

# East West Rail Consultation Response from Iain Stewart MP

## **(A) Introduction**

I am grateful for this opportunity to contribute as the MP for Milton Keynes South to this consultation on the next phase of East West Rail. This scheme, through enhanced connectivity and modal shift from road transport, offers significant economic and environmental benefits both for Milton Keynes and the wider region. As with any major infrastructure project, however, there are a number of potentially adverse local consequences which need to be addressed.

I have received representations about the project from individual constituents and organisations. In my submission I have endeavoured to capture the balance of these views together with my own observations both as the local MP and as someone who has a long-standing interest in and enthusiasm for rail transport. My submission is divided into two parts; first some general comments and suggestions on the project as a whole, and secondly observations about specific issues contained in the consultation. I have limited the latter to the section of the line which runs through my constituency and the stations of Bletchley, Fenny Stratford, Bow Brickhill and Woburn Sands given that I do not have as deep a knowledge of the local aspects of the line in Bedfordshire.

I remain willing to act as an intermediary between EWR and local residents to help explore solutions to the challenges that local areas may have.

## **(B) General Observations**

1. **Co-ordination of EWR with wider development:** The single most important message I would like to emphasise in this response is the critical need for EWR to be developed in sync with both Milton Keynes Council's growth plans and the wider Oxford-MK-Cambridge spatial strategy. While your consultation document does reference this<sup>1</sup>, there is currently considerable local alarm, which I share, that the planning processes are not fully aligned. For example, Milton Keynes Council's consultation on its expansion plans for South East Milton Keynes (SEMK) concluded while this EWR consultation is still running. I attach as an appendix to this note my own response to the SEMK which explains this point further. **It is difficult to judge the best solution to the challenges identified in the consultation document without detailed knowledge of these wider development plans.** My observation from over two decades' involvement in the political and civic life of Milton Keynes is that local people will support housing and other developments when it is clear that it has been properly designed and planned in conjunction with transport and utility infrastructure and public services. I

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<sup>1</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, p36

strongly recommend that you take all steps open to you to demonstrate that this co-ordinated planning is taking place.

2. **General Road Traffic Survey:** I am also concerned that a number of your options related to station design/location and level-crossing closures are being considered in the absence of up-to-date road traffic flow surveys. Given that certain interventions could result in problematic traffic congestion away from the railway, it is important for decisions to be made with this full knowledge. I will refer to specific issues in the following section but, to illustrate the point, in Woburn Sands no recent traffic survey has been done to estimate what proportion of road traffic is local (i.e. journeys by Woburn Sands residents and visitors starting or finishing in the town) and what is “through traffic”. If, for example, a high proportion is through traffic that could potentially be re-routed away from the town, that could materially affect the decision on whether to keep the Newport Road level-crossing open.
3. **EWR’s Benefits:** I recommend that a refreshed analysis is made of the local and wider benefits that EWR can deliver. There are many examples at home and abroad where a new/re-opened/upgraded rail line has delivered significant economic benefits and contributed to environmental gains by encouraging modal shift from private cars. The re-opened Borders Line in Scotland is a good example. I believe the same to be true for EWR. However, that view is not universally shared in areas which might see local disruption as a result of the railway. Some scepticism has also been expressed about the number of local people who will use the upgraded Marston Vale line, particularly given the post-Covid “new normal” may see different home/office work patterns and leisure traffic. While the consultation document does reference the National Infrastructure Commission’s work<sup>2</sup>, a refreshed analysis of the potential patronage and wider benefits would be beneficial.
4. **Further Consultations:** I welcome the fact that this consultation will not be the only opportunity for local residents to help shape EWR. While many are aware of the detailed proposals, and have views about them, I have encountered many other residents who are not aware of the project beyond a general notion that the old “Varsity Line” is to be reinstated. For example, many are not aware of the proposal to close the level crossing at Fenny Stratford. This is understandable given that Covid restrictions have limited the opportunities for physical public displays. I would recommend working with local Town/Parish/Community Councils and Residents Associations to help explain specific local proposals and options to capture what works best for each location.
5. **Compulsory Purchase:** I have been made aware of a number of residents in houses close to the line who have received communications from EWR about compulsory purchases. While I have not seen the correspondence in question (the individuals concerned have not approached me directly as their MP), I flag this to you as it is creating the impression amongst some that a decision on the project details has already been made and that this

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<sup>2</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, pp 32-33

consultation is a “going through the motions” exercise rather than it being a genuine opportunity for local communities to shape the project.

6. **Passenger Experience – Rolling Stock:** I applaud you for inviting comments on the design of rolling stock for optimal passenger comfort<sup>3</sup>. Getting this right is essential for achieving modal shift and I have been appalled at the design and comfort levels of some recent new trains. In particular the seats on the new Siemens-built Thameslink stock and the Hitachi LNER Azuma stock are a disgrace and a real disincentive to take the train! As well as commuter and business traffic, EWR is likely to attract a significant number of tourist and leisure passengers and should be designed accordingly (e.g. luggage space for shoppers coming from Bicester Village!). Three basics to get right: decent leg-room; align seats with windows and decent padding on the seats. Of all the new rolling stock recently procured, the one that I would suggest comes closest are the Stadler-built bi-mode trains for Greater Anglia.
  
7. **Passenger Experience – Stations:** I also congratulate you on inviting suggestions about what makes a good station<sup>4</sup>. I will comment on individual stations in the next section but I would make the observation that larger stations should have two key features: good onward journey connections/facilities (e.g. links to bus stations with integrated timetables) and retail outlets which complement the passenger journey. You invite suggestions of stations at home or abroad which could be examined. From my extensive rail travel in Europe, I would suggest Spiez, Interlaken West and Zug in Switzerland and Girona in Spain (the main station, not the AVE high speed one) offer insights into what a “good” station looks like.
  
8. **Service Pattern Options:** The two service pattern concepts you propose<sup>5</sup> both have advantages and disadvantages. I can see the attraction of having a smaller number of stations along the line which would help deliver a more regular and reliable service. However, I would lean towards Concept 1 which retains all existing stations and the currently hourly (all stops) service<sup>6</sup>. I believe that a case can be made for retaining stations at Fenny Stratford and Bow Brickhill as well as Bletchley and Woburn Sands at which all trains will call under either concept. In particular, there is strong case for retaining and enhancing a station at Bow Brickhill. Even without future housing growth, it is close to significant employment and residential areas (not just the eponymous village but the industrial areas at Tilbrook and Caldecotte but the Walton Parish housing estates). The Consultation’s Technical Report<sup>7</sup> notes that passenger usage of Bow Brickhill is one of the

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<sup>3</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, p 74

<sup>4</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, p 72

<sup>5</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, pp 112-118

<sup>6</sup> If all existing stations are retained, some could be “request stops” which would introduce an element of timetable flexibility thus increasing reliability.

<sup>7</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Technical Report, p 105

highest on the line and only marginally less than that of Woburn Sands. With proper engagement with employers, marketing and connections, patronage levels here could increase significantly. Fenny Stratford is underused at present but, given the wider ambitions to increase public transport usage in Milton Keynes, it would seem premature to close it. I cannot offer a view on the desirability of keeping open all stations on section of the line in Bedfordshire as I do not have sufficient local knowledge of those stations and localities.

9. **Clock-Face Timetable:** In general, I support the proposal for a regular Clock-Face timetable based on the Swiss Railway Taktfahrplan, which is one of the reasons why their rail system is so reliable and popular. I would, however, suggest modelling additional peak hour services or calling points for stations such as Bow Brickhill which, given the proximity to major employment centres, has a potential for commuter passenger use before and after working day times.

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## **(C) Specific Issues**

- Bletchley Station:** I welcome the ambitions set out for Bletchley Station<sup>8</sup> given the enormous potential for EWR and the station to regenerate Bletchley. I have had the privilege of taking part in two workshops to explore the options for the expanded station. While the options are still at an early stage, Option 3 (with a bridge from the eastern entrance of the station to link with Queensway and the bus station) looks the most promising. The key criteria to embed in any option are: (i) retain the existing western entrance to the station, which is essential for easy access to Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes College and generally for residents of West Bletchley; (ii) retain/expand car parking provision as Bletchley station attracts passengers from a wide area on a park & ride basis and there is a shortage of parking availability in the general area; and (iii) be mindful of the importance of Saxon Street (the V7), while it may be attractive to have a piazza style approach to the new eastern entrance the road is a busy one and a strategic link in Bletchley and any changes which constrict flow will cause severe knock-on congestion elsewhere in Bletchley.
- Fenny Stratford Level Crossing:** While I understand the general desire to close level crossings for safety and reliability reasons, I am not persuaded that the case has been made to close the crossing at Fenny Stratford. Trains do not run at high speed on this section of the line owing to the curvature of the track between Fenny Stratford and Bletchley. Moreover, all the alternative options<sup>9</sup> are unacceptable in my view. Traffic Option 1 would cause an unacceptable increase in traffic on quiet residential streets (especially Staple Hall Road) and congestion at key junctions on Watling Street. Traffic Option 2 is better but would probably still lead to a degree of the problems of Option 1 plus the topography of the road and surrounding land at Bletcham Way is not optimal for such a link road. Option 3 I don't believe is feasible given that a large industrial site is currently under construction at one the site of the proposed link road plus Simpson Road has a narrow, single file bridge over the canal. In any scenario, I would also recommend the provision of a footbridge across the railway for safety and accessibility reasons.
- Bow Brickhill Level Crossing:** I agree that a road bridge in place of the existing level crossing is desirable. I would question the feasibility of Options 2, 3 and 4<sup>10</sup> given the recent redevelopment of the land to the north east of the level-crossing to a larger carpark and other assets for the businesses in Tilbrook. Loss of this space would be strongly opposed by the businesses there. Option 1 looks like the only viable option, but I would point out that the road would go close to residential areas and noise mitigation measures would need to be installed. I would make the further general observation that Bow Brickhill station has the potential to be a significantly used station on the line given existing and planned industrial and residential developments in the vicinity. It could be an option for a park and ride station for south MK.

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<sup>8</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, pp 128-129

<sup>9</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, pp 137-142

<sup>10</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, pp143-146

4. **Browns Wood and Pony Level Crossings:** I have no objection to the removal of these pedestrian level crossings provided that alternative footbridges or underpasses are provided. Without knowledge of what, if any, housing development will occur to the south of the railway it is difficult to express a preference for any of the options.<sup>11</sup>
  
5. **Woburn Sands Station Relocation:** Without further detail about (i) what additional passenger facilities are envisaged for the station and (ii) what housing development (if any) will happen to the west of Woburn Sands, it is difficult to make a case for the suggested relocation of the station. If, for example, a car park is envisaged for a relocated station, this potentially leads to additional traffic volumes and congestion on already busy local roads. It also would take the station further away from the centre of Woburn Sands thus making it less accessible for many residents. One potential advantage I can see (providing the Newport Road level crossing is retained – see below), is that it might allow for a better sequencing of the level crossing gates being closed. At present, gates are down when a train is waiting at the station. If relocated, the gates may not need to close until the train at Woburn Sands station is ready to depart. Another circumstance in which I could support a relocation is if my Alternative Woburn Sands Option (detailed below) is considered viable.
  
6. **Woburn Sands Station Level Crossing<sup>12</sup>:** Perhaps the thorniest issue for EWR in Milton Keynes is how to deal with the level crossing at Newport Road/Station Road. This is a strategically important road for the town and surrounding area. The Consultation Document proposes two options. Option 1 envisages the closure of the level crossing completely and constructing a new road and crossing to the west of the town. This option has met with near universal objection. I do not believe it is a viable option. I draw your attention to the consultation response submitted by Woburn Sands Town Council which contains the detailed reasons as to why this option would cause far more problems than it would solve. Many individual constituents from Woburn Sands have also contacted me to register their strong opposition to this option. I agree that the loss of green recreational space and allotments together with the traffic problems it would generate in the town render this option unacceptable. Option 2 is generally regarded as the lesser of two evils. That said, the number of minutes in an hour when the barriers will be down would cause significant traffic issues in the town. Therefore, every option to mitigate this must be explored. This potentially includes the relocation of the station if that could improve the “barrier-down” situation. Also essential is a full traffic survey to identify the volume of through traffic that could potentially be re-routed away from the town. I would also suggest that you evaluate the possibility of the Alternative Woburn Sands Option which I propose. Finally, in any scenario the provision of a pedestrian footbridge is essential. The closure of the existing pedestrian crossing by Network Rail has caused considerable anger in the town and there is a strong appetite for an alternative pedestrian crossing to link the two halves of the town.

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<sup>11</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, pp 147-152

<sup>12</sup> Making Meaningful Connections Consultation Document, pp 153-157

7. **Alternative Woburn Sands Solution:** Given the difficulties with either of the Options mooted for Woburn Sands in the Consultation Document, I would like to propose an alternative solution for full evaluation. I am not a civil engineer and cannot comment on its viability, nor do I know if this option would be unaffordable, but I put forward a concept of the rail line going under Newport Road/Station Road. My amateur observations of the line of route to the east and west of the existing Woburn Sands station suggest that it would be feasible for the line to descend into a cutting east of Bow Brickhill station to a depth by Woburn Sands that would allow Newport/Station Road to form a bridge over the railway without inclines of the gradient that renders a traditional road bridge inappropriate. Such an option would actually improve existing traffic flow as there would be no level crossing at all. It would involve the relocation of Woburn Sands station to a new location in the cutting. However, having observed the site of the new Winslow station similarly in a cutting, I would suggest this could be viable. An added benefit of having the line between Bow Brickhill and Woburn Sands in a cutting would be to reduce noise pollution from the railway to existing and any new households.

## **Appendix – Iain Stewart MP’s Response to Milton Keynes Council’s South East Milton Keynes Consultation.**

My view, and that of many constituents who have contacted me about this proposal, is that it is premature to be determining the SEMK Development Framework at this point in time. I am strongly of the view that this work should be paused until further notice in order that significant, currently unresolved issues, that will affect any development in this area can be properly considered.

Most importantly, this development framework and consultation was prepared before the Government’s announcement of its approach to developing a spatial strategy and potentially a development corporation for the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge arc. This was launched on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021. [Planning for sustainable growth in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc: an introduction to the spatial framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-sustainable-growth-in-the-oxford-cambridge-arc-introduction-to-the-spatial-framework)

It envisages:

*3.3 The timeline for developing the spatial framework covers three core phases:*

*1. Developing a vision for the future of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc – We will undertake wide public engagement to shape a vision for the area, through a consultation in summer 2021.*

*2. Towards a spatial framework – We will develop options for turning the vision into policy, based on engagement and initial evidence gathering and analysis. We will publish these options for consultation in spring 2022.*

*3. Draft spatial framework – To finalise the spatial framework, we will consider responses to this consultation, and undertake spatial analysis, option testing, impact assessments and stakeholder engagement. We will publish a draft spatial framework for consultation in autumn 2022, with implementation of the final framework shortly after.”*

I would therefore argue that the SEMK plans are premature. Would it not be better to consider a development of this magnitude in the wider framework?

Secondly, I am concerned that SEMK will be decided before decisions are made on the Marston Vale section of East West Rail. This consultation will be running until June 2021, but outcomes are unlikely to be determined until 2022. Given significant issues such as the location of stations, crossing points and service patterns will have a significant impact on a SEMK development, would it not be better to align these two projects much more closely?

Thirdly, the immediate area is already experiencing significant new housing developments, including in Woburn Sands, Wavendon and at Woburn View. The impacts on local services and infrastructure have only just started and I would contend that these need to be monitored in real time before another 3,000 houses are built in the area.



Fourthly, there may be significant permanent changes to employment patterns post-Covid; we do not yet know what the permanent mix of home and office working will be and, consequently, the effects of that on transport issues and the styles of housing and open spaces that residents might require in the future. I am not convinced that the density of development which 3,000 homes in the area suggested would deliver is going to be what is required in the future.

Fifthly, the Government has also published its new policy intentions on “Building Better, Building Beautiful”. [Government response to the Living with Beauty report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/building-better-building-beautiful) . Rather than build an ever larger number of identikit new housing estates of which there are many under construction in Milton Keynes, surely it would be better to include these new design policies in any significant new development areas?

Finally, many of my constituents have voiced their concerns to me that the necessary COVID restrictions have precluded many of the normal consultation mechanisms and consequently the full range and volume of opinions may not be captured.

For all these reasons, I strongly urge Milton Keynes Council to pause the SEMK process and allow proper consideration of how new developments can be built in a way which can command local support.

**19<sup>th</sup> April 2021**