

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects and Local Road Networks

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—
(Keir Mather.)

18:41:00

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD)

I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate. I thank the Minister for attending and for the engagement that we have had prior to the debate. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a county councillor in Oxfordshire.

In Bicester in my constituency, the delivery of East West Rail will lead to the closure of London Road. That is the only road joining the south-east with the centre of town. Closing it without providing a replacement will cut the town in two. I have secured this debate to highlight the problem and to seek the Minister's support in finding a suitable solution for our town that will keep London Road open to pedestrians, cyclists and car users. Given that the frequency of rail services is set to double from 2025, I hope that she will recognise the urgency of the issue.

The general point, which I suspect may be of relevance to other Members, is that when there are projects that bring national benefit, local communities should be directly compensated for the impact on them.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD)

The emergency closure of the A432 motorway overbridge has had a massive impact on the local road network in my constituency. It is a good example of how national infrastructure projects can have damaging impacts on local residents and businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need investment in national infrastructure so that we do not get these damaging, multi-year closures, which have such an impact on local people?

Calum Miller

I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes her point extremely well. Too often, the decision-making process on national strategic infrastructure projects takes decisions away from local communities, and local people feel that things are done to them rather than with them.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD)

The Government's target for 1.5 million more houses will have a transformative impact on the UK, particularly in terms of our national strategic infrastructure, such as motorways and motorway junctions. That will have a major impact in constituencies such as mine, which is bisected by the M3 motorway and is expected to have a 250% increase in housing over the next few years, despite our already overcrowded roads. Does my hon. Friend agree that local

communities need to be put at the heart of decision making, and that national strategic infrastructure must be upgraded in advance of development, rather than long after?

Calum Miller

My hon. Friend illustrates rather well that, as I suspected, this topic is of interest to a number of Members. He makes his points extremely well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Calum Miller

I will take one more intervention, and then I will make some progress.

Jim Shannon

I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate before the House—I spoke to him beforehand, and other Members have added their input as well. While the planning system in Northern Ireland is devolved and operates very differently from that on the mainland, he will know that significant infrastructure projects can take years of planning to—ing and fro—ing and do not always involve communities in the way that they should. Does he agree that community involvement and streamlining the process of delivering necessary projects are important, in order to take in and encapsulate the entirety of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Calum Miller

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I am glad to have given him the opportunity to speak at the beginning of a debate, rather than at the end. His points about community involvement are very well made, and I will elaborate on them a bit in my own remarks.

To turn back to Bicester, the East West Rail project to connect Oxford to Cambridge is an ambitious infrastructure project that will provide a connection between some of the UK's most dynamic centres of innovation and research. It will pass through my constituency of Bicester and Woodstock, and many constituents have contacted me to highlight how the project will impact them. They include Carol, who lives in a care home south of the rail crossing and tells me that she moved there because it was a short mobility scooter ride from Market Square on a flat route—he would be cut off. They include a volunteer firefighter at Bicester fire station on the north side of the crossing, who lives on the south side and is worried that without access via London Road, he may be delayed when he is called to join an emergency crew—he would be cut off. They include Claire, who cycles with her two sons into town from her home on the south-east of the town. They cannot use the busy A road to get into town if London Road is closed—they would be cut off. Those constituents, and many like them, are worried about the delays that they will face to these regular journeys. All those journeys will be disrupted by this planned closure.

To put this issue in some context, Oxfordshire county council maintains an automated traffic monitor on London Road by the level crossing. That traffic monitor shows that in 2017, there were 9,000 journeys per day on the road. That number fell during the pandemic, but has consistently risen since, with 7,700 journeys in 2023.

The threat of closing London Road is imminent, but it should not come as any surprise to those in government or the rail industry. Importantly, there was a road there long before there was a railway; back in 1795, a coach service ran six days a week from Banbury to London through Bicester, making use of London Road. The railway came to Bicester in 1850, crossing London Road for the first time. Those horse-drawn coaches have been replaced by motor cars, as well as buses and lorries, and with that has come the growth of the town. Over the century to 1930, Bicester was a town of around 3,000 inhabitants. The war period was followed by expansion, and the town's population nearly doubled by 1961, before growing rapidly to 20,000 by 1981 and 37,000 by 2021. It is forecast to grow to over 50,000 by 2031.

Through all of this, there has remained just one road from the centre of Bicester out to the south: London Road, which is still crossed by the railway line. In 2008, Chiltern Railways announced a proposal to connect Oxford to London Marylebone by instating new track just east of London Road. This was linked to the proposal for the new East West Rail link that had been made in the early 2000s by a consortium of local authorities. Back in 2006, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister stated its support for the west part of the line, from Bletchley to Oxford. That support was finally backed with money in the 2011 autumn statement and a subsequent announcement made by the Transport Secretary in July 2012.

The Chiltern Railways proposal went to planning inspection, with a hearing held in 2012. At that point, more than 12 years ago, various Bicester residents pointed out the implications of a new line and the disruption that frequent downtime of the level crossing would cause. Chiltern Railways argued, however, that there was uncertainty about East West Rail going ahead, and therefore it would be premature to act. The inspector agreed. As a result, when the railway was closed for a full 20 months between February 2014 and October 2015, a huge opportunity was missed to provide a viable solution for the future. Worse, the redesign and expansion of the station—including a large two-storey car park to serve Bicester Village retail park—took up space that could have been part of a solution to the rail crossing. It therefore took almost a decade from the announcement of Department for Transport support for the route between Bletchley and Oxford to be formally approved by the Transport Secretary in February 2020.

That approval followed another planning inspectorate hearing. Residents including Carole Hetherington, who is the chair of the Langford Village Community Association and is in the Gallery today, and the Bicester Traffic Action Group, represented today by Rachel

Mallows, again pointed out the need for a solution for London Road. Again, this did not happen.

In 2021, East West Rail consulted residents on its ideas for the line between Bletchley and Oxford, including for London Road. It offered six alternatives, of which option 1 was the full closure of the road with no mitigation. Local residents were appalled by this suggestion. A petition that I launched, as a county council candidate, garnered over 1,500 signatures opposing the road closure. In March 2023, Oxfordshire county council unanimously approved a motion that I proposed as a councillor, stating that the council would work with East West Rail to secure

“a sustainable, funded solution that continues to provide suitable rail crossings for cars, cycles and pedestrians”.

A similar motion was brought to Cherwell district council by Liberal Democrat councillors, who are represented in the Gallery today by Councillor Frank Ideh. The policy of both local authorities is therefore to keep London Road open.

Local residents and I were very frustrated to have to wait over two years for East West Rail's response to the 2021 consultation. Despite repeated indications that it would publish a response, this was serially delayed. I have some sympathy with East West Rail—under the last Government, it saw five Rail Ministers between 2019 and the 2024 general election, as well as four Prime Ministers and five Chancellors. It was not easy for a major infrastructure project to get steady engagement from the last Government. Finally, in July 2023 East West Rail brought forward feedback on the consultation. This was done through an informal feedback session with a limited amount of published material. Many people were disappointed that, after two further years, there were no specific proposals on the table.

Does the Minister share my frustration and that of my constituents that a project first endorsed by the then Deputy Prime Minister under the last Labour Government in 2006 has only in the last month brought forward detailed proposals for London Road, even though residents have been highlighting concerns for over a decade? Does she also agree that it is deeply regrettable that a short-term approach meant that much more cost-effective opportunities to address this issue were missed when the railway was closed and station rebuilt in 2014–15?

People in Bicester had to wait for the announcement of the proposed East West Rail route in November 2024 to hear what is now being proposed for our town. Let me start with a positive. It is welcome that there is now a commitment to provide a suitably accessible crossing for pedestrians and cyclists. That is a material improvement on the proposals in 2021, which were either to close London Road or to provide only a basic footbridge that would have been totally unsuitable for anyone with a disability, parents with buggies or cyclists.

This reflects sustained community pressure, including from Claire, whom I mentioned earlier, and from the members of the Bicester bike users group, who have been strong champions of a suitable underpass. There is strong support for an underpass rather than a bridge. It would require much less clearance since the land already sits 2 metres below the height of the railway. However, it must be well designed to ensure the safety of users, which, among other things, means adopting best design principles to discourage loitering and maximise visibility for all users.

However, the very bad news for Bicester residents is that East West Rail is proposing to close London Road to car users and offer no alternative. In its consultation document, it says:

“Our preferred solution is for traffic to be diverted using existing roads.”

The strength of community feeling about this is very clear to me in my postbag and my inbox. Nearly 400 people have signed a new petition in the last month objecting to this closure.

The technical document that accompanied the conclusion makes it clear that only preliminary analysis of the journey times has been conducted. It is unclear from this whether the projected growth in Bicester, of both new homes and employment sites, has been factored into the analysis. The document talks about potential improvements to journey times from junction improvements and signalling changes. Local residents and I are very sceptical that this can compensate in any meaningful way for closing this arterial road.

When the Rail Minister courteously called me last month in advance of the announcement of this route, I shared these concerns with him and welcomed his assurance that this would be a genuine consultation. May I therefore take this opportunity in the House to ask the Minister to confirm that the Government remain open-minded on this proposal? Can she confirm that the Government will listen to the consultation feedback, and will she agree that either she or the Rail Minister will meet me and local representatives before submitting any final proposal for planning approval?

Many residents in Bicester see the benefit of increasing the capacity for rail travel across our region, and see that it may bring economic benefits to the UK by joining up some of the most innovative areas, yet all residents agree that the national benefits will come at a cost to Bicester. The core issue here is one of fairness. Local people can support a project that has wider benefits so long as they are not asked to bear concentrated costs without mitigation. In this case, car users are being asked to make materially longer journeys without any alleviation.

The situation is akin to a compulsory purchase order. The railway has, in this case, determined that it will compulsorily close the road at the level crossing, but instead of fully compensating the

community for the loss of the road, the current proposal is to give them a limited underpass. East West Rail and the Government need to do better.

I note that the Government are proposing that for nationally significant infrastructure projects in energy, such as new pylons, there should be direct compensation for affected communities. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) recently led a debate on community benefit from renewable energy, which had strong participation from across the House. There is clear support for accepting that local communities should be compensated when asked to bear the brunt of the effects of national projects. Do the Government agree with the principle that there should be compensation for loss from these nationally significant planning decisions?

Money, of course, is key. It has been suggested to me by East West Rail that a core reason for not providing a new road crossing is a cost-benefit evaluation, yet that misses the point. This is not about greenfield project appraisal; it is about compensating the community in Bicester for what is being taken away from them. When land is compulsorily purchased, a market value is paid in compensation. The Government cannot give the landowner a cheaper plot of land and tell them to make the best of it. Since the railway is, in effect, compulsorily seizing the road, it should provide direct compensation to the community. Does the Minister agree that residents in Bicester deserve direct compensation for the closure of London Road in the form of a new road crossing?

Over the past decade, many residents have provided potential options for a crossing, and one of their deep frustrations has been that so little detailed work has been done on those options. Residents are sharing ideas with me now. They include a crossing for light vehicles only, or a signal-controlled crossing that would be cheaper as it would only require one lane across the railway. They have asked whether the proposed underpass could be repurposed for light vehicles at limited additional cost. But it is hard for people to engage meaningfully with alternatives when the Government and East West Rail have been so secretive about the funding available for this project. As final proposals are developed next year, will the Minister undertake to provide a cash value of the preferred options that the Department for Transport is set to approve?

Finally, I want to stress the urgency of action. East West Rail has already run test trains on the track between Oxford and Bletchley, and it intends to start that service in 2025. When that happens, the downtime of the level crossing will double, creating immediate inconvenience and delay for Bicester residents. After all the delays my constituents have already experienced, they must not be made to wait until services start between Oxford and Cambridge after 2030. I appreciate that there are other challenges at the eastern end of the line before the line is completed, but nothing will change between now and then for the western end of the project that affects London Road. Will the Minister please commit that, once options are

submitted and approved under a development consent order, funds will be provided and East West Rail will proceed immediately with works to provide crossings at London Road?

This is an issue of fairness. As a national infrastructure project, East West Rail brings many national benefits, yet it brings very specific local costs to my constituents in Bicester. After more than a decade of delay and missed opportunities, we are asking the Government to do the right thing and provide compensation for the direct harm of closing London Road. I hope the Minister will agree to my requests, and I look forward to working with her, her colleague the Rail Minister, and the leadership of East West Rail to ensure that the right solutions are developed for pedestrians, cyclists, and car users, and that Bicester is not cut in two by the new railway.

18:58:00

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood)

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) on securing this debate, and I thank him for continuing to raise the issue of the London Road level crossing in his constituency. I recognise the concerns that he raises on behalf of local residents, and I appreciate the strength of those concerns—indeed, that was demonstrated by the presence of a number of his constituents today.

As the hon. Member is well aware, East West Rail launched a non-statutory consultation on 14 November on its proposals for the construction of a new railway that would provide a direct service between Oxford and Cambridge for the first time since the 1960s. That will provide billions in economic growth, which can be reinvested into the economy nationally. The upshot of that is that, as he says, East West Rail is proposing the closure of the London Road level crossing in Bicester. The possibility of that was noted in the non-statutory consultation that took place in 2021. I appreciate that for constituents facing these sorts of challenges it is difficult to have that uncertainty over a long period, when they know something is coming but it is some way off and they do not know exactly how it will impact on them.

The introduction of four East West Rail passenger trains per hour on top of existing passenger and freight services would represent—

19:00:00

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—
(Keir Mather.)

Lilian Greenwood

I had forgotten that would happen at 7 pm.

The introduction of four East West Rail passenger trains per hour on top of existing passenger and freight services would represent a significant uplift in the rail traffic passing over the level crossing. On one level, that is a benefit, including to the hon. Gentleman's constituents, who will have those new options for connectivity and the choices that brings in jobs, education or just getting about. That is a huge advantage not just to his area, but to the country. However, I understand that it does have less welcome impacts, and he has described the severance issue in his constituency in Bicester. Indeed, the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) and the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), who is not in his place, took the opportunity to highlight the importance of listening to the concerns of local communities when developing national infrastructure projects and working with them to mitigate any adverse impacts. I understand the importance of trying to do that.

Turning back to London Road and the level crossing, the level crossing barriers are currently closed for around 10 minutes every hour, but the closure time is expected to regularly exceed 32 minutes in the hour once all East West Rail services are operational, and the barriers could be closed for up to 12 and a half minutes of continuous downtime at a time. The impact of that would be queues half a mile long in either direction. That would have a huge impact not only on those stuck in the queue, but on air quality and broader congestion. It would cause the significant traffic disruption that the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock is rightly keen to avoid, creating long tailbacks, potentially through the centre of town, on a daily basis.

In addition to the traffic issues that would be caused by retention of the crossing, we also have to consider the personal safety of crossing users, whether they are crossing on foot, on bicycles or other non-motorised means. Analysis undertaken by the East West Railway Company determined that the risk of collision between a train and a road user, whether through misuse of the level crossing or an accident, was simply too high with the uplift in East West Rail services. We know that level crossings are a point of vulnerability on the rail network, and safety has to be a top priority.

In the view of the East West Railway Company and Network Rail, no further steps could be taken to improve the safety of the level crossing without undertaking its closure. I understand how disappointing that is to members of the hon. Gentleman's local community. The East West Railway Company has reviewed all the possible options for the crossing, having consulted on them in 2021. Those options include a road bridge over the crossing and a road tunnel underneath it. As the East West Railway Company set out in its 2023 route upgrade announcement, providing an overbridge or an underpass presented insurmountable design, constructability and affordability challenges, and those options were not progressed.

I recognise, as the hon. Gentleman said, that when the area around the station was redeveloped, I think back in 2014, there might have been an opportunity to look at different ways the crossing could have been done, but at the time there was no East West Railway Company, and perhaps there was a lack of join-up that could have been provided at that time. However, I am afraid we are 10 years on from that.

The East West Railway Company did undertake to explore options to leave the road open to local traffic and develop options to retain connectivity for pedestrians, cyclists and other non-vehicle users, which would of course include mobility scooter users such as the constituent that the hon. Member referred to. Ensuring accessibility for those groups is extremely important.

Since 2023, the East West Railway Company has also considered providing new road bridges crossing the railway at other locations in Bicester. I am afraid that the modelling work undertaken on the downtime of the level crossing barriers produced the results that I set out for the extended closure period, so it is deemed not appropriate to retain the level crossing for local use only. Providing road bridges in other locations in Bicester has also been ruled out on the grounds of affordability and constructability. East West Rail has provided further details of its analysis that led to those conclusions in the technical report accompanying the current non-statutory consultation. I am sure that the hon. Member is aware of that, and that his constituents and those watching either will have read that or will now go and seek it out.

The options currently out for consultation of a pedestrian footbridge or underpass—they would of course be built to suitable accessibility standards to provide opportunities for cyclists and those using mobility scooters—alongside local road diversions, aim to provide the best possible balance between affordability and constructability and the needs of the local community in the hon. Member's constituency. Both the footbridge and the underpass have been developed in the light of feedback received at and since the 2021 consultation. I assure him that there are opportunities for further design refinements to ensure that the solution meets the community's need.

I note the hon. Member's comments about the issues that he would like to see addressed and what he believes the majority of his constituents would prefer. I assure him that the Government are listening and that I and my colleague the Rail Minister will be happy to keep in touch with him. I am sure there will be opportunity for further discussion as things progress.

Calum Miller

I very much appreciate the Minister's fulsome response. There is one point that I want to press her on slightly. East West Rail's own analysis has demonstrated that there is still a lot of technical work to be done—as I highlighted, some of the traffic modelling has not yet been done—so given that the information is not fully there

and we have no public figure on how much money could be spent on a solution, will she accept that there should be openness to suggestions that might come from the community and not a closing down on the relatively limited range of options that East West Rail has so far provided? The Rail Minister gave me that assurance when I spoke to him, and I would be grateful if the Minister would confirm that there is openness to considering other options if they can be demonstrated to be technically and financially feasible.

Lilian Greenwood

I am happy to give the hon. Member that assurance, and I certainly would not disagree with the Rail Minister. I can also assure him that the proposed road diversions and any further enhancements required to minimise the impact of these diversions will be funded as part of the East West Rail project and that the local authority will not be expected to foot the bill. I have heard the representations about the importance of protecting the hon. Member's constituents, and I know that my noble Friend Lord Hendy will have done as well.

I understand that having to travel to the centre of Bicester by an alternative route is unwelcome, but initial traffic modelling has demonstrated that any journey lengthening caused by vehicle traffic taking the alternative route proposed in the consultation will still be considerably shorter than the journey time extension caused by sitting in a traffic jam at the crossing for 10 minutes and upwards.

In closing, I signpost the ongoing consultation, and I invite all those with views, including the hon. Member's constituents, to contact the East West Rail Company through the published channels before the closing date of 24 January 2025. It is so important that we listen to local people's views and that we try to take them into account as we develop further mitigation. As I said, no final decision has been taken on which option to choose for the level crossing and future access for the local community. Feedback from the public will play a part in influencing the outcome. I would be pleased to keep in touch with the hon. Member as the position on the level crossing develops, and once again I congratulate him on securing this important debate, ensuring that his constituents' concerns are heard in this place.

Question put and agreed to.

19:09:00

House adjourned.