

News and views on Chiltern's proposed new Oxford to London route

ON TRACK FOR A CAPITAL NEW SERVICE

PLANS BY CHILTERN RAILWAYS TO DEVELOP A NEW OXFORD TO LONDON MARYLEBONE RAIL SERVICE ARE CONTINUING TO ATTRACT STRONG SUPPORT IN THE RUN UP TO A FORMAL TRANSPORT & WORKS ACT ORDER APPLICATION THIS AUTUMN.

The vast majority of visitors at exhibitions in Oxford, Bicester and Kidlington expressed their overall support for the scheme which has been the subject of an extensive consultation exercise with a wide range of

interested stakeholders. Lineside residents, local councils, transport groups, conservation bodies and members of the public are among those who have been invited to comment on a scheme which seeks to provide commuters with a viable alternative to the area's congested road system.

It involves upgrading existing track and stations between Oxford and Bicester as well as creating a new station at Water Eaton Parkway. This would provide easy interchange between train, bus, bike and car,

making it an important gateway for north Oxford, Kidlington and the Radcliffe Hospital.

Dubbed Evergreen 3 following successful Evergreen 1 and 2 service upgrades by Chiltern, the scheme is being designed to meet high standards of environmental protection and management. To this end Chiltern has appointed locally-based environmental consultants ERM to carry out a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) – see page 2 – and prepare an Environmental Statement to accompany the Transport and Works Act Order application.

Increasing demand

The idea of creating a second rail route between Oxford and London has been on the drawing board since before Chiltern signed its second franchise agreement in 2002. "All our projections indicated that there would

be increasing demand for the proposed service," commented the company's Strategic Development Manager Allan Dare. "Railways are a growth industry and nationally passenger traffic has grown by more than 40% in the last 10 years – and on Chiltern it has gone up even faster."

If the scheme gets the go ahead, Chiltern envisages operating two London-Oxford trains an hour from 2013. All trains will call at Bicester Town and Oxford stations – both of which would be upgraded under the scheme – and the new Water Eaton Parkway station in North Oxford. Selected trains will call at Islip Station, which would also be upgraded.

Chiltern is currently finalising its design for the scheme, taking account of views expressed during the public consultation, site investigations and specific items emerging from the EIA.



EVERGREEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL IMPERATIVE

A 20km corridor which will form the important first stage in Chiltern's proposed new Oxford to London route is the subject of a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as part of the Evergreen 3 proposals.

Stretching from just north of Oxford Station to Bicester, the corridor, which is expected to provide a viable rail alternative for thousands of new travellers, has been extensively surveyed to assess and mitigate the impacts of the scheme on local residents, the countryside, wildlife, buildings and archaeology.

The EIA process, including the preparation of an Environmental Statement (ES), is now an established requirement under EU law for major transport schemes and other significant development projects. By taking into account such factors as changes to the landscape, local ecology and traffic issues, it seeks to inform and shape the final design of the scheme.

With a tight timescale and the need to complete a number of specialist studies prior to the Transport and Works Act Order application, Chiltern appointed locally-based environmental consultants ERM to carry out the EIA and manage an extensive public consultation process. National and local government bodies, along with NGOs and members

of the public have all been given their say during the EIA process.

The EIA covers everything from road traffic and noise impacts to the effect of the scheme on air quality, water resources and local ecology. With a number of important monuments and historic landmarks along the route, archaeology is another key area and Chiltern has turned to another local firm, Oxford Archaeology, to provide specialist input into this part of the EIA process.

"The aim of an EIA is to look at all the likely significant effects of a scheme, both positive and negative," commented ERM partner Bruce Davidson. "It's important that members of the public, statutory organisations and the Secretary of State for Transport all have a clear understanding of the likely significant effects of a scheme so that these can be taken into account in any decision as to whether the scheme goes ahead."

Another feature of the EIA is its focus on protected species. As in other aspects of the EIA, the onus is on assessing, protecting and in some cases enhancing natural habitats.

All the various aspects of the EIA will be described in an Environmental Statement which will be publicly available as part of Chiltern's Transport and Works Act Order application in the autumn.



Badgers are a key focus of the EIA

SPOTLIGHT ON LINESIDE ECOLOGY

Bats, badgers and great crested newts have all featured strongly in a series of specialist ecology surveys which ERM has been carrying out as part of the EIA. The surveys cover both flora and fauna which could be affected during development work and when the new service is in operation.

"We started the process back in February with a walk over survey covering the project area," explained ERM ecologist Diane Taylor. "This helped us identify the requirement for individual protected species surveys, which will be published as part of the Environmental Statement which accompanies the application."

One example, she said, was badgers, a protected species which have a number of setts located along the route. The badger survey report identifies all setts within 50 m of the proposed route and assesses which setts will be directly impacted by the works and which will need to be closed and re-created if the scheme is given the go ahead.

Also important are two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) located along the proposed route. The ecology team has been working closely with Natural England, the priority being to minimise any disturbance and produce a solution which is acceptable to all parties involved.



Gathering data on the great crested newt.

JUDGE US BY OUR TRACK RECORD



Transport Secretary Andrew Adonis (left) with Chiltern Railways chairman Adrian Shooter at the opening of Aylesbury Vale Parkway station.

On time and within budget has become a watchword for the Chiltern Railways service – both operationally and for service upgrades which have been a feature of the company's second franchise period.

Chiltern is regularly among the leading train companies for punctuality

and last year it boasted the highest ever annual punctuality rate of over 95%. Coupled with this, the company has made service improvements a key feature of its current franchise, delivering projects on time and within budget.

A recent example is the opening of the new Aylesbury Vale Parkway by Transport Secretary Andrew Adonis which will help to reduce car journeys into Aylesbury.

Prior to Evergreen 3, Chiltern completed 18 miles of track doubling between Bicester and Aynho Junction (Evergreen 1) and carried out various measures to improve line capacity between London and Bicester, as well as adding two extra platforms

at London Marylebone (Evergreen 2).

The upgrading of the previously derelict grade-2 listed Birmingham Moor Street Station and the opening of a new station at Warwick Parkway are also important examples of the Chiltern track record.

"We have a long 20 year franchise which has given us time to commit to improvements and see them through," commented Chiltern chairman Adrian Shooter.



Aylesbury Vale Parkway Station finished

TACKLING NOISE

Any increases in train noise as a result of the scheme are being assessed as part of a detailed noise study which is being carried out as part of the EIA.

If the study shows any increases in noise, Chiltern will consider a range of mitigating options.

The overall design of the scheme includes such features as quieter trains, continuously welded rather than jointed track and, where possible, the siting of track mechanisms and junctions away from sensitive locations.

EVERGREEN ALTERNATIVE

Chiltern's proposed Oxford to London Marylebone service could provide a timely alternative for travellers to London.

This follows the government's recent – and very welcome – announcement that it will proceed with the electrification of the Great Western route, including the London Paddington to Oxford line via Reading.



Oxford: two routes for a 21st century service

With the bulk of work taking place in 2014-16, along with the CrossRail project between Paddington and Maidenhead and the remodelling of Reading station, there is bound to be some disruption to the Oxford-Paddington service.

The Chiltern service will provide a fast and frequent alternative route to the capital. In the longer term, Chiltern's new route to Marylebone and the Great Western electrification will together give Oxford a train service for the 21st century.

WE'RE LISTENING TO OUR STAKEHOLDERS

Public meetings, exhibitions, mail outs and a dedicated phone line and email address have all been features of Chiltern's extensive public consultation programme as part of the Evergreen 3 scheme.

The onus has been on keeping people informed and encouraging them to have their say on the scheme.

To this end the programme has included meetings with parish councils and other interested parties and three public exhibitions in Oxford, Kidlington and Bicester where the vast majority of those attending expressed overall support for the scheme.

There is also an Evergreen 3 website – www.chiltern-evergreen3.co.uk – through which people

can express their views and more than 160 emails have been received via the dedicated email address.

Taking views on board

"It's a multimedia programme and we have been happy to take both positive and negative views on board," commented Chiltern's Strategic Development Manager Allan Dare. Chiltern has also sent out 42,000 flyers and an update for specific groups of residents who may be affected by particular issues.

"All views have been taken into account and where feasible they are helping to shape the final design of the scheme," added Allan Dare.

HISTORY IN THE MAKING



Oxford's former Rewley Road station which is now on show in the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre in Aylesbury.

If railway history can be likened to the ups and downs of a roller coaster then there is perhaps no better example than the line between Bletchley, Bicester and Oxford.

Originally authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1846, it became part of the London & North Western Railway's Oxford-Cambridge route and for many years gleaming black steam engines pulled purple-and-ivory carriages along the "Varsity Line".

During World War II the line became a vital strategic link and in the build-up to D-Day over 400 wagons a day were being handled in the military sidings at Bicester.

After the war, British Railways started to run the line down. Passenger trains were withdrawn on 1st January 1968 but freight trains continued to operate, keeping thousands of lorries off Oxfordshire's

roads each year. Ironically, many of these trains carried construction materials for Milton Keynes, even though the plans for the new city had been completely ignored in the decision to end the passenger service! The stations were demolished, the double track was replaced by a single line, and the route's former glory seemed to have gone forever.

From the 1970s onwards the local authorities along the route campaigned for the reinstatement of the passenger service and in 1987 a limited service resumed between Bicester Town and Oxford. In 1989, Oxford County Council financed a new station at Islip and has funded further improvements to the service in recent years. Now the line has up to a dozen passenger trains and several freight trains each way daily.

Evergreen 3 is designed to continue the trend, reinstating much of the double track and upgrading the stations to give Bicester commuters an alternative to the congested A34 and residents and business in north Oxford a direct train service to London.

This particular roller coaster shows no sign of running out of steam.

IN THE FIRING LINE



Chiltern Railways Chairman Adrian Shooter answers questions on the Evergreen3 scheme

1. Why are you investing in the new Oxford to London route at this time?

Rail traffic in Britain has grown by over 60% in the past 15 years and the Department for Transport is predicting 30% more passengers over the next decade. Our new route will provide the capacity to handle this growth, and will give passengers a choice of train services as well.

2. Why should Chiltern Railways be trusted to deliver on its proposals?

Since we took over the Chiltern franchise in 1996 we have successfully managed £400m worth of investment projects, delivering them on time, within budget and with minimum disruption to lineside residents. Projects have included installing double track; new stations at Warwick Parkway and Aylesbury Vale Parkway; line re-opening; doubling the size of our train fleet; and enlarging London Marylebone and Birmingham Moor Street stations.

3. How will the scheme impact on traffic congestion in the Oxford area?

Our demand forecasts show that many people will use our trains in preference to the often congested M40 and A34 roads. Our new Parkway station at Water Eaton will also mean passengers can avoid driving through central Oxford to catch the train. We are using detailed computer simulations to predict any traffic problems and help make appropriate changes near stations.

4. How has public opinion influenced the design of the scheme?

Overall reaction to the scheme has been very positive – almost 90% of the people we have spoken to are in favour of it. Public comments have been very useful as well – for instance helping us to choose the best station layouts, or alerting us to local drainage issues which we wouldn't otherwise have known about. We hope this will continue – we have often found that our best ideas actually come from local stakeholders.

5. How long will the work take and when do you expect services to start?

We will work on different parts of the line at different times and the duration of the works in any one location will be limited. We would expect train services to commence in 2012/13.

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