



Response by Woburn Sands Town Council to the Consultation Document published by East West Rail on 31 March 2021

Introduction

1. Woburn Sands will be significantly affected by the development of the East West railway. It is therefore essential that the development of the line takes full account of the requirements of the existing population of Woburn Sands. There are approximately 4,000 residents of Woburn Sands and about 5,000 living in the neighbouring parishes of Aspley Guise, Aspley Heath and Wavendon who regard Woburn Sands as their centre. This number of residents will shortly be augmented by the construction of approximately 3,000 dwellings in the area between Woburn Sands and Bow Brickhill (SEMK).
2. The Consultation Document suggests two travel pattern Concepts and invites comments. The Town Council (WSTC) is unable to comment on these in the absence of any data in the documents published by EWR. There are no demand figures quoted in the papers and no evidence that any market research has been carried out on either passenger or freight demand for the enhanced railway. This is particularly important in view of the changes in working patterns which have been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic.
3. WSTC therefore requests that a robust market research analysis be carried out before any plans are finalised. Some work may have been undertaken a couple of years ago when the project was first proposed but the recent pandemic has changed everything. Further market research taking account of the changes in working (and leisure) patterns must now be undertaken. It is essential that such data be published in order to enable a proper cost/benefit analysis to be undertaken – the cost of the investment must be assessed against the expected level of benefit to the whole community across the length of the line.
4. From the Woburn Sands point of view the benefit of the development is questionable. It is accepted that some residents will wish to travel to other points on the line but the number is estimated to be relatively small. The benefit to this small number of residents needs to be set against the very significant costs to the community of the proposed development.
5. There are very significant costs/disadvantages to the Woburn Sands community of the changes brought about by the development of the railway as proposed by EWR. These are set out in more detail in the subsequent sections.



The Woburn Sands Railway Crossing

6. Station Road/Newport Road is the primary arterial road between Woburn Sands and Milton Keynes. It is also a vital link between the houses to the north of the railway line and the facilities of Woburn Sands. It is essential to the community that a vehicular connection be maintained although it is appreciated that the volume of train traffic will increase as a result of the EWR development.
7. The EWR Consultation Document proposes two possible options:
 - Option 1 suggests closing the crossing and building a by pass from the Newport Road approximately opposite Cross End Road, and then running South to reach the Bow Brickhill Road. Traffic would then enter Woburn Sands either via the Bow Brickhill Road or via an extension running through the allotments and Edgewick Farm into Hardwick Road.
 - Option 2 is to retain the crossing but recognises that the barrier down time for vehicles could be up to 40 minutes per hour depending on the pattern of train traffic.

Option 1

8. This Option is totally unacceptable to Woburn Sands and would effectively destroy the town for the following reasons:
 - (a) It would create a major traffic jam in the town. Many of the houses in The Leys and Hardwick Road do not have front gardens or garages; the occupants are therefore obliged to park their cars in the roadway. This results in single lane traffic which already leads to traffic congestion at peak times. Any additional traffic would lead to lengthy traffic jams. This is recognised by MKC in its draft SEMK Development Framework which specifies that the junction of the proposed Woodleys Road and Bow Brickhill Road should restrict the left turn into Woburn Sands. Option 1 is therefore directly contradictory to the draft Development Framework.
 - (b) Furthermore there is a double roundabout at the East end of Hardwick Road. This already causes congestion with traffic backing up along the High Street, Woburn Road and Aspley Hill. This junction is also the only access to Aspley Heath
 - (c) In practical terms any traffic from Cranfield Road or residents of the Woburn Sands properties North of the railway line would have to detour approximately one mile to the north before joining the proposed by pass and returning into Woburn Sands; in effect this would add about 3 miles to their journey to say nothing of the increased time. Equally, any Parklands residents would have to drive through the middle of the town through the busy High Street before joining the by pass and driving to the Newport Road junction. This would add significantly to the congestion in the town and add substantially to their journey time.



- (d) The introduction of a major entry into the town via The Leys and/or Hardwick Road would encourage drivers from the West of Woburn Sands to try to reach the M1 by using Aspley Hill and Aspley Guise Square. The latter is already a traffic blackspot with a blind corner exacerbated by parking in the Square.
- (e) There would be a major negative impact on the town's amenities particularly if the by-pass is extended over Bow Brickhill Road into the allotments and Edgewick Farm:
 - There are 150 fully occupied allotments with a waiting list. These are an essential amenity given that many houses in Woburn Sands have relatively small gardens. The destruction of many of these would be a devastating blow to many residents.
 - Edgewick Farm is the only open space in Woburn Sands where dogs can be walked and children can experience wildlife. The land benefits from a covenant which specifies that it "should be used as public open space in perpetuity". Any reduction in Edgewick Farm would be a major degradation in the lifestyle of Woburn Sands residents.
- (f) The proposed road to the North of Bow Brickhill Road would significantly reduce the amenity nature of the buffer zone (Country Park) proposed in the SEMK Development Framework. This park, which would include the only football pitch in Woburn Sands, fishing lakes, and picnic sites, is urgently needed for the residents of both Woburn Sands and the SEMK development and to fulfil the policy objectives of Milton Keynes Council to provide adequate recreational space in SEMK.

Option 2

- 9. This Option is also unattractive to Woburn Sands particularly if the barrier downtime of 40 minutes per hour is a reality. The maintenance of the crossing is however the only realistic solution.
- 10. While appreciating the difficulties the Town Council requests that EWR explore further the possibility of a bridge or underpass since either of these would enable a free flow of both traffic and trains in the long term.
- 11. If neither of these is possible then every step must be taken to reduce the barrier down time. The actual pattern of rail traffic needs to be studied further, and justified, to ensure the barrier works to the benefit of road users as well as to train operators – it must be a realistic balance and not weighted to favour the train service (which will be used by significantly fewer individuals than the vehicles using the road).
- 12. The technology operating the barriers needs to be improved. At present the barriers are down for about 5 minutes per train (despite Network Rail's protestations). The use of modern technology should be able to improve on this.
- 13. The design of the crossing needs to be improved. In particular a northbound right hand lane into Cranfield Road needs to be provided since this will enable northbound traffic to pass on the inside of right turning vehicles when the barrier is open.



14. It should be noted that vehicle delays would be reduced if the volume of traffic is reduced. WSTC appreciates that it is the responsibility of Milton Keynes Council to undertake a comprehensive Traffic Survey which would identify improvements in the local road infrastructure to assist in the reduction of traffic. The recent pandemic has rendered any previous surveys virtually useless so a new comprehensive survey covering the whole of South East Milton Keynes should be undertaken before any decisions are made. WSTC will encourage MKC to undertake this work which it is hoped EWR will also support.
15. WSTC is committed to working with EWR to exploring a more effective crossing that will reduce the delays to vehicles while still enabling an improved train service.

Pedestrian Crossing

16. There is a very sad history in respect of the pedestrian crossing of the line. School Crossing has long been the subject of discussions with Network Rail. WSTC has always agreed in principle that the at grade crossing should be closed in the long term. In November 2016 planning permission was granted to Network Rail for the construction of a ramped bridge. Following further discussions between Network Rail and WSTC, and legal advice to Network Rail, a revised application for a smaller stepped bridge was approved provided provision was made for wheeled vehicles (such as baby buggies) to use the road crossing. This was granted in 2019 and is still valid. At that time, according to Network Rail's own survey figures, there were 275 pedestrians using School Crossing daily from 57 households; 30% of these crossing were estimated to be for school purposes.
17. At the Inquiry held in February 2019 into proposed works on the line under the provisions of the Transport and Works Act the Inspector ruled that the at grade crossing should be closed and that pedestrians should use the road crossing. This created outrage in Woburn Sands, particularly since Network Rail had already agreed to, and had permission for, a stepped pedestrian bridge. School Crossing was duly closed in 2020.
18. The present arrangements are inherently dangerous. Pedestrians, particularly children, should not be asked to share a busy roadway with vehicles – it is more dangerous that sharing a crossing with trains since the latter can have warning bells and locked gates. Children who can see their school from their house are now being taken to school by car. That is an absurd situation from both a health and environmental point of view.
19. WSTC therefore requests that, regardless of the development of the vehicle crossing, a stepped pedestrian bridge be installed at the site of School Crossing, in fulfilment of the current planning permission, as a matter of urgency.



Location of Railway Station

20. The Consultation Document suggests that consideration be given to relocating Woburn Sands Station approximately 500 metres to the West since this would give the opportunity to build a larger station with more and better facilities.
21. WSTC cannot see any benefit to this proposal. There is space in the existing station to extend the platforms (as acknowledged in the Consultation Document), and available land to the north of the railway line (the Pristine Wheels site, currently up for sale) to construct the necessary station buildings and develop any additional facilities. Furthermore road access to this area would be possible from both the East and West and there would be room for adequate car parking facilities.
22. It should also be noted that the current station is of significant historical importance to the community of Woburn Sands.

Conclusion

23. WSTC accepts the national importance of developing the Oxford-Cambridge Arc. However it is equally essential that the continued vitality of existing communities in the Arc should be preserved. It is essential therefore that any development of the East West Railway should be fully justified in cost-benefit terms.
24. WSTC has yet to be satisfied that the scale of the proposed development of the East West Railway is justified. The Town Council is also concerned that there is no long term strategic plan for the road system in the South East of Milton Keynes, which is the responsibility of Milton Keynes Council.
25. WSTC recommends, in the strongest possible terms, that EWR and MKC should develop a coherent transport strategy for this area before any decisions are taken in the short term which could pre-empt the longer term strategy.
26. The Town Council stands ready to work with EWR and MKC to develop this strategy.