

Meeting, Parishes & Councillors - North Bedfordshire

Meeting notes – Tuesday 19 October 2021

Date / Time: 19 October 2021, 18:15 – 19:45

Type of meeting: Hybrid meeting

EWR Co attendees Simon Blanchflower CBE - CEO
Will Gallagher - Strategy and Sponsorship Director
Jordi Beascochea – Engagement Manager
Tobias Paul - External legal advisor (DCO process and compensation)
Representative from AECOM
Representative from Barley Communications

Attendees Cllr Mike Barlow, Brickhill Parish Council – in-person
Cllr Amanda Quince, Renhold Parish Council – in-person
Cllr Jane Walker, Clapham Ward, Bedford Borough Council – in-person
Cllr Gordon Johnston, Chawston and Colesden Parish Council – in-person
Cllr Martin Towler, Riseley Ward, Bedford Borough Council – in-person
Cllr Tim Wood, Great Barford Parish Council – in-person
Cllr Chris Kew, Bolnhurst and Keysoe Parish Council – virtual
Cllr Brent Fielder, Wilden Parish Council – virtual
Cllr Sarah Walker, Clapham Parish Council – virtual
Cllr Bernadette Russell, Ravensden Parish Council – virtual
Cllr Justin Griffiths, Roxton Parish Council – virtual
Cllr Michael Thompson, Thurleigh Parish Council – virtual
Cllr Graham Palmer, Colmworth Parish Council – virtual
Cllr Phillippa Martin-Moran-Bryant, Great Barford Ward, Bedford Borough Council – virtual
Cllr Charles Royden, Brickhill Ward, Bedford Borough Council – virtual
Cllr Wendy Rider, Brickhill Ward, Bedford Borough Council – virtual
Dr Cath Terry, Department for Transport – virtual
Peter Norris, Renhold resident – in-person

Key discussion points / questions raised

Introductions

Statement delivered by Amanda Quince (AQ)

The story so far/ 15 assessment factors

Will Gallagher (WG) explained that the EWR Co team are currently processing 2021 non-statutory consultation feedback and there is an expectation that EWR Co will publish the Public Feedback Report, the Preferred Route Alignment and other supporting documentation in 2022. WG clarified that the 15 assessment factors were outlined in the 2019 and 2021 Technical Reports. These are informed by a mixture of qualitative and quantitative considerations which inform an overall conclusion in the round.

Backchecking and cost details

Mike Barlow (MB) questioned whether there is evidence of back checking the preferred route option.

WG gave an example regarding whether to consider route alignments which approached Cambridge from the north, rather than the south. WG also clarified that as part of the development process EWR Co has been back checking earlier decisions, but there has been no new information which indicates that the decision to select Route Option E as the preferred route option should be re-opened, and therefore there has been no need to reconsult on it.

MB asked why costing of all routes cannot be available to the public.

WG stated that cost information to date is available on the website. Cost details continue to be developed and further detail will be available at statutory consultation in 2022.

Freight

MB asked why freight information was not disclosed at the non-statutory consultation in 2019.

Simon Blanchflower (SB) clarified that the design of the railway will be able to accommodate freight, which has been transparent throughout the development of the railway. In addition, there may be aspirations to open up freight connectivity, but no decisions have been made and will need to be assessed to incorporate the wider railway network.

EWR Co are currently working with the Department for Transport (DfT) and the railway will be predominantly a passenger railway.

WG stated there will be a cost-benefit assessment undertaken for freight which will assess the demand and provision. It is expected that there might be theoretical capacity for one freight path an hour in each direction, but the actual level of demand cannot be prescribed because freight trains operate on an open access basis.

Diesel trains/electrification

MB stated that there has been a lease signed by EWR Co to allow diesel trains.

Tobias Paul (TP) and WG clarified that this was correct for services between Oxford, Bicester and Bletchley (the sections already in construction) and the railway will utilise diesel trains as an interim solution, but there have been no decisions made for other sections. Diesel trains already run on this section between Oxford and London Marylebone.

SB stated that electrification is preferred as part of wider UK decarbonisation strategy.

Carbon and environmental assessments

MB asked if an embedded carbon study has been undertaken or equivalent qualitative assessments of environmental impacts and stated that Route B was the most environmentally friendly. He further explained that improving air quality in Bedford is vital.

WG said that EWR Co had looked in qualitative terms at the overall environmental impact of the line which would have included consideration of the construction materials and embedded carbon.

SB also stated that there have been a number of measures in place towards achieving biodiversity net gain between Bletchley and Bedford, such as building badger sets and an otter den and installing bat boxes. Furthermore, EWR Co are currently undertaking works on assessing the embedded operational carbon to meet government milestones in 2037 and 2050.

2019 non-statutory consultation

MB stated that 5% of homes in Clapham and Roxton received a postcard, and some parishes were not on the prescribed consultee list. There was also limited engagement through the media and explained that the Bedford Citizen & Times does not reach the whole of Bedford, and that the choice of location for the Bedford event (Scott Hall) is not well known in Bedford and not accessible.

SB stated that there was a strong overall representation of parishes during the 2019 non-statutory consultation.

MB also stated that half of the 7,000 responses in 2019 were from a campaign by the Wildlife Trust. This would have affected the overall ranking of the route options based on the public feedback.

TP clarified that the identified Trust campaign responses were provided as free text and did not rank the route options. Consequently, the published quantitative analysis of the public rankings would not have been affected by that campaign.

Questions from the Councillors

Phillippa Martin-Moran-Bryant (PMMB) asked a question about the back checking process and how EWR Co will work with new information published within the Bedford Borough Local Plan.

WG explained the back checking process in three stages:

1. Is this new information?
2. Does it indicate that an earlier decision should be re-opened?
3. If so, analyse material to see if the decision would be different and then reconsult.

WG stated that the EWR Co team will check the progress with any new information published in the Bedford Borough Local plan.

Sarah Walker (SW) explained and expressed the concerns regarding the lack of engagement and transparency from EWR Co with the public.

WG announced that EWR Co will be setting up community forums to continue dialogue with elected representative across the route.

Statement by Peter Norris (PN)

PN expressed concerns regarding the transparency of EWR Co, lack of engagement, concerns for environment and poor engagement of materials. For instance, the poor quality of the website material and maps during the 2019 non-statutory consultation.