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Today's House of Commons debates - Friday 04 December 2015

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House of Commons East West Rail

East West Rail

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Sarah Newton.)

2.32 pm

[Iain Stewart \(Milton Keynes South\) \(Con\):](#)

I am delighted to have secured this debate. My reasons for doing so are to re-emphasise the importance of the east-west rail project to regional and national infrastructure, and to urge my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues at the Department for Transport to do all they can to deliver the project as soon as possible in the light of the Hendy review.

Let me first explain the scope of east-west rail. This is not a new line, but a project to restore the old varsity line between Oxford and Cambridge, via Bicester, Milton Keynes and Bedford, with a spur to Aylesbury. Much of the line already exists. Part of it is used as a freight line, part of it already has local services running on it and large parts of the old infrastructure are still in place, if mothballed.

The line was not closed by Beeching, but declined in the 1970s, when it became faster to travel between Oxford and Cambridge by going through London, rather than taking a slow, diesel multiple unit winding its way through such wonderfully named places as Swanbourne, Verney Junction, Claydon, Launton and Wendlebury Halt. East-west rail is not, however, a misty-eyed rail enthusiast's scheme to evocate a bygone age of rail travel, in the style of that wonderful Ealing comedy "The Titfield Thunderbolt". Rather, it is about creating a fast, modern rail link between some of the fastest growing towns and cities in the country and adding a vital link in the nation's strategic transport infrastructure.

The positive case for the east-west rail scheme is currently being refreshed by an independent analyst. I have seen the draft report by Rupert Dyer of Rail Expertise Ltd. His refresh of the evidence for the western section of the project concludes that the new business case continues to produce a strong financial case for the project, with the core scheme delivering a benefit-cost ratio of 4:1 and some of the incremental options delivering much higher results of up to 40:1. The benefits of the project to my constituency and neighbouring

constituencies cannot be overestimated.

Dyer's draft report states:

"East-West Rail will open up new travel and employment opportunities in the main conurbations of Oxford, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury and Bedford and communities along the line."

The wider economic benefits have been reviewed and found to have increased significantly since the initial scoping of the project. The Dyer review suggests that the south-east's regional gross domestic product will increase by £135 million per annum with the core scheme and £268 million per annum with the enhanced scheme.

The east-west rail project is vital to improving the transport infrastructure of the area. Many who have ever driven west from Milton Keynes along the A421 and the A34 will know that it can be a very miserable experience. The economic and environmental costs from that congestion should not be underestimated. Without east-west rail, the area will become increasingly congested and that will impair the aspiration to develop the Oxford-Cambridge arc for economic growth.

On the section between Oxford, Aylesbury, Milton Keynes and Bedford, some 120,000 new homes and a similar number of new jobs are planned over the next few years and will be underpinned by the line. In my own area of Milton Keynes, we have some 20,000 housing permissions over the next decade or so. That will underpin our business growth and it will be important for tourism and new housing.

Mr Speaker, in his capacity as the Member for Buckingham, which adjoins my constituency, has pointed out that the Aylesbury Vale district council is currently working on its local plan, which will ultimately require the delivery of over 30,000 new homes by 2033. East-west rail is imperative to support that. Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) has reminded me that 18,500 new jobs and 30,000 new homes are being developed in Bicester in her constituency.

This is not just a transport project; it is essential to delivering other Government policy objectives. I contend that it will help to deliver some of the Government's broader transport objectives. I am not expecting the Minister to comment on this, but if London Heathrow is chosen as the airport for expansion in the south-east, east-west rail will provide a direct rail link from many towns and cities. That will not only enhance the economic case for Heathrow, but help to mitigate concerns about environmental pollution from additional road traffic movements to an expanded Heathrow.

This is important for High Speed 2, too. With the link from Milton Keynes to Aylesbury and then into London, we would create an additional relief line between Milton Keynes and London. Should Euston, in its redevelopment for HS2, require some line closures, that additional relief line would help to link in services in the interim period.

On HS2, which I support, there is a wider political point. Many people in Buckinghamshire object to HS2 because they see no benefit from the project but suffer considerable disruption as a result of it. I have always been strong in arguing that the Government's transport investment is not just about HS2; it is a substantial investment in the classic rail network. It is therefore important to demonstrate to people in Buckinghamshire that we are going to deliver this project as soon as possible, so that they, too, can see the benefits of investment in our infrastructure.

The line will also increase the nation's capacity to transport goods by freight, which we all want to see, both on a north-south line and going east to west. My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) has asked me to urge that, although we are talking about the western section today, hopefully, we will see progress on restoring the line between Bedford and Cambridge as soon as possible and that will follow in later control periods.

My final point on the wider transport infrastructure is that this project will be a key element of passenger connectivity across the whole network. Some 41 of the 46 principal towns and cities in this country will be directly connected by rail, either without a change or with just one change of train. That will be a long-term

sustainable improvement in our rail infrastructure across the country.

There are enormous benefits from the scheme—both locally and nationally. I welcome the significant progress already made in delivering the project. Indeed, the first section has already been opened: my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister opened the Oxford to Bicester section a few weeks ago. The new chord to the Chiltern main line allows an additional service from Oxford to London.

It was announced today that Network Rail had appointed its partners to deliver the next phase of the scheme. An alliance of four equal partners—Network Rail, Atkins, Laing O'Rourke and VolkerRail—will construct phase 2, linking Bicester and Aylesbury to Bletchley and Bedford. The alliance is currently working on the outline design and construction programme. Once that initial segment of the work is complete, the alliance will consult with the Department to agree on a final design and construction timetable and costs. It aims to submit an application for an order under the Transport and Works Act 1992 in the autumn of next year.

However, despite that welcome progress, a number of concerns have been expressed recently about some slippage in the timetable as a result of Sir Peter Hendy's review of Network Rail's control period 5 investment programme. I do not intend to rehearse the arguments about that review, but I support it as a way of ensuring that the Government's record investment in our railways is delivered in a robust and achievable way. That said, I do not want a well-advanced, deliverable and vital project to suffer undue collateral delays as a result of overruns elsewhere in Network Rail's programme.

It was feared that this project, which was initially due to be operational by early 2019, might be delayed by between three and seven years, but I understand from conversations that I have had with Ministers and the East West Rail consortium that that worst-case fear will not be realised. I welcome the assurances that I have received from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Transport and the Rail Minister that east-west rail will happen. I also welcome the assurance in Sir Peter Hendy's report that significant development of east-west rail will happen in control period 5. What I seek today is an assurance that the Department will do all that it can to ensure that construction of the project can start in CP5, and will be completed as early as possible in CP6.

My understanding is that there is a very healthy and positive working relationship between Network Rail and the East West Rail consortium. The Network Rail delivery team is among the best that it has. I suggest to the Minister that, if its members can be unleashed as much as possible and are able to respond as positively as possible to the offers from the consortium, the project can be accelerated as much as possible. If there are concerns about the capacity of Network Rail to deliver all its envisaged programme within the timescale that is envisaged, I would ask whether it would not seem odd if one of the best teams, working on one of the most beneficial projects, was unduly delayed because of slippage in projects elsewhere.

I hope that I have demonstrated the value of the project to my local area, to the wider region, to the Department's strategic transport priorities, and to the Government's wider objectives. I urge the Minister to do all that he can to encourage and facilitate all the players in the scheme to get on with the job as quickly as possible, so that we may all reap the benefits as quickly as possible.

2.43 pm

[The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport \(Mr Robert Goodwill\):](#)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) on securing the debate. I share his enthusiasm for east-west rail, and very much want it to become a reality.

East-west rail is a transformational project to rebuild the railway between Oxford in the west and Bedford in the east. It will also connect Aylesbury with Milton Keynes. Part of the project will use disused railway routes, and part of it will upgrade or double-track lightly used or mothballed sections of railway. It is a missing part of the railway jigsaw connecting the great western, west coast and midland main lines.

The project is being built in two parts. Phase 1, between Bicester and Oxford, is being built as I speak; phase 2, between Bicester and Bedford, is being developed. Trains operated by Chiltern Railways started running on the first part of the railway on 25 October, with two train services an hour from London Marylebone to

the brand-new station at Oxford Parkway. Two stations have been completely rebuilt, at Bicester Village and Islip.

That was the first new rail link between a major British city and London in over 100 years. Together with Chiltern Railways, we have invested over £320 million in east-west rail phase 1, and in September 2016, when the infrastructure works west of Oxford Parkway have been finished, services on this route will be extended into the centre of Oxford, where it will connect with the Great Western main line.

Phase 2 of east-west rail will connect Oxford and the Great Western main line with Bletchley, the west coast main line with Aylesbury and the Chiltern main line and Bedford for the Midland main line. It will allow faster journeys between these locations than is possible by car today. It will stimulate economic development and new housing across the region. The project includes a new station at Winslow and new platforms at Bletchley.

This project is complex and challenging. In particular a lot of work is needed to the structures, such as bridges, and earthworks along the route. As part of the project we expect Network Rail to do the following: build or renovate 18 bridges over the railway; modify or close over 75 level crossings; and build 22 new footbridges and subways across the railway.

The new railway will be capable of operating at 100 miles an hour. It will also be electrified, enabling faster, lighter and greener electric passenger trains to run. As well as providing a new route for passenger trains, east-west rail will provide a corridor for rail freight.

East-west rail is a challenging and ambitious project. Network Rail's current cost estimate for phase 2 is high. We want to reduce this cost as plans mature and scope options are looked at in more detail, taking the risk out of the scheme. None the less, I would like to reaffirm the Government's commitment to delivering east-west rail.

These are challenging times for the rail industry. In June, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport announced that important aspects of Network Rail's investment programme were costing more and taking longer. He announced the steps he was taking to put things right. On 25 November my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer reaffirmed the Government's commitment to Britain's vital transport network as part of our wider spending plans.

Sir Peter Hendy's report on delivering the rail investment strategy was published at the same time. The Secretary of State has accepted Sir Peter's report, subject to a short period of consultation with stakeholders, such as the East West Rail consortium. No infrastructure schemes have been cancelled. Electrification of the TransPennine and midland main line has already resumed following a brief pause. The Government have confirmed their commitment to delivering east-west rail. Work on this has continued without interruption while Sir Peter's review has been carried out.

We included this project in our 2012 rail investment strategy following the convincing case put forward by the East West Rail consortium of local authorities. One of the strengths of this project has been the close working relationship we have had with the consortium and the help and support it has been able to provide. I am pleased that the consortium has been able to play its part in the development of the delivery plans and welcome its continued support in the future.

Following Sir Peter's review, funding has been identified in control period 5 to continue development of east-west rail and secure the necessary planning powers to enable the project to be completed. Network Rail is continuing to work on its plans for east-west rail phase 2. It expects to have developed a single option for the scope of east-west rail in a considerable level of detail by late 2016. When this work has been completed, we will be in possession of much better information than we have now. This will enable us to make an informed decision and set out clearly the timescales for delivering east-west rail.

As part of these next steps, I urge my hon. Friend and all the interested local partners such as the East West Rail consortium to continue to help to take the project forward. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important topic, which I know is of considerable local interest. It is now time for Network Rail to get on with

the job and to develop a detailed plan for east-west rail that we can all get behind. As I said at the start, the Government are committed to seeing east-west rail built.

This Government have prioritised infrastructure investment. A 50% uplift in investment compared with the last Parliament demonstrates that we really mean business. Projects like this are becoming a reality and contributing to the long-term economic plan that got such a resounding endorsement at this year's general election.

Question put and agreed to.

2.49 pm

House adjourned.