerly route is a lot more useful.

When the Council made the original decision for Route E going north one of the key factors looked at was the economic benefit to Bedford, and the only options were a route that went through Bedford or bypassed Bedford to the south. At the time, there was a big difference between the two cases and the view was that it would be more beneficial to have trains stopping at Bedford. In the current situation, with the routes proposed by BFAre and BRTA, they offer an option where the train comes into Bedford and reverses out again. Economically, there is not much difference to the options that are currently on the table.

**Question:** We hear the word consultation all the time, what does consultation mean? When have we been consulted as residents?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) There have been two consultations, one in 2019 and 2021 where people were asked about what they thought. When EWR wrote out to people to seek views, it didn't go out to as many people as it should have done but people did find out about them in different ways and the Council did publicise it and people were able to respond. Both of these were non-statutory consultations and it was not a yes or no vote but a chance for people to put views across and for EWR to take those views into consideration. In the first consultation there was a choice of 5 different routes (A-E) and residents, parish councils and the Council did respond. These consultations did happen but might not have been the best consultations.

The next consultation will likely start in June and EWR will be presenting more details (but not fully detailed plans) with some limited options. Individuals, parish councils and the Council will be able to write back. The Council's view will not determine which choice is made at the end as the decision will be made at a national level on behalf of the whole country. We need good arguments, and the Council has been collecting evidence over the past year to allow us to have an informed opinion that we can put forward at the consultation.

(Mayor Tom Wootton) Consultation is the one word that has united communities as it has made people very angry and when I visited Wilden, residents there said they are sure no one in the village received a letter and the rail line is set to run within a few hundred yards all the way through the village and will change that village forever. My view is that a consultation is where I talk and then you talk, and we exchange views but what EWR have been doing is engagement and they talk and that is it and they don't want to hear what you say. I visited London yesterday to speak to ministers and they will be investigating this. This June we will get a chance to get our view across as it is a statutory consultation, and they have to do this one properly as it is set out in law how they have to run this consultation.

(Jon Shortland) The difference with the next consultation is that EWR will have to be able to show the Inspectorate that the consultation has been done properly which wasn't the case with the previous consultations.

**Question:** EWR have been dishonest and have put figures out to say that 85% of people in Bedford are in favour of a train line. My wife had a telephone call to ask if she would use the train line and she said no as it is too expensive.

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) My wife was also called along with Alistair Burt's wife, and she was asked if she would use the train; so, they have been using leading questions, they are adamant that they want this rail line built.

**Question:** What is the economic benefit to Bedford? Is there a difference between the Council's and EWR's view on this economic benefit?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) As far we are aware EWR have not yet produced any information on the economic benefits for the stations built along the route and it would be helpful to see this business case as we can then start to scrutinise it. The Council has employed our own consultants (Systra) to look at the economic benefits that additional rail journeys would give and they found the benefit of having EWR in place would be £14 million pounds a year – £¼ billion over a 60 year appraisal. Therefore, we believe that it would bring substantial benefits to Bedford.

(Mayor Tom Wootton) The issue is that the business case will come after the consultation and the planning permission which doesn't seem to be the right way round and this is what happened with HS2. EWR are forcing us down one route which is going to be hugely expensive and as a Council we have been trying to get the business case and the costs, but EWR have not shared this with us.

**Question:** We have talked about a northern route with a diesel railway and my understanding is that the rail line will not be electrified until at least 2039. What is your view about the air quality in Bedford as we have a management area in place due to poor air quality.

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) We have been looking at quality in Bedford for some time and there is an Air Quality Management Area in the centre of Bedford and the monitoring of that has shown that it has improved over the last year to a more acceptable level.

EWR do want electrification, but they can't get agreement from the Treasury to pay for this upfront, but the battle is ongoing. Electrification is not the only answer as options such as hydrogen or battery-operated trains could become a viable financial option in the future.

In terms of air quality in Bedford, the Council have put in additional monitoring stations so we have baseline data.

**Question:** The current hospital car park is leased to them by Network Rail, who is paying for the car parking facilities at the three stations? and provision in the meantime whilst works are happening?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) EWR will be paying for it, and they are proposing a new multi storey car park at the main station, they are in discussions with the hospital about building a multi storey car park there as well.

(Mayor Tom Wootton) We haven't had the detail from EWR, and we will get this in June as there will be red lines on the map. I have spoken to the chief executive, and she said that a new multi storey will be built before the railway is built. Our hospital relies on this car park, and it is a problem and currently there is not a clear outline of their plans. As a town we have seen what happens when Bromham Road bridge shut, there was a massive impact on Bedford in terms of car parking, all bridges with the new route will need to be reworked and the question is about the impact of this on our town. It is suggested that they will do one bridge at a time but even shutting one bridge had a

huge effect on Bedford. If the decision goes through it will be Bedford that suffers, we will have the pain and Oxford and Cambridge will get all the benefits.

**Question:** At what point will it go to Full Council with regards to support for Route E

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) The councillors that voted felt that this was the best route at the time, and it was voted along party lines. I feel that not many of those councillors will change their views unless there is a change in the information and that is why we have done this work with consultants. The one thing that might change minds is in June when EWR puts that line on the map because we don't know exactly how many houses will be knocked down. This will be the time to then go to Full Council and have another motion.

**Question:** Last week Oxford newspapers were reporting on EWR dropping litter and making messes. Will Bedford Borough Council hold EWR to account when they start churning up our roads and when HGVs are using the village roads? It would be good for the Council to speak to Oxford and Buckinghamshire Councils to hear their experiences. And how do we know the council will challenge EWR?

**Answer:** (Craig Austin) We will respond accordingly depending on what has happened and make sure they are accountable if they do leave a mess on the road for example. There is already evidence of the Council challenging EWR and I will guarantee that the Council will scrutinise and challenge any information or noncompliance that it feels is necessary to do so.

(Jon Shortland) We are talking to Buckinghamshire on what things have worked well, a lot of things went badly at the start, so we will learn from that. As part of the Development Consent Order that EWR will have to acquire, they will have to set out a Construction Management Plan. The Council will have to agree those plans and it will be the Council's job to ensure the plans are as least disruptive as possible, such as agreeing the route to and from site that works best for us. If something does go wrong, we have asked EWR to fund posts within the Council to be able to respond to that 24/7, as we currently do not have a 24-hour service.

**Question:** With civil engineering works in the planning stage, they try to utilise spoil (such as from digging a cutting) to build embankments and when the Council sees detailed plans, can we ask them if they are minimising disruption caused by haulage by utilising spoil unless there are technical reasons?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) We have employed a firm of rail engineers to look into this to see if it can be done and we are also going to be encouraging them to lay the track via rail rather than road to reduce disruption.

**Question:** From an environmental perspective, in the recent route comparison, the carbon footprint of the routes wasn't included, how can we not be looking at this?

**Answer:** (Craig Austin) EWR will have to demonstrate their legal compliances and we are awaiting a lot of information from them. When we get this information, we will look at it and scrutinise it.

(Jon Shortland) They will have to provide this carbon impact information before they get to the independent Inspector, it may be in this consultation or in next year's.