

EWR / Northern Parishes Meeting Report

19th October 2021

Willows Training Centre, Wyboston Lakes

18.15 – 19.45

Attending in person:

Simon Blanchflower OBE	- EWR
Will Gallagher	- EWR
Jordi Beascochea	- EWR
Catherine	- ACOM
Chris	- Barley Consultants
Tobias	- DCO Consultant
Mike Barlow	- Brickhill
Amanda Quince	- Renhold
Jane Walker	- Clapham Ward
Gordon Johnston	- Wyboston, Colesden and Chawston
Martin Towler	- Thurleigh
Tim Wood	- Great Barford

Attending Remotely:

Dr Cath Terry	- Dept for Transport
Chris Kew	- Bolnhurst and Keysoe
Brent Fielder	- Wilden
Sarah Walker	- Clapham
Bernie Russell	- Ravensden
Justin Griffiths	- Roxton
Michael Thompson	- Thurleigh
Graham Palmer	- Colmworh
Phillippa Martin-Moran-Bryant	- Great Barford Ward
Charles Royden	- Brickhill Ward
Wendy Rider	- Brickhill Ward

Proposed Agenda from EWR

- Introductions
- Update from EWR as to current status.
- Review of BFARe proposed option.
- EWR to describe next stages

Restrictions placed by EWR

- Only elected representatives from Parishes and Wards may attend (EWR verified each person)
- Only questions which had not been asked before may be asked
- These must be submitted in writing before the meeting

Meeting report.

After introductions, Amanda Quince made a statement on behalf of the attending parishes and BFARe that expressed the collective outrage at how the meeting had been stage managed to provide

a tick box exercise for EWR to say they have engaged. She also referenced the total disregard for anyone in the North Bedford parishes.

This was seconded by Brent Fielder who likened the dictatorial, unidirectional nature of the handling of the meeting as a microcosm of the mis-management of the consultation process.

Expressly it was mentioned that, on 29 July, Simon Blanchflower committed, live on 3 counties radio, to a meeting with BFARe to opening discuss the BFARe preferred option. The view is that by preventing the attendance of the authors of that report, EWR are renegeing on that promise.

EWR were informed that the BFARe proposed option would not be covered because the right people had been prohibited from being in the room by EWR.

It was highlighted that the only acceptable outcome to the meeting would be follow up meetings:

1. A free and frank exchange of ideas and information with BFARe in a face to face meeting as promised.
2. An open public meeting where residents can attend to have their views heard, acknowledged and actioned by EWR – a similar courtesy as was afforded the residents of Poets.

Discussion Points:

15 Decision criteria

The 15 decision criteria were acted on “qualitatively” – i.e. subjectively “on a balance of factors”. A quantitative analysis was made of the public responses for the “tick box” rankings. Written answers were read and “taken into consideration”.

There was no scoring mechanism for the 15 criteria identified prior to the consultation.

No detail was revealed about what the terms of reference for the “balance of factors” was. EWR couldn’t tell us how these were judged or how the Route decision was informed.

EWR shared a table of the results from the public response which ranked the routes on the basis of the tick box exercise.

We are still none the wiser as to how the decision for route E was reached. Moreover **EWR seem unable to explain it in any logical structured fashion.**

Zero Carbon Aspirations

EWR informed us that **no Carbon calculations for the construction of any route were used to inform them of the Carbon impact of the routes.** Therefore they do not know whether the route selected is the most carbon efficient. Rather they are seeking to mitigate the selection.

EWR have simply not done the work. They are treating climate change like a minor inconvenience, rather than the emergency that it is.

The point was made, that if the route selected were not the most carbon efficient, then mitigating it is akin to putting lipstick on a pig. It is creative carbon accounting. Surely a shorter, straighter, flatter route would be more carbon efficient to build and run.

EWR made the point that they have a good record of bio-diversity net gain in the Ox-MK section. However, The Bed-Cam section is the first substantial new track being laid over virgin countryside which is destroying established, rich natural biodiversity such as that at the Clapham flood plain. This is harder to mitigate. Plus if the carbon impact of the railway contributes to climate change – that bio diversity will be heavily impacted, and it is a waste of time.

Freight

EWR stated that their railway is being designed to primarily provide a passenger service running 4 times per hour in each direction and expected to be able to support one freight path in each direction throughout the operating day. Simon Blanchflower believed that there would be no limitation on the freight carrying capacity of the line which would meet the full W12 gauge specification.

They were challenged on the lack of transparency during the 2019 consultation because freight was hardly mentioned and quite frankly continues to be down played.

EWR continue to evade embracing their potential contribution to the freight industry and the growing aims of important stakeholders to maximise the effectiveness of the National Freight Strategy. They admit they do not know the role of freight, the demand on their railway, nor where EWR stands in terms of the National Freight strategy. The question was asked – how can EWR build a business case without encouraging freight given the fall in passenger numbers due to the changing work environment.

EWR would not commit to a “traction strategy”. They refused to state if or when they would be able to cease reliance on diesel power. Fully embracing freight business would suggest they should be pressing to electrify the line from build but they continue to display little enthusiasm for either topic.

The extensive use of freight limiting gradients throughout sections C and D was raised but Will Gallagher insisted that gradients were specifically defined by the current Programme –Wide Output Specifications.

Backchecking

EWR frequently claim to be “backchecking” their work. They were asked if they have documentation for where they have performed backchecking. They responded that they had in the North Cambridge area. They were asked why not in respect of Bedford then?

The response was that it would require significant change to trigger a back check. EWR deemed the following changes too insignificant to trigger a back check:-

- The Climate Emergency. Which in Bedford, was declared in March 2019, just as the EWR Route selection consultation was taking place.
- The six track option (known to EWR in 2019, but not the public) and the potential demolitions in Poets, the wider Bedford and the northern villages.

When questioned as to whether a rise in the costs would trigger a back check – EWR said it would.

Costs

EWR refuse to reveal the costs for Section C (Bedford), E (Harlton to Hauxton) and F (Shelfords to Cambridge) during the 2021 consultation. This means it is not possible to perform a cost comparison for Bedford to Cambridge versus the 2019 consultation.

It was made clear that we believe the reason is for the increased costs in the Bedford section, and potentially the others. The predicted costs at 2019 consultation was £3.7bn between Bedford and Cambridge. The costs currently revealed in 2021 for the section D only is £2.0 – 2.4bn depending upon which alignment.

This means that the costs for sections C, E and F must come in at under £1.3 - £1.7bn to come under the 2019 consultation value.

The point was made that if there is no problem, then there is no reason not to make these costs public. EWR have admitted that they have these costs, but so far they have blocked the FOI which has gone to appeal with the ICO.

EWR defended this saying the costs were “still maturing”.

Consultation Process

EWR were asked if they felt that the 2019 consultation process had been adequate given that three of the directly impacted North Beds villages were not on the prescribed consultee list and that in some parishes – (Clapham and Roxton) only 5% of residences were on the EWR postcode list. Meaning 95% did not receive a communication from them in 2019.

It was pointed out that Queens Park, Bromham and Biddenham were also omitted despite Route E being immediately adjacent to them.

EWR maintained that they publicised the consultation well (in the Times and Citizen – which doesn't get regularly distributed). They said they ran multiple events, referring to the event at Scott Hall and at St Neots. It was made clear to them that these are not easily accessible.

EWR maintain the line that the two consultations to date are non-statutory and therefore somehow not important and that they are doing residents a favour. The point was made that EWR are making decisions that impact lives, homes and livelihoods on the basis of these non-statutory consultations. They need to take that responsibility seriously.

EWR do not accept the point made that – had they been more transparent with residents – more accessible in 2019 and more open about costs, freight, the environment and the six track option, then the public response would have been different.

EWR were reminded of an inadequately answered FOI question on the fundamental shortcomings of the 2019 rout Consultation process had been resubmitted and had still not been answered after 25 working days. It was pointed out that addressing the FOI submission would help clarify the extent of public disquiet felt throughout the areas impacted by sections C & D.

EWR Engagement with Bedford Borough Council

EWR have had at least 8 meetings with Bedford Borough Council where no Agenda, Minutes or actions have been kept. Several FOI requests have been made, but no information regarding the contents of the meeting have been forthcoming.

This includes some meetings from July and August 2019 where participants from BBC and EWR discussed the six track option but did not expose this to constituents or their Councillors.

It was pointed out that to hold senior level meetings without record or documentation is extremely unprofessional. Especially with a public body where billions of pounds of taxpayer's money is being spent and decisions that impact homes, lives and livelihoods are at stake.

Follow up

1. A follow up meeting with the right people from BFARe was requested. EWR refused to commit to a follow up meeting, saying they needed to come back to us with an answer. When asked when they would come back with an answer, they said they needed to check.

Will Gallagher committed to come back to us on 20th October 2021 with a timescale for when they will be able to answer whether they will commit to a follow up meeting with the BFARe team.

2. A follow up meeting open to the public was requested. Will Gallagher announced that they will be forming public forums for people to attend and he was going to investigate whether this could be brought forwards for the Northern Parishes.