

East West Rail Update compiled by Peter Norris

Richard Fuller, MP, has had 2 meetings (on 20 Sep and 8 Nov 21) with EWR on the question of costs, specifically why they changed so dramatically in favour of Route E between the 2019 Route Consultation and the decision to recommend Route E to the government later that year. He has not yet received a satisfactory explanation but is awaiting a further meeting. At the last meeting he was accompanied by Mike Barlow from Brickhill and Steve Arnold from Ravensden (two founder members of BFARe.)

Steve Arnold has a Freedom of Information (FOI) dispute with EWR Co which is awaiting a slot time for the Information Commissioner to adjudicate on EWR's refusal to divulge the estimated costs for the new line required for Section C. This covers the new lines up through Midland Road Station, across the Clapham flood plain and up the escarpment to the start of Section D which is at Clapham Green, about 300m above Carriage Drive.

EWR have been creative in their costings by taking the view that the solution through Bedford with the relocation of St Johns Station, rebuild of Midland Road Station and Bromham Bridge, plus all of the new track onwards until the proposed alignments split into the northern 1, 2 & 6 group and the southern 8 & 9 group (at the start of Section D) is common to each of the Alignment proposals under consideration. This means that there are no cost differentiators between the alignments, so the costs within Section B are a 'done deal' and do not need to be discussed, as the decision to incur them was taken when Route E was selected.

Whilst EWR continues to shrug off cost challenges like water off a duck's back and press on doggedly with their analysis of the Alignment Consultation feedback, they face the reality of having to present a robust case to the DfT and Planning Inspectorate as they approach the Statutory Consultation and Development Consent Order (DCO) examination. I believe they aim to announce the preferred route alignment, which regrettably I doubt will be the Southern Alternative proposed by BFARe, just before Simon Blanchflower, EWR CEO, abandons the EWR ship around April time. They will then enter a period of detailed design work in preparation for the Statutory Consultation starting early 2023 which will eventually set the scene for their application for a Development Consent Order to start construction.

EWR Co are currently in difficulty with National Highways (NH) because they didn't develop their plans alongside the Black Cat/A428 improvement prior to NH's plans being finalised. EWR Co are about to resurvey the land each side of the A1 to fit the proposed alignments around what NH have now issued detailed plans to build.

I don't think there is much we can achieve before EWR announce their preference. There is a lot going on within the economy and gradual national mind shift towards decarbonisation which will raise the stakes for EWR to successfully negotiate the Statutory Consultation and Development Consent Order processes.

During November 2021, EWR were supposed to let the contract for lease of the initial rolling stock – about a dozen 3-car diesel/electric passenger trains to start between Oxford and Bletchley but that hasn't happened yet. They were assuming that services from Oxford to Bletchley would be operating from 2025 with connectivity through Bedford to Cambridge by 2030. To support the eventual opening up of the whole Oxford – Cambridge route from 2030, they plan to upgrade to a new fleet of non-diesel reliant passenger trains - most likely hybrid battery powered but recharging from partial overhead line sections or strategically located charging points. Whilst this would provide a low-carbon traction solution for passenger traffic is unlikely to satisfy the tractive power requirements of freight trains – which, at best, would be diesel/electric hybrids run by the Freight Operating Companies (FOCs) and not owned by EWR. So, in short, it's all still up in the air...