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ECO-TOWNS

This response to the consultation “Eco-Towns: Living A Greener Future” represents the view of the East West Rail Consortium, a group of local authorities and regional bodies whose overarching aim is to promote the reinstatement of rail services between Oxford and Cambridge. The Consortium has focused on the proposed eco-town sites at Weston Otmoor and Marston which identify East West Rail (EWR) as a key piece of transport infrastructure to underpin their transport sustainability.

In recent years, the Consortium has concentrated its efforts and resources on developing the Western Section of EWR i.e. west of Bedford to Bletchley/Milton Keynes and Oxford including the spur to Aylesbury. Our work has involved detailed engineering and operating appraisals endorsed by the rail industry. The Western Section is regarded as the priority phase in the context of the Government’s existing growth agenda and related regional, sub regional and local planning and transport policies. Our most recent development work, in conjunction with English Partnerships, DCLG, Network Rail and the Department for Transport, has taken the project to the railway industry’s GRIP Stage 3. It demonstrates an operating case for a network of passenger services that will support the growth set out in the statutory planning framework: the South East Plan (which incorporates the Milton Keynes and South Midlands and Central Oxfordshire Sub Regions). We are awaiting the proposed modifications but there is significant support for the project within the Examination Inspector’s Report. The Consortium is currently working on a funding strategy for the project which will rely heavily on private sector contributions.

The Western Section is seen as a building block for future eastward extension of services from Bedford towards Cambridge. To this end, the Consortium also has work in hand to review routeing options, the outcome of which will form our response to the East of England Plan Review.

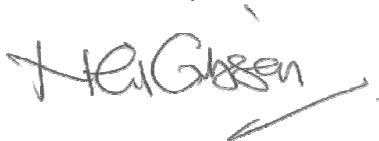
We are proposing to build a two track railway on the core sections between Oxford and Bletchley. Although the signalling system can be designed to allow high frequency services (with minimal headways), there will be a finite capacity in terms of the number, type and mix of trains that will be able to use the route. This capacity will need to be allocated carefully to ensure there is a robust timetable that provides enough space on the trains for users along the entire route, and not just at the eco-towns. We are aware the line also has a wider national and regional strategic role and allowance should be made for long distance north-south passenger services and container freight in the future.

We are deeply concerned that undue emphasis is being placed by the promoters on linking delivery of EWR to their respective eco-town proposal, especially as the credentials of an eco-town have yet to be tested. One developer is suggesting they can deliver the project for significantly less than the cost we have estimated working with the rail industry. We remain sceptical they will be able to achieve that in view of the detailed technical appraisals we have carried out over the past 3 years with the rail industry.

The Consortium is willing to explore the potential interaction between EWR and the eco-town proposals that are currently under consideration, and is willing to work with each developer should their site be shortlisted in October. We are currently scoping the next development stage (GRIP Stage 4) and if the developer(s) agree to fund the additional work, this can include options to evaluate their rail proposals as part of the route development. The Consortium's willingness to engage in this process should not be taken as an indication that we believe the EWR proposal in its current form can satisfactorily accommodate the impact arising from the eco-town proposals.

The Consortium believes it is important that the momentum to deliver East West Rail for the wider South East is not put at risk by the Eco-town initiative.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Neil Gibson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Neil Gibson
Strategic Director for Transportation, Economy & Environment
Buckinghamshire County Council - Chair East West Rail Consortium