

## **East West Rail Meeting**

**Monday 6 November, 6-7pm**

**Roxton Village Hall, High Street, Roxton, MK44 3EB**

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:** How did we get to this point with Route E being chosen?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) It has been a long journey to get to this point with the original idea for the East West railway link starting in the early 1990's when local authorities lobbied the Government. Originally there were about 20 routes and this was narrowed down (through a series of studies) to a possible 5 routes (2 North of Bedford and 3 South of Bedford). There was a consultation around this and the results of that showed that a route through Bedford would be better for Bedford economically as it would bring more business to Bedford than if the route bypassed the town to the south. That route was supported by Bedford Borough Council, South Cambridgeshire, Cambridge City and Milton Keynes. Only Central Bedfordshire opposed Route E. Following the consultation, EWR decided that Route E was best fit for their objectives, but we haven't seen a document that sets out how their choice came about.

There has been a route update announcement from EWR in May this year, and they have set out the route they are putting forward. The next step is a statutory consultation (probably between April-June 2024) which EWR must deliver, which will be a chance for everyone to put their views across. The results of this will allow EWR to put together a national planning application to the planning inspectorate (probably in 2025) and in late 2026 we can expect a firm decision about whether it is going ahead. Construction could start in 2027, most likely at the Bletchley end first and by the time it gets to Roxton it would be round 2033.

**Question:** The Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) red rated the route and refuses to publish a business case, why is the route still being allowed to be considered to continue.

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) It is a political question and difficult and the Council are still waiting to see the business case as everything rests on it and we want to see it. Our MP, Richard Fuller, is against this line and he has spoken to the National Audit Office who are now investigating East West Rail as the figures do not match up.

(Jon Shortland) We have been asking for a business case for some time, the Treasury seem very committed to the project. Craig and I attended a meeting with EWR on Friday and they did talk about the business case, but they said it will be mid-2025 before the business plan comes out as EWR are not obligated to produce one until they make the national planning application.

**Question:** Will EWR share their list of assumptions?

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) The Council have sent them a list of questions and some answers are very slowly coming through. I don't think the business case will come through until they want to see it as their aim is to build the railway. It is hard to see the benefit to the route for anyone in north Bedfordshire as very soon we will have a dual carriageway that leads to Cambridge so it doesn't make sense for Bedford residents to go on a train rather than drive unless you live next to the station or live in Bedford.

(Craig Austin) One of the other issues raised by EWR related to their assumptions that the other routes would cause flooding of the River Gt Ouse in Bedford. We have flood consultations employed to look at this claim.

(Jon Shortland) It is about building up our evidence as the route update is just a statement and we have time now to gather evidence and the statutory consultation is the time that people can have a say and put in their views. We have employed SLC Rail (railway consultants) to review Route E and also to review the other previous routes put forward. Along with two additional routes which EWR put in the data analysis that they rejected, one of them followed the old varsity route and the other is a variant of this. On top of that we have added 2 routes put forward by pressure groups, BFARe and the English Regional Transport Association (Bedford based national rail pressure group).

East West Rail have said no to the old Varsity route as they say that to bring it to new standards this would involve far more embankment to be built and would cross a flood plain. Our flood consultants (JBA) have looked at this and their report has concluded that the level of modelling provided by EWR is too superficial and high level to make any reasonable conclusions so they need more detail from EWR.

There will also be some economic consultations (conducted by Systra) to review the different service patterns that would come with the north and south routes, looking at the economic impact of the 3 options and the economic benefits to Bedford. This was done previously (3-4 years ago) but it needs to be reviewed so the information is up to date.

**Question:** Was East West Rail invited to tonight's meeting?

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) EWR have their own meetings and they have tended to be quite preachy and they don't give straight answers or seem willing to listen to residents views.

**Question:** Is EWR definitely going to happen? Can we actually do anything to change the plans?

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) If EWR are building a railway, ruining North Bedford, knocking down houses, they should prove the case, at the moment, they are just assuming everything. They are assuming the south route will flood, but the Varsity line has never flooded. I love this town and we as the Council will fight for you and we are already doing this by gathering evidence for the public inquiry. We don't know if we will win or not but we are trying to prove there are other options.

(Craig Austin) We have highlighted issues such as flood risk so it is up to EWR to demonstrate it is a flood risk. Jon has already challenged EWR regarding going for a 6 tracks option. We had a meeting with EWR on this issue where EWR provided a model which was very basic and as a result of Jon's challenge they are going to do this model again. All challenge is worthwhile and the Council's role is to look at the existing plans and to challenge them. Where there is evidence to contradict their plans, the Council will challenge them where there isn't evidence the Council will not.

**Question:** What happens to EWR if there is a change of Government?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) EWR is wholly owned by the Department of Transport, if the Government says there is no money, they can't go ahead.

**Question:** Why are EWR so passionate about this route?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) Looking at railway maps of the country as it is very difficult to get from the East of England to the West without going via London. The Treasury has put aside budget for this and they say that the area between Oxford and Cambridge is the most powerful economic part of the country after London and by putting those connections in place through the railway and road improvements, means people will be able to work better together and drive up growth in the area.

**Question:** Is the route not going to be electrified?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) 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. Plan at the moment is diesel operated trains but EWR has said they are designing the route so that these things could be added on in the future.

**Question:** Why was no one in the village consulted when EWR did the first round of consultations?

**Answer:** (Mayor Tom Wootton) EWR did not do a very good job of the first round of consultations and whole areas of Ravensden and Wilden were not consulted along with many areas of Roxton.

(Jon Shortland) EWR will have to do a much better job in their next round of consultations as this round is statutory, the previous round was non-statutory. This next consultation will have to be evidenced and the planning inspectorate will have something to say if they believe the consultation has not been conducted thoroughly.

**Question:** Will we see a business case before the consultation next year and is there a budget?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) EWR have been given a budget which has increased a few times, they have already built the route between Oxford and Bicester and they are working on Bicester to Bletchley at the moment so packages of funding are being released.

We will not have the business case before the consultation but the business case is to convince the Treasury and not the Council.

**Question:** Is there housing targets? is opening up other towns funding the line?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) The national government sets targets for all Local Authorities, although we believe that number is too high, it is not affected by EWR. We have the Local Plan 2040 and have felt

that we should make use of the railway by putting these new homes near railways so we are looking at 4000 houses near Kempston Hardwick and 4000 houses in Tempsford/Little Barford. If EWR didn't go ahead and the railway stations were not built, the Local Plan would still go ahead but as having a station is a big plus, other options would have to be considered for the location of these new homes to achieve the Government's targets.

**Question:** There will be issues with flooding building the Tempsford station, as Tempsford is only 15 metres above sea level so the station would need to be lifted up. Tempsford also doesn't have the road infrastructure to deal with people driving to park at the station.

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) The new platforms will be higher up. Bedford Borough Council supported the most northerly route which didn't go through Tempsford and EWR have come up with this new variant because they feel there is going to be a lot of development around Tempsford. That development is not currently in the Central Bedfordshire plan, their next plan might include it.

(Mayor Tom Wootton) I will meet and get the views of the leader at Central Beds regarding the Tempsford station as they are starting on their local plan soon and will report back to the Parish Council on the results.

**Question:** Can the Council ask the consultants to look at flooding at Tempsford?

(Craig Austin) We can do, and what we have been just told demonstrates the benefits of having these meetings because. It is important to have this local knowledge to take such issues forward.

**Question:** Is it true that the route has gone ahead as four Local Authorities wanted it to go thorough Bedford and Bedford Council will pay for changes to the station?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) Bedford Borough Council are not paying for changes to the station, although we did secure funding from a different part of the Government (£5 million) to pay for improvements to the area outside of the station.

The Council, as a whole, did vote for the route to go through Bedford and out to the north but it might not have been the deciding factor, other Councils did also agree for the north route. We have also said we don't believe there is a need to demolish houses, EWR say this is needed as they want to build 2 extra tracks of their own. There are currently 2 tracks (nearest the Poets area) which are not being used much at the moment (as all passenger trains uses the fast lines) and we believe EWR could utilise these.

**Question:** Why does Bedford Borough Council think the route was a good idea if it is carrying so much freight?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) For the economic benefit of the extra traffic coming through Bedford bringing more people in, more connections and the opportunities for more business connections. The Council did conduct a study into the economic benefits for the town but this was pre Covid in 2019 so this study is being redone now.

**Question:** Based on economic benefits, did the Council's study look to see what business the rail route would take away as well as what it would bring?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) Yes, the inflows and outflows were both considered, there are benefits to connections being made. The Council are looking at a possible 7-8 routes and the impact of each of those routes which we hope to have by January 2024 and this will be made public.

**Question:** Will the Council object to the DCO application?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) We would take instruction from a meeting of the full Council.

(Mayor Tom Wootton) In terms of economic benefit, the new route will require all the bridges to be demolished and rebuilt which will have a big impact on the town. When the Bromham Road bridge was knocked down and rebuilt a few years ago, business in the town was greatly affected. My view is that this would mean years of building work and would mean total destruction to our town in its current form in terms of shopping, the roads are congested already and people have alternatives outside the town centre to shop such as Milton Keynes and Rushden. My view is that Bedford would not survive this, even with the projects and schemes to raise the towns profile and prospects, footfall is only just starting to increase.

**Question:** Will the Council get the right to approve conditions around the building of the route for the local interest, similar to Bucks Council with the HS2 project?

**Answer:** (Jon Shortland) The Council can give a list of conditions to the inspector who should agree if they are reasonable and realistic.