

Supp/310

12 Feb 19

SUPPORTER'S PROOF OF EVIDENCE

APPLICATION FOR THE PROPOSED NETWORK RAIL (EAST WEST RAIL BICESTER TO BEDFORD IMPROVEMENTS ORDER

INTRODUCTION

1. I have been a resident of North Buckinghamshire for 35 years and have been an independent supporter of the East-West Rail (EWR) Scheme for all that period.
2. I am now semi-retired but have spent a 40+ year career as an HR professional in the Defence and Aerospace sectors. I have maintained a lifelong interest in railway planning and operations.
3. I intend to establish an EWR User Group to work in association with other organisations, mostly Marston Vale Community Rail Partnership and Future Rail, in order to represent user requirement and to seek to ensure that the eventual EWR service meets customer demand.

Summary

4. I fully support EWR for all the reasons provided by Network Rail in their submissions but would also like to provide the following evidence and comment with regard to how the Scheme could be improved.
5. By way of general comment EWR is an excellent opportunity to provide much needed rail services but as presented seems a somewhat local initiative bounded within the Oxford/Aylesbury/Milton Keynes/Bedford environs. It is therefore felt that it could be further improved and be more attractive to potential customers with a more strategic and future proofed approach.
6. The following are the salient points:
 - EWR is essential to the restoration of rail transport across the Northern Home Counties Beds/Bucks/Oxon east-west axis.
 - The full strategic benefit of EWR will not be realised unless services are extended south and west beyond Oxford to Didcot Parkway, Reading, Swindon and Bristol, and north of Milton Keynes to Northampton thus enabling thro' inter-regional journeys.
 - De-scoping of the Scheme to provide only single line running between Aylesbury and Claydon Junction, and no through service south of Aylesbury will limit the attraction to potential customers, and potentially cause delays with subsequent knock-on effect.

- Shortened platform lengths (4 car) will limit operating flexibility and the ability to be able to respond to increase customer demand.
- Consideration should be given to changing the Bletchley track configuration to enable trains to be able operate east from Milton Keynes to Bedford and beyond.

Northern Home Counties Beds/Bucks/Oxon East-West Axis

7. The northern area of the home counties (Beds/Bucks/Oxon) is currently served principally by rail services to and from London and the North by virtue of GWR services from Oxford to Paddington, Chiltern services from Oxford/Bicester to Marylebone, Virgin/LNWR services from Milton Keynes/Bletchley/Leighton Buzzard to Euston, and East Midlands/Thames Link services from Bedford to St Pancras International. Notwithstanding the Marston Vale route between Bedford and Bletchley it is not possible to travel between the eastern (Milton Keynes/Bedford) and the western (Bicester/Oxford) flanks by rail. In effect this means that any passenger seeking to travel west of Milton Keynes by rail will have to travel via London or Birmingham. In broad terms this means that a train journey from say Milton Keynes to Bristol Temple Meads will currently take almost 3 hours with a change at Birmingham or 2 changes in London. By implementing EWR the journey could be completed in 2 hours 15 minutes¹ and with strategic planning of the service eradicate the changes of train thus making road travel less attractive. In particular this will provide much needed relief to the A421/A34/A420 road links.

Strategic Scope

8. The proposal to implement EWR by Network Rail understandably focuses on the economic factors, and in particular housing developments, across the Oxford Cambridge growth area. However, rail becomes an increasingly more attractive option over longer journeys so a key benefit of the scheme is actually more strategic in that by reinstating the 19 miles of track between Bicester and Bletchley the scope to run a range of inter-regional services to a greater number of destinations and rail-hubs becomes possible. In particular the existence of the east and west curves at Didcot make possible services to the west and south and in this respect a service linking Milton Keynes/Bedford to Swindon and Bristol should certainly be implemented which would include Future Rail's stated intent for reinstatement of the previous Bicester/Oxford/Bristol service. Similarly, extending services to Reading, Guilford, Basingstoke and perhaps Gatwick Airport in the south are also possible as is running on to Northampton north of Milton Keynes. Consideration should also be given to extending the EWR service from Bristol into Bedford to Leicester and Peterborough for a period at least until EWR Phase 3 (Cambridge) is complete providing a truly inter-regional service. Extended services of this type will increase the options for travelling further afield

¹ Journey time calculated using Network Rail estimate of Milton Keynes-Oxford on EWR and current journey times between Oxford and Bristol Temple Meads.

with minimal changes. For example a through Milton Keynes to Reading service would make available a range of wider destinations in the south and west with one change at Reading.

De-scoping Claydon Junction to Aylesbury

9. Whilst recognizing that de-scoping has been as a result of the financial challenges set by the Secretary of State the decision to only provide single line capability between Claydon Junction and Aylesbury, and not to upgrade the existing route between Aylesbury and Princes Risborough is considered to be a retrograde step and indeed lost opportunity. Whilst the current EWR proposal is only for one train per hour in each direction freight services in and out of Calvert remain as do the hourly (half hourly peak) services to Aylesbury Vale Parkway to Marylebone via Amersham. A single-track capability will therefore present risk to service reliability particularly as a result of delays or train failure. Further, not offering a through service between Milton Keynes Central and Marylebone reduces the attractiveness of using the facility to potential passengers south of Aylesbury (Princes Risborough, High Wycombe, Beaconsfield, Gerrards Cross) because of the need to change trains.

10. An urgent rethink of this proposal is suggested as implementing a double track configuration and upgrading the Aylesbury to Princes Risborough section at a late date will ultimately prove more costly and cause service disruption.

Platform Configurations

11. Whilst recognizing that this is again in response to the Secretary of State's financial challenge the decision to reduce the platform length at Aylesbury Vale Parkway, Winslow and Bletchley (High Level) is a cause for concern in that it will reduce operating flexibility by not being able to provide longer trains in response to increasing passenger demand. There are now almost countless examples across the network of passengers enduring extremely uncomfortable journeys because of trains being too short. The success of EWR Phase 1 is in no small part to passenger demand for services to Bicester Village and it is anticipated that when EWR opens demand will similarly increase. Given track capacity limitations across the network including critical areas that interface with EWR e.g. Milton Keynes/Bletchley/Oxford, opportunities to run additional services will inevitably be limited making the provision of longer trains the only viable option.

12. Again a rethink is recommended to save retrospective action that will again prove more costly.

Milton Keynes/Bletchley Track Configuration

13. The current track configuration at Bletchley dictates that trains cannot operate east from Milton Keynes to Bletchley at least without reversal in Bletchley station. As currently proposed EWR services to Bedford will take the Marston Vale line directly from Bletchley viaduct and not call at Milton Keynes

Central. In effect this means that passengers wishing to travel from Milton Keynes (a key strategic hub and interchange) to Bedford (and eventually Cambridge and beyond) will have to change at Bletchley and will be doubly inconvenient for passengers that will have changed from an inter-city WCML service at Milton Keynes. Given Milton Keynes increasing economic importance this would appear to be another lost opportunity.

14. In an earlier iteration of EWR it was proposed to insert a northern curve at Bletchley in order that EWR trains from Oxford run north into Central Milton Keynes and reverse before running on to Bedford. Whilst this option would create a short delay to facilitate the reversal and require further track reconfiguration at Bletchley, and possibly land acquisition, it would very considerably enhance the travel options at Milton Keynes Central including interchange with WCML services.

Conclusion

15. From the viewpoint of a longstanding resident of North Bucks EWR has unqualified support and should proceed at the very earliest opportunity. However, beyond the current Network Rail proposal it offers opportunity to be an integral part of the UK strategic rail infrastructure in providing a range of travel opportunities currently not available and every effort should be made to exploit these to the full.

Lindsay Milne