

MP claims Government to axe



Philip Haigh
Contributing Writer
rail@bauermedia.co.uk

MINISTERS look set to axe another part of HS2, according to a local MP who wrote to a constituent to say that he had received "categorical, verbal assurances" from Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps that the Golborne Link near Manchester would be dropped.

The *Guardian* newspaper reported on April 6 that Sir Graham Brady, who represents Altrincham and Sale West, wrote: "I have received categorical, verbal assurances from the Secretary of State that the Government will table an amendment as part of the second reading of the Bill. This will remove the Golborne spur from the legislation. This is expected to take place in the summertime."

As currently planned, the

If the Department for Transport drops HS2's Golborne Link, as one local MP claims, then trains for Scotland will be forced onto conventional (and congested) tracks north of Crewe station. However, as part of the UK government's *Union Connectivity Review*, DfT is also investigating a longer link than Golborne's which would let trains run further north before reverting to slower tracks. An aerial view of Crewe station from 2017. ALAMY.



Network Rail: turn 'Varsity' route into East West Main Line

Network Rail has made the case for expanding the current East West Rail project into a full East West Main Line, integrated into the rest of the network.

In a strategic statement, NR argues for consideration of aspects such as electrification, provision for adoption of European Train Control System (ETCS) signalling, and allowing for much wider service provision whereby passenger trains could reach the likes of Cardiff, Southampton, Northampton,

Peterborough and Ipswich.

That would significantly expand the scope beyond the current project, which is largely limited to re-creating the Oxford-Cambridge 'Varsity Line' through a mixture of new and upgraded railway.

The £1.1 billion EWR is due to begin services between Oxford and Milton Keynes in 2025, followed by their extension as far as Bedford. Route options covering five alternatives for the final stage, to Cambridge, went out for

consultation during 2021.

As currently remitted by the Department for Transport, the new railway will provide services between Oxford, Cambridge, Aylesbury and Milton Keynes.

However, NR says its statement outlines a vision "aimed at gaining the most from the investment made in the new infrastructure and providing a railway that delivers for passengers and freight users into the future".

The East West Rail Strategic

Statement argues that the next steps should include analysis of market flows, assessment of potential modal shift, and identification of capacity and performance constraints, as well as interventions needed on the existing network to accommodate expanded service provision.

It contends that infrastructure changes should not preclude the potential to serve additional locations.

■ See *Analysis*, pages 34-35..

How East West Rail could reach

WHILE engineers are busy working to reopen East West Rail - the old Oxford-Cambridge cross-country route - Network Rail is thinking further ahead to suggest how the line can better fit into Britain's transport network.

That could mean providing better links at intermediate interchanges such as Bedford and Bletchley, or extending trains beyond EWR's limits to serve places such as Cardiff, Southampton, Peterborough, Norwich and Ipswich.

For freight, the line has potential to provide another route between Felixstowe and distribution centres huddled around Daventry.

NR expands the name East West Rail into the East West Main Line to describe its wider vision, published as a strategic statement in spring 2022. It stresses: "The statement does not specify a programme of works, infrastructure projects or a pattern of train service as part of the East West Main Line vision."

Nor does it recommend changes to the wider network that would compromise performance or capacity already allocated to operators.

This gives NR a fine line to tread. As it stands, the Department for Transport's East West Rail project is expensive - *RAIL* 859 revealed the £1.1 billion price tag for reopening

Network Rail has announced its ideas to better incorporate East West Rail into a wider rail network. PHILIP HAIGH examines some of the obstacles that would need to be overcome

12 miles of mothballed railway and upgrading another 35 miles. NR's suggestions inevitably add to this sum, even if they might generate a more useful railway.

NR says that to achieve its long-term vision, decisions must be taken now to address emerging constraints. These decisions should not lead to infrastructure options being selected that can't accommodate future expansion or which would be very expensive to redesign later, it says.

Planners at NR have taken the services expected on EWR and tested them against capacity on the current network. This has exposed gaps that, if not addressed, will prevent EWR delivering its aspirations (see table) - let alone a wider role.

It notes that Oxford does not have space for EWR services without a major remodelling of the station. The answer might come initially with the second phase of NR's Oxford corridor capacity upgrade, deferred from Control Period 5 (2014-19) into CP6 (2019-

24) and which provides capacity for EWR's initial service of two trains per hour each way to and from Milton Keynes. Adding more services (for example, the 2tph to Bedford) will need more capacity which NR says will need more funding - from EWR or elsewhere.

As it stands, the second phase of Oxford capacity improvements closes level crossings north of Oxford, installs high-speed crossovers at Oxford North Junction, and provides a new twin-face platform for Down (northbound) trains.

Another answer might come by extending EWR services to run further south - perhaps to Cowley (currently a freight branch but a candidate for passenger status) or to Didcot.

Nor is there sufficient capacity at Milton Keynes Central to reliably run EWR services. This is despite the station's remodelling that added two platforms, including a bay facing Bletchley, and two lines for trains reversing in the station.

Capacity released by HS2 is one

the East West Railway Company in 2018, the task was to refurbish the mothballed section from Bicester to Bletchley (including BR's 1962 viaduct over the West Coast Main Line), upgrade Bletchley-Bedford, and find a route from Bedford to Cambridge before building it.

Current physical work concentrates on Bicester-Bedford while the eastern arm is being developed. This gives the prospect of a line from Oxford to Cambridge providing interchanges into the Chiltern, West Coast, Midland and East Coast Main Lines.



Looking towards Shepreth Branch Junction to the south of Cambridge, Great Northern 387126 passes Addenbrookes (near the planned site of the new station at Cambridge South) on January 19 2020 with the 0912 King's Cross-Ely. NR's suggestions for East West Rail would require infrastructure changes at Shepreth Junction. KIM FULLBROOK.

answer to this problem. Another is to build extra infrastructure. Neither will happen before EWR's planned service launch in 2025, but NR's third option of restructuring the West Coast Main Line's timetable is not easy either.

Network Rail admits that the fourth option of cutting the service back to Bletchley in the interim is not desirable.

It says: "Milton Keynes should be the primary central 'hub' for east to west services on the grounds that Milton Keynes is a nationally significant and rapidly growing market, and that the need to align service groups to facilitate interchange at Bletchley represents a sub-optimal use of the capacity released by HS2."

Putting further pressure on capacity in the area around Bletchley and Milton Keynes is the potential to use EWR to feed freight trains to and from national distribution centres around Daventry. Adding an east-to-north chord from EWR to the WCML at Bletchley would create another route for trains to and from Felixstowe, says NR.

East West Rail

British Rail closed its line between Oxford and Cambridge east of Bedford in 1968, at a time when roads were providing stiff competition.

The closed section ran eastwards through Willington, over the East Coast Main Line at Sandy, then through Potton, Gamlingay and Trumpington to run into Cambridge from the south.

From Bedford, passenger trains ran westwards to Bletchley. Only freight ventured further west through Verney Junction, passing Claydon LNE Junction (where a freight line ran to Aylesbury), under the Chiltern line at Bicester

to reach Oxford.

Passengers returned to the western section in 1987 when British Rail's Network SouthEast reopened the route between Oxford and Bicester Town. After BR's privatisation, Chiltern Railways upgraded the line, adding a link to its line towards London Marylebone. This enabled Chiltern Railways to run London-Oxford trains from 2015.

After years of lobbying from local councils, starting in Ipswich in the mid-1990s, the Department for Transport adopted in the early 2010s the scheme to reopen the wider line. By the time it created

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rail@bauermedia.co.uk



other points of the compass



EWR passenger train services

Configuration State 1

2tph Oxford-Milton Keynes Central

Configuration State 2

2tph Oxford-Milton Keynes Central

2tph Oxford-Bedford

Configuration State 2.5

2tph Oxford-Milton Keynes Central

1tph Aylesbury-Milton Keynes Central

2tph Oxford-Bedford

Configuration State 3

2tph Oxford-Milton Keynes Central

1tph Aylesbury-Milton Keynes Central

2tph Oxford-Cambridge

2tph Bletchley-Cambridge

Configuration State 3.5

2tph Oxford-Milton Keynes Central

1tph Aylesbury-Milton Keynes Central

2tph Oxford-Cambridge

4tph Bletchley-Cambridge

Note: Configuration states relate to how much of EWR is open for traffic. CS1 opens Bicester to Bletchley, CS2 links in Bedford while CS3 delivers the new line from Bedford to Cambridge.

At Bedford, trains from Bletchley currently scuttle to and from bay Platform 1a, which is separated from the slow lines carrying Thameslink services and the fast lines used by East Midlands Railway. NR suggests that in future, EWR should have segregated lines to the east of the station that diverge from the Midland Main Line further north.

EWR itself suggests that Bedford needs a new station that can handle trains from Bletchley as they call on their way towards Cambridge. This needs through platforms with tracks that link to its expected new railway, which curves away from the MML on a viaduct crossing the River Great Ouse and the A6 road. One option shows twin tracks for EWR services with three dedicated platforms.

The proposed increase in EWR services makes it likely that today's ten stations between Bletchley and Bedford will not survive. In their place could come five intermediate stations, all shifted from today's sites. EWR suggests that the five should be Woburn Sands, Ridgmont, Lidlington, Stewartby

and Bedford St Johns.

EWR expects its line to cross the East Coast Main Line between St Neots and Sandy, and assumes that it will build a station to allow passengers to change to and from ECML services. NR expects EWR's tracks to be separate from those of the ECML, so that there is no impact on ECML operations or performance.

Its strategic statement then explains: "It is unlikely that ECML fast-line services could call at any new station without unacceptable detriment to journey times or capacity. Assessment of stopping other trains must mitigate any impacts of the additional call on, amongst other factors, performance, ECML journey times, timetable constraints and rolling stock, and work with the industry to make sure connectivity benefits are deliverable."

This neatly introduces one of the dilemmas of EWR. Passengers coming from the north would have to change at Peterborough and again at the ECML interchange to reach EWR services. This might make their journey longer than

staying on a fast train to London and then heading out of town again. Making passengers change trains too often gives longer journey times and hands an advantage to roads.

There's a prospect of trains running directly between the ECML and EWR to remove this interchange penalty, but this will need extra infrastructure. But there's no surprise that NR warns that these additions should not harm ECML capacity or performance.

As if there's a theme developing, Cambridge also presents challenges that need early decisions. If EWR is to run four trains per hour no further east than Cambridge, then it's sufficient to four-track the station's southern approach from Shepreth Junction and add bay platforms on the west side of the station. If the ambition is to run further east (noting that Ipswich council was an early backer of what became EWR), then Cambridge needs more infrastructure.

Shepreth Junction needs to become grade-separated and there needs to be three additional

through platforms on the station's eastern side. That copes with 4tph. To increase that to 6tph needs all the 4tph improvements, but with sections of the line in from Shepreth Junction increased to six tracks.

Building what's needed for terminating trains and then deciding to run through services would result in wasted money, NR warns.

Finally, there's the elephant in the room that is electrification. The Department for Transport cut EWR's scope to remove electrification, but NR says that "all new railways should aim to be introduced without the use of diesel traction, or with diesel traction as a temporary measure only".

NR reports that wiring EWR and adding NR schemes would "be a significant step towards an East West Main Line vision".

This needs some strategic decisions. There's a prize on offer by creating an East West Railway that's integrated into the wider network, rather than simply being a standalone system. Those decisions will not be easy. **R**