

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

8 June 2022

Agenda Item 4: Making the case for the Aylesbury link

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Agrees a funding contribution of around £30,000 to progress work to update the business case for the Aylesbury link to East West Rail**

1. Context

- 1.1. Delivery of an East West Rail link to Aylesbury has been an integral part of the East West Rail scheme for over a decade.
- 1.2. Its delivery has been a longstanding priority for the Partnership, England's Economic Heartland and Buckinghamshire Council.
- 1.3. The link would unlock economic opportunities and support sustainable growth in the town, while also providing strategic benefits for the wider region, including improved north-south rail connectivity.
- 1.4. Aylesbury Station and Aylesbury Vale Parkway Station were included within what was previously named the 'western section' of the route, proposals which also included Bicester to Bedford.
- 1.5. 'The Case for East West Rail Western Section Phase Two' published by Department for Transport in December 2018, stated that one passenger service per hour was expected to run direct between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes.
- 1.6. The Transport and Works Act Order for the western section was approved by the Secretary of State in February 2020, including in it the Aylesbury link.
- 1.7. However, East West Rail capital funding announced in January 2021 only covered parts of the original Western Section Phase Two – the section between Bicester and Bletchley.
- 1.8. At the previous Board in March 2022, the Partnership discussed its work programme for the year ahead. It agreed that at in June, the Board would receive an update on taking forward work to specifically update and reemphasise the business case for the Aylesbury link to East West Rail.

2. Importance of the Aylesbury link

- 2.1. Aylesbury is poorly connected west and north by both strategic highway infrastructure and rail. Currently rail services on the Chiltern line to London terminate at Aylesbury. Issues with congestion and wider connectivity in Aylesbury are well documented.
- 2.2. The provision of a rail link, connecting Aylesbury to other centres of high growth and employment such as Milton Keynes and Oxford, is considered vital for addressing the significant pressure on existing transport infrastructure; unlocking economic opportunities; and supporting future sustainable growth. It is also an important element within the wider Aylesbury Garden Town project, supporting the regeneration and masterplan aspirations of the town.
- 2.3. More than 15,000 new homes are due to be built within 5km of Aylesbury in the current local plan period, with a further 6,000 new homes within 5km of Aylesbury Vale Parkway.

- 2.4. Aylesbury Station would also serve as an important interchange location to access the East West Main Line from stations to the south of Aylesbury via Princes Risborough and Amersham.
- 2.5. Over 2,000 new homes are planned at Princes Risborough near the station and the link to East West Rail via Aylesbury station is considered key in supporting this growth.
- 2.6. Delivering the link to Aylesbury also unlocks the potential for strategic north-south connectivity between Northampton and Old Oak Common. Through utilising the capacity released by HS2 on the West Coast Main Line, potential new journeys could be unlocked between Northampton, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury, High Wycombe and Old Oak Common and the Elizabeth Line.

3. Updating the business case

- 3.1. The Aylesbury link has previously been considered as part of the western section business case which also included Bicester to Bedford.
- 3.2. The objective of the proposed work is to revisit the existing business case, updating it with the specific benefits that the link to Aylesbury would bring.
- 3.3. It is proposed that the work would explore how the Aylesbury link can:
 - Contribute to the business case for the overall scheme
 - Improve the local and regional transport system
 - Facilitate economic growth and jobs creation
 - Act as a catalyst for the further regeneration of Aylesbury town centre
 - Support current and future housing growth
 - Reduce reliance on the car
 - Contribute to a net zero transport system
 - Identify any wider opportunities to improve rail connectivity such as Northampton to Old Oak Common
- 3.4. The proposal to undertake this work has been discussed with officials from Buckinghamshire Council and Network Rail to understand their requirements. They, along with the Department for Transport, have indicated their support for some work to take place and will be further engaged as the full study brief is developed. Buckinghamshire Council has indicated it is open to match-funding the work, subject to final approval.
- 3.5. The Aylesbury link has also been considered within the scope of the suite of work being undertaken by the Partnership, EEH and East West Railway Company to update and reemphasise the strategic narrative for the Oxford-Cambridge section being delivered in full. This work is nearing completion and relevant information will be used to inform the strategic case for investment into the Aylesbury link.
- 3.6. In addition, the outputs of this work will form a key part of EEH's planned multimodal connectivity study: Northampton-Milton Keynes-Thames Valley.

4. The proposal

- 4.1. The Board is invited to agree a contribution of around £30,000 (subject to final costings), which will be potentially match funded by Buckinghamshire Council.
- 4.2. This would leave £58,834 remaining within the Partnership's budget (this includes a reserve of £40,000). This is in line with the proposed programme of work and funding profile for the current financial year, as agreed by the Partnership in March 2022.

5. Next steps

- 5.1. Subject to the Board's comments and approval, EEH officers will take forward delivery of the study on behalf of key partners and will establish a steering group to ensure it incorporates their requirements.

- 5.2. EEH officers will work with Buckinghamshire Council and other partners to understand the best route to commissioning the work.
- 5.3. The Board will receive an update on the work in September 2022.

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May 2022