

# Is East West Rail's Northern Route the Only Way?

**Richard Pill**, CEO of British Regional Transport Association (BRTA), on why the East West Rail consultation's single route option between Bedford and Tempsford risks missing opportunities for better local connectivity and value for money

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**E**ast-West Rail Recent Consultation and BRTA's before, during and after views for a better approach to re-railing between Bedford and Tempsford.

In December 2024 to January 2025, the East West Company for an Oxford-Bedford-Cambridge Rail Link held a consultation across the regions the railway would serve. It presented one route choice between Bedford and Tempsford where the east-west railway would meet the East Coast Main Line (ECML) via a segregated railway station interchange. The foundations of this Northern Route E were laid in a 2019 Consultation by the same company, but unfortunately the consultation failed to include the original route as an option for the public and turned its back on the route the East West Consortium had supported and worked tirelessly with from formation in 1995 until 2017.

A key factor in abandoning this long-held view of the route east of Bedford was the Office for Road and Rail (ORR) ruling against level crossings for new builds and reopenings of railways following several accidents. It is BRTA's view that level crossings are safe if used properly and maintained adequately. Bridge design and underpasses incur much higher costs, as evidenced by lines like the March-Wisbech reopening, where the flat Fenland area faces intrusive bridges and spiralling costs, making reopening much harder.

The ORR ruling's deterrent effect on local rail reopenings is detrimental to the goals of modal choice and cutting congestion, with associated pollution and public health impacts. HS2 costs have spiralled due to similar design engineering considerations, setting back the reopenings agenda. This concerns BRTA, and we would like it reviewed with a more pragmatic approach and greater flexibility. While we understand 'special dispensation' can be considered, the terms and criteria remain unclear.

For example, on Bedford-ECML, Priory Park in Bedford entrance via the old route

would require a level crossing due to the road crossing a bridge over a river course at right angles to the railway. While a road bridge here would be impracticable, the ruling means all consideration of reinstating the railway was abandoned by the East West Railway Company and Consultation Process. This directs public view toward the Northern Route, with its great cost and upheaval but few benefits.

The East West Rail Company proposes a rail link entering Bedford from the South West off the existing Bedford-Bletchley Railway (part of Oxford-Bedford but also a railway in its own right) through Bedford Midland Railway Station going North. It would then depart the Midland Main Line slows (or add twin tracks) to head at an incline circumventing northern Bedford, arc and tunnel under Ravensden area, tunnel eastward under the revamped A1/A421 Black Cat Junction, and head for the ECML Tempsford area. Here it would burrow under the ECML on a flood plain with a new segregated railway station before continuing to Cambridge South via the new Cambourne settlement, which would also have a station.

BRTA sees problems with this route option, solely set before the public as follows:

1. Let the people decide! Choice means at least two routes, instead the public have but one. West of Bedford it is the old Oxbridge route, which has always been accepted. East of Tempsford, the new route to Cambridge is the only option, as the northern access to Cambridge via the former St Ives line Chesterton Junction now has Cambridge North Station sitting on that former junction area.
2. BRTA believes that after 20 years of support, study, and work, to abandon that work and cost, and not let the public have a say before ditching the route east of Bedford via the old St John's Station area, was wrong. We support east of Bedford via St John's. But we have been ignored, swept aside by the big headlines,

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media blackout and the local dual loyalty of wanting a Bedford-Cambridge rail link while not wanting the ruination of North Beds rural areas. This has rightly informed much local hostility to what is basically a good idea for a new railway.

## Our old route approach

Our predecessor organisations acknowledged that encroachment on the old route into Sandy (on the ECML) was blocked from the mid-1970s, and a new route north of built Sandy would be required on what was then (1980s onwards) agricultural land, now built over. BRTA accepts a new route to link with Tempsford, but proposes following the old route east of Bedford to west of Willington, either bypassing to the north or reclaiming the old route to east of Willington. Then, whereas the old route went south of Blunham, ours would be new build north of Blunham, approaching Tempsford either side of Station Road to have physical rail linkage with the ECML. This would open up direct running south of Peterborough to the Oxford corridor, north of Stevenage and East Bedfordshire to the County Town of Bedford and beyond.

Will people from Biggleswade really take a train to Tempsford, change, and wait for a Bedford train when they can drive for 20 minutes? The local competitiveness and cost will be challenged, even if the Oxbridge effect overall makes such considerations relatively insignificant. Locally, a railway for local people is a very important dynamic to grasp, as BRTA believes based on experience. It is local upwards and outwards which

makes for a better appeal to choose rail as relevant and accessible, not a remote ideal that isn't first choice for everyday transport commuting.

Our old-new route adaptation was studied by Bedford Borough Council and found feasible.

Our route has the following qualities to commend it:

1. East of Bedford via St John's with a new triangle would enable east to Midland Main Line (MML) north and vice versa freight and passenger interactions. The northern route has no direct running rail links to MML northwards or onwards to Northampton; ours does have that design. Bletchley and Bicester do not cater for north-east direct running either, nor Oxford, although in former years there was a direct rail link arcing to and from the Cotswold line, now obliterated.
2. It is flat land mainly between Bedford and Willington, climbing over embankment (flood defence) and at height to cross River Ivel-Great Ouse confluences and the A1 Trunk Road to descend to the Tempsford plains either side of Station Road, Tempsford.
3. Costs are comparable, but the benefit for passenger and freight, not just

passenger, commends greater reach and range of scope for fuller use of the twin track solution to road proliferation, gridlock congestion in urban areas and tackling sustainability balance in transport demand, use and deployment of method of mode.


BRTA may lose its call for its route to be tabled and included in a final consultation, but the contrast is stark. The northern route requires 60 houses for an extra pair of tracks north of Bedford, while our route needs fewer than 20 homes (albeit more expensive ones). This echoes the 1980s onwards rejection of our predecessors' Bedford-Sandy rail proposal, where blockages led to opting out of even studying reopening merits beyond the Colhoun Report of 1989 (circa).

Though Bedford Borough Council recommended the railway, it was ignored and discounted at the 1993 Side Roads Order Inquiry, which allowed the A421 Bypass to sit on the old railway trackbed rather than bridge it – a decision that could have benefited equestrian and cycling access had the road bridged the railway corridor.

BRTA continues to voice its views and challenge what seems a straitjacketed approach of northern route or nothing. Government support appears broad brush,

not considering detailed points about wider regenerative benefits and market share for rail. We need to put people, places and the environment at the heart of planning, design and development, not impose solutions through consultations that appear rigged as to outcomes. Yes, we want a railway, but we require a route alternative choice too!

The timing is telling. Chancellor Rachel Reeves MP's January 2025 speech at Eynsham in Oxfordshire was followed days later by the Transport Minister quashing a long-standing campaign to re-rail Witney for commuting off the A40 into Oxford. This rejection, combined with the cancellation of the already underfunded Local Rail Reopenings Fund in 2024, contrasts sharply with the £27 billion new roads fund and announcements like the Lower Thames Road Crossing. This demonstrates acute pandering to the roads lobby and raises grave concerns for BRTA about how we balance transport and access inclusion.

Capacity on the rails is a real issue if we want modal shift back to rail. Our reopening proposals and more are the way forward, and all effort is needed in a timely manner – not new money per se, but a modal switch of roads money to enable local rail modal shift for people and goods. 

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