

In this joint final response to the East West Rail Company's non-statutory consultation which ran from mid-November 2024 to late-January 2025, our East Anglia, London & South East and Thames Valley regional branches have taken the opportunity to respond to the proposals for the East West Railway between Oxford and Cambridge by addressing each route section as presented in the November 2024 consultation document, starting at Oxford, as well as our overall position on East West Rail and its objectives.

Above all, the aims of the project must in our view align with the wider goals of the British rail network as a whole. The concept of a new main line linking East Anglia, central England and regions further west has existed since the 1990s, and Network Rail's *East West Main Line Strategic Statement* published in 2022 reflects this ambition. EWR must therefore not be treated as simply an individual commuter line between Oxford and Cambridge, but as a new link in the wider network, connecting the towns and cities along the route not only to each other but to places further afield. This must be taken into consideration during the design and delivery of EWR to ensure that future development of the route for passenger and freight services is possible.

We believe that the scope of the works can be expanded in several places. There are a number of proposed or planned projects along the route which, while currently independent of EWR, would greatly enhance the line. We will outline these suggestions under the relevant sections, and strongly encourage EWRC to engage with Network Rail, local authorities and other stakeholders on including provision for these additional works in the plans, or even delivering them alongside EWR.

We support a minimum service level of four trains per hour across the full length of the line, early-morning until late-evening, seven days a week. The infrastructure must therefore be able to support this, including station platforms of sufficient length to accommodate 8-coach trains. New and rebuilt stations should be designed in line with Network Rail's *Design Manual for Medium to Small Stations*, with adequate facilities including toilets, covered / enclosed waiting areas and retail provision where appropriate. Accessibility is paramount and so level boarding must be built into both stations and any new fleet as a basic requirement. The new railway will support communities for decades to come and must be at the heart of the communities it serves. This includes making access to stations as easy as possible, with active travel links to all nearby existing and planned settlements, and new entrances at existing stations where appropriate.

## 5-6 – Oxford to Bletchley

At Oxford station we support the proposal for additional works, and suggest that the reopened Cowley branch be incorporated into the project. This would not only provide an ideal turnback for EWR services – minimising the works needed to accommodate four terminating trains per hour at Oxford – but would also enhance connectivity by providing direct access to the major science park at Littlemore, particularly from research and academic sites in Cambridge. Alternatively, if this is not possible within the scope of EWR, passenger services should extend to Didcot for direct interchange with the Great Western Main Line.

We agree that retention of the London Road level crossing is not practical, and stress that whatever solution is adopted, pedestrians and cyclists should be prioritised.

As the line through Fenny Stratford is doubled, we would strongly recommend that passive provision is made for an east-to-north connection between EWR and the West Coast Main Line in this area, as well as an additional pair of tracks up to Milton Keynes Central. These interventions have been proposed by Network Rail as part of their *West Coast South Strategic Advice* (2023), in order both to accommodate the new freight and passenger traffic created by EWR, and to enable a direct link between East Anglia and the West Midlands via Milton Keynes. This would allow through services between Cambridge and Northampton / Birmingham, and provide an alternative route to railfreight terminals in Northamptonshire

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and the West Midlands for intermodal trains from Felixstowe. Furthermore, if these works were to be delivered under EWR, they would remove the need for an expanded station at Stewartby, as the proposed terminating services could be extended to Milton Keynes Central instead.

Regardless of whether the connection is built with EWR, we would like to see services from Cambridge extended to Milton Keynes Central from the outset, via a reversal at Bletchley. Terminating services at Bletchley from the east is poor for connectivity as it would add another change for passengers intending to connect with longer-distance services, who would need to take an additional train just one stop north to Milton Keynes Central.

We also welcome the engagement with Milton Keynes City Council on providing an eastern entrance to Bletchley station, and see this as a priority to maximise both ease of access to the station and connectivity with local buses via the nearby bus station. A new entrance would also lessen the impact of closing Fenny Stratford station by providing simplified access to the high-level platforms at Bletchley.

We are disappointed at the deferral of the Aylesbury link. We note that the scope of the Draft Order Limits and the provision built into the HS2 works along the route, as well as the intention for HS2 Ltd to rebuild the Quanton to Calvert line once works are completed, are all conducive to construction of the link. This could be included in Connection Stage 2 to deliver Aylesbury-Milton Keynes Central services alongside Oxford-Bedford.

### **7-11 – Fenny Stratford to Kempston (Marston Vale)**

This section is crucial to the long-term development of the entire line and so must not hinder that development. Doing the 'hard' (or even controversial) work and getting it right now will enable EWR to be a success and avoid more expensive and disruptive works in the future. We therefore support the Consolidated Stations option (Concept 2) in order to enable a minimum passenger service of 4tph to be provided across the full extent of the line. The consolidated stations must be developed as 'hubs' with active travel links to all surrounding settlements and future planned developments. However, we recommend that consideration be given to retaining the existing Bow Brickhill station, as this currently serves the eastern suburbs of the Milton Keynes urban area and significant industry, and with improvements and future development nearby could see much greater usage.

While we recognise the issues around the closure of level crossings, the Marston Vale section must not become a bottleneck for initial and future traffic along the EWR route. We therefore support the removal of as many level crossings as possible, and to that effect agree with the proposals for all level crossings except the following:

- Bow Brickhill (V10 Brickhill Street) - Replace with new bridge
- Pony - Replace with underpass
- Millbrook (Station Lane) - Replace with underpass
- Green Lane - Replace with underpass
- Wootton Broadmead (Broadmead Road) - Replace with new road overbridge

Furthermore, traffic at Fenny Stratford (Simpson Road) level crossing should, through waymarking, be encouraged to use the Watling Street overbridge when possible.

Ridgmont station should be redeveloped on the current site (Option 2), in order to retain connectivity with nearby employment sites, reuse existing station land, and enable closure of the adjacent level crossing. Stewartby should be re-sited according to Option 1, with a new footpath connecting directly to Kimberley College; the Broadmead Road site would be too far from the college for students to commute practically.

The consultation documents note that the current plans do not take the proposed Universal Studios theme park development into account due to the lack of formal permission. While we understand that the consultation has been delayed due to external circumstances, such that this may have been the case in June 2024, it has recently been confirmed by the government that negotiations over the park are progressing positively. Official documents from Universal highlight the prime location of Kempston Hardwick station for serving the development, and so it is imperative that this is now actively taken into future consideration by EWRC.

## **12 – Bedford area**

We agree with the proposals to relocate Bedford St. Johns station to a new site adjacent to Bedford Hospital.

We also agree with the proposals to redevelop Bedford station, as well as the public realm improvements. To maximise the benefits of connectivity for EWR, the works should be used as an opportunity to provide an additional platform on the Up Fast line – as proposed by Network Rail – to allow long-distance trains on the Midland Main Line to call at Bedford and provide direct interchange for the East Midlands and beyond.

We support the addition of two new tracks north of Bedford station, in order both to accommodate long-term passenger and freight traffic growth on EWR and to prevent operational challenges that would risk importing delays between EWR and the MML. While we recognise that residents of the area would be affected by the demolition required, and agree that adequate compensation must be provided, it is evident that EWR will benefit hundreds of thousands of people – including the 120,000-strong population of the Bedford urban area – for decades to come.

## **13 – Clapham Green to Colesden**

We agree with the proposals for this section of the route.

## **14-15 – Roxton to east of St. Neots**

We would encourage EWRC to consider an alternative route for part of this section: crossing the East Coast Main Line near Tempsford as proposed, but instead heading north alongside the ECML through the existing station at St. Neots. A new island platform would be provided here for interchange with north-south Thameslink services (and intercity services in future), with the line continuing north of the town before diverging eastwards to rejoin the current proposed route north of Croxton. This route would reduce both the impact of the line on the area and the land take for construction by following an existing rail corridor. The proposed new town at Tempsford is not guaranteed, so the focus should be primarily on serving existing population centres in the area; a station for Tempsford could still be built on the ECML in future, possibly closer to the site of the new town.

If the current proposals are retained, however, we agree with the assessment that Option 1c would be the better route and station location at Tempsford. Provision should be made for a future island platform on the fast lines of the ECML, for improved interchange capability to / from more northerly destinations and to serve what may become a substantial new town in the area. We also recommend investigating the potential to retain the temporary logistics hub at Tempsford as a road-rail interchange, given its proximity to the A1 and A421, and as a link between EWR and the ECML.

Furthermore, if the current proposals are retained, we believe that an additional station must be provided on this section to the east of the Wintringham development, at St Neots. This is an important settlement with a growing population of almost 40,000 people, and close economic links with both Cambridge and Bedford. It is unrealistic to expect any substantial modal shift from road to rail along this corridor if residents are expected to either drive south to Tempsford station or wait for a connecting service at St. Neots ECML station, and not linking the town to the railway at such a short distance would be a failure of the project's aims concerning connectivity.

## **16 – Croxton to Toft**

We support the proposals for this section, including a new station at Cambourne. It must be developed as a high-quality travel hub with bus and active travel links to all areas of the existing town, as well as the upcoming Bourn Airfield development. EWRC should engage with local authorities to examine how a future mass transit link to West Cambridge could be integrated to serve the new station at Cambourne.

## **17-20 – Comberton to Shelford**

We support the proposals for this section, including additional pedestrian bridges at Newton and Hauxton Road. We also recommend that passive provision for a future station in the Comberton area be investigated to serve the numerous villages in the area and reduce car traffic into Cambridge city centre.

## **21 – Cambridge area**

We strongly support the proposals for this section but, noting the ongoing work between Shepreth Branch Junction and Cambridge South station, would encourage the completion of four-tracking throughout this whole section to be delivered sooner to reduce future disruption.

The additional footbridge at the south end of the main station is a welcome addition. Its extension to staff facilities on the east side of the station must however be enhanced to provide a proper pedestrian entrance, as has been suggested for many years. This would improve access to the station and help to relieve the overcrowded western entrance.

We support the remodelling of Cambridge North station and welcome the suggestion that EWR services could call at the station in future; to this effect we emphasise that the works must rectify the poor platform / track arrangement of the current station. Developing 'cross-city' services for Cambridge, with trains calling at Cambridge South, Cambridge (central) and Cambridge North / East will create major benefits for the city by providing an alternative to its already heavily-congested road network (the latest INRIX Global Traffic Scorecard for 2024 ranked Cambridge 19<sup>th</sup>-worst of 111 UK cities, and 99<sup>th</sup> of 945 cities globally).

We strongly support the addition of a 'Cambridge East' station on the Newmarket line, and prefer that it be located at the site of the planned turnback in Cherry Hinton near Yarrow / Gazelle Road. This would greatly increase access to the railway as well as local connectivity. We also support the provision of additional reception sidings for freight trains and empty stock movements to the east of Cambridge station; we believe previously used land is available close to the Cherry Hinton Lakes (former Norman Cement works chalk quarry) for at least some of the length needed.

## **22 – Additional comments we have in relation to route-wide matters**

We stress that EWR must be \*continuously\* electrified along its entire length, between Oxford and Cambridge East; discontinuous electrification would result in the use of diesel locomotives for freight operations, significantly reducing the benefits of EWR for freight and the environmental credibility of the project. Full continuous electrification would allow electrically-hauled freight trains and through-running of existing electric stock across the full extent of the line.

As previously stated, the scope of East West Rail should not be limited to Oxford-Cambridge, with the long-term goal to extend services to Norwich and Ipswich in the east and to Didcot and along the Great Western Main Line towards Swindon, Bath and Bristol in the west. To this end, we would like to see the proposed double-tracking east of Cambridge extended to Chippenham Junction to meet the Mid-Anglia Line. This would allow immediate extension of passenger services towards Ipswich, as well as increasing frequency on the Mid-Anglia line as there is latent unmet demand along the Cambridge-Newmarket-Bury corridor. This double-tracking should also include provision for the Snailwell curve to be reinstated, to provide a Cambridge-Newmarket-Soham-Ely service in future.

There seems to be a relative lack of information on active travel links to stations in the current proposals. We would like to see more on this aspect and believe that active travel should be prioritised over vehicular access if EWR is truly to meet its environmental ambitions.

We are concerned about the possibility of EWR adopting a 'Minimum Viable Product' approach – that is, the project delivering only the absolute minimum infrastructure needed for passengers to be able to take a train between Oxford and Cambridge, in order to minimise costs. This has become a worrying trend with some recent new stations and lines, despite these projects often surpassing predicted demand. The railway must be not only functional but attractive to use; platforms with a couple of seats and a bus stop-style shelter would be wholly inadequate. We recognise that costs will always be a major concern, but it is clear that under-investment has had negative consequences, and investment in the railways is needed to support and encourage growth, as well as fuel the modal shift from road to rail that is necessary to tackle various environmental issues. Getting it right now will eliminate the need for expensive and disruptive upgrades in future.