

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury (Con)): I very much welcome the opportunity that this Adjournment debate presents to raise a matter of great importance to my constituents—the Aylesbury spur of East West Rail. No, Mr Deputy Speaker, your ears have not deceived you: this is indeed a Member of Parliament from Buckinghamshire calling for a rail line in his constituency. I recognise that this may come as something of a shock to the Minister and perhaps even more so to the officials in his Department. But given the Transport Department's sterling record in telling my constituents that a behemoth of a railway in their local area is absolutely essential to the future of the country, I rise in a mood of cautious optimism that they will similarly be able to sing the praises of a far more modest proposal that truly will be appreciated by the people of Aylesbury and the surrounding area.

I am no Dickens and this is no tale of two cities, but it is a tale of two railways. There is the big, bad, scary one: the one that destroys ancient woodlands, that has an insatiable appetite to gobble up billions of pounds of taxpayers' cash, and that will make it harder, not easier, for us to be carbon neutral by 2050. Then there is the smaller, gentler, friendlier one: the one that will connect towns striving to succeed in the post-pandemic world, that can play a key role in an integrated local transport system with buses, cycling and walking, and that can support the next generation's heartfelt desires for a greener, more sustainable future. We could call the bad one HS2 and we could call the good one the Aylesbury spur.

The Aylesbury spur is part of phase 2 of the excellent plan to restore the old Varsity line on which steam trains used to power between the two ancient university cities of Oxford and Cambridge. That line fell victim to the Beeching axe in the late 1960s. Even then, many thought the decision made little sense. There was therefore a good deal of enthusiasm when proposals were made for the new East West Rail line, complete with an integral Aylesbury spur.

Aylesbury has historically had a bit of bad luck with the railways. The town was once very well connected. The Metropolitan Railway used to call at Aylesbury, but by 1963 the service was curtailed to Amersham. The Great Central Railway used to carry high-speed express trains through Aylesbury, including the Master Cutler, named in homage to my university city of Sheffield and its Company of Cutlers. These services too were removed by 1968, leaving just one direct rail link, to London. So, in Aylesbury we have lost rail connections over the years. I respectfully suggest that it is now time to reverse that trend, and indeed that the Aylesbury spur is crucial to the success of the town in the future.

Aylesbury is almost unrecognisable from the traditional market town where I was born half a century ago. Even as the millennium approached, large estates such as Fairford Leys and Berryfields were but fields; now they are thriving communities enabling people from near and far to purchase their own property. In the past 10 years alone, nearly 10,000 homes have been built in Aylesbury Vale, with a concomitant increase in population of more than 10%. However, all this development has come at an enormous cost. It is no exaggeration to say that it has created a nightmare situation for residents. Infrastructure in the town is at breaking point, and the traffic is unequivocally the No. 1 concern. In fact, The Bucks Herald reported last year that Aylesbury has the eighth worst traffic congestion in the country. It was the only town in the top, or perhaps I should say bottom, 10; everywhere else was a city. Like many other residents in my constituency, I have whiled away the hours sitting in queuing traffic on the Tring Road, the Bicester Road or the Wendover Road trying to get from one side of the town to the other. This is all the more frustrating when we know that nearly 50% of the traffic that comes to the town does not actually stop there, but is passing through on its way somewhere else, in the meantime creating an absolute bottleneck.

However, worse is to come for our creaking road network, because the house building has not finished yet—far from it. Aylesbury Vale is expected to accommodate a further 32,000 homes by 2033, with 16,000 of them in and around Aylesbury itself. To have any chance of coping with the huge increase in population this entails, the town needs rapid, significant and sustained investment in infrastructure. The East West Rail Aylesbury spur would go a long way to plugging the gap.

Unfortunately, when funding was granted last year for the construction of phase 2 of East West Rail, to the great consternation of local residents and businesses, it did not extend down to my constituency, but only covered the line between Bicester and Bletchley. This is despite the inclusion of the Aylesbury spur in the Department for Transport's own document making the case for phase 2 of East West Rail. Indeed, specific reference is made to the town in the text. Let me be clear: the Aylesbury spur is not described as a possible later addition, and it is not a dotted line on the diagram showing the route; it is a clear and integral part of the plan. There is even a very attractive photo of Aylesbury town centre on the East West Rail website, yet suddenly Aylesbury has been excluded from the funding announcement, prompting fears that the money will never come and that the spur will be left to wither and die.

Why this should be was all rather a mystery, because the business case for phase 2 of East West Rail, including the Aylesbury spur, has always been crystal clear. It has a benefit-cost ratio of between 1.3 and 2.4, depending on assumptions made about economic and housing growth in the Oxford-Cambridge arc. The spatial framework for the arc, which the Government have very recently published, would lead one to assume that the BCR is likely to be in the upper half of the range, but in order not to be accused of gilding a lily, let me use the bottom of the range—the figure of 1.3, which is the baseline of the Department for Transport’s national trip end model. Let us now consider the rail line that has already been given the go-ahead and is under construction, HS2—the bad guy in this story. The full business case published in April last year gives a benefit-cost ratio of 1.2 for the two phases currently given parliamentary approval. That figure of 1.2 is, in other words, lower than the lowest point for East West Rail, but that HS2 figure is not the bottom of its range. It is a figure that includes what are known as wider economic benefits, defined as “monetised elements where the evidence is developing”. I think in layman’s language that means, “where we don’t really know yet”. To put it simply, the business case for this phase of East West Rail is stronger than the business case for this phase of HS2.

In addition to the economic benefit, by the Department for Transport’s own admission, the Aylesbury spur would enable my constituents to experience high-speed travel for themselves, rather than just watching trains zip across their beautiful landscape. The strategic case for phase 2 of East West Rail states that the current journey time by rail from Aylesbury to Milton Keynes—a distance of 20 miles as the crow flies—is nearly two and a half hours. It requires two changes and a trip on the London underground. However, with the construction of the Aylesbury spur, that journey time would be slashed to a dizzying 38 minutes. A reduction of 75% in travel time is surely in itself a compelling argument.

While I hope I have made a strong case for East West Rail’s Aylesbury spur, I recognise that there may still be a degree of confusion about why we could possibly want yet more devastation of countryside or disruption to our communities, given our experience with HS2. The answer is simple: the Aylesbury spur would not require such devastation or disruption. That is because the Aylesbury spur is not a brand-new line. This little spur does not need Florence the tunnel boring machine to growl its way beneath the Chilterns, and it will not necessitate ancient woodlands being ripped up or countless farmers to be deprived of their land, yet left waiting years for compensation. In fact, most of the track for the

Aylesbury spur is already laid, and currently used for freight. It requires relatively minor adjustments to be converted for passenger use, the addition of some passing tracks, and to be joined with the rest of the EWR line near Calvert. While I am certainly no engineer, this does seem to be well within our country's capabilities.

In fact, far from replicating the environmental disaster that is HS2, the Aylesbury spur of East West Rail provides another important opportunity to help us in our goal to reach net zero by 2050. This is a commitment that is already being embraced in Aylesbury, most particularly with our designs for a garden town. It has bold ambitions, with sustainable transport at its heart. Our current trial of e-scooters demonstrates our enthusiasm for new and innovative modes of transport. What is more, the Aylesbury spur could drastically reduce the pollution suffered by residents living along the town's busiest roads. For while Aylesbury Vale generally has good air quality, there are two locations where concentrations of nitrogen dioxide exceed what are known as the objective levels. Unsurprisingly, both are on the arterial routes close to the town centre.

Providing a feasible alternative to travel by rail would enable residents and commuters to leave their cars at home—but not just residents and commuters, Mr Deputy Speaker, because we are just beginning English Tourism Week 2021. I want to see far more tourists coming to visit Aylesbury: to experience the heritage of our historic old town; to enjoy the marvellous performances by our local Unbound theatre company at the Queens Park Arts Centre; to see the uniquely painted Tudor walls in our fine museum; to eat, drink and dance in the restaurants, the bars and the clubs that are springing back to life post pandemic; to walk by the canal and wonder at the beauty of the Chiltern hills on a tricycle tour. Aylesbury is bursting with attractions and it is frankly selfish to keep them for ourselves. The Aylesbury spur would enable so many thousands more people to come from across the country to share in all that we have to offer.

I submit that it is absolutely right and reasonable for my constituents to say to the Government that if we must have all the disruption of HS2 and if we must endure new housing construction, then the least consolation would be to give us the railway that we do want, and indeed thought that we were going to get. It has support from residents, with a petition still collecting signatures. It is championed by Buckinghamshire Council, which has itself contributed millions of pounds to funding the scheme's development. It is backed by Buckinghamshire's local enterprise partnership and by Bucks Business First.

The station is there, most of the track is there, and the passengers are poised. Only last week, the Transport Secretary himself told this House that rail will shape our future. He said: "No other form of transport can bind the nation so effectively and help us to level up our country, bringing new jobs and investment...as we build back from covid."—[Official Report, 20 May 2021; Vol. 695, c. 888.] I could not agree more, and, in Aylesbury, we want to be part of that bright new future. It would be odd indeed if, at a time when the Government have pledged to expand the rail network, not shrink it, the planned Aylesbury spur disappeared from the iron web of Great British Railways.

Aylesbury is the proud county town of Buckinghamshire, but our pride is worn lightly. We are humble in our request of Government. I began with a reference to Dickens, I end with one to Rev. W. Awdry: we have no need for the slightly arrogant big blue express engine, Gordon, hurtling across our countryside with a degree of disdain, for us a simple but enthusiastic Thomas the tank engine on a modest spur will suffice.

I respectfully ask the Minister to put a smile on the faces of my constituents and approve funding for the Aylesbury spur, and, in so doing, help level up our town. Make Aylesbury an even better place to live, work, visit and invest.

**Greg Smith** has sought and received permission to make a short contribution from the mover of the motion, Rob Butler, and the Minister responding, Chris Heaton-Harris, and I have been informed as per the rules.

I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) on securing this debate. He has made the case for the Aylesbury spur incredibly eloquently, and I wish to add just a few very brief comments to support the case that he has made.

As my hon. Friend said, this is the railway that we do want in Buckinghamshire. Within the county of Buckinghamshire, the existing approved stretch of East West Rail is currently entirely in my constituency as it arrives from Oxfordshire and departs into Milton Keynes. But the Aylesbury spur is vital as it adds a level of connectivity to Buckinghamshire that is truly game changing. A massive part of the appeal of East West Rail to my constituents in the first place was not just connecting, via a new station in Winslow, Bicester to Bletchley, but having that vital link with the Chiltern line in the town of Aylesbury and access to the key services

and attractions in around that town, not least Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

As my hon. Friend said, given the suffering we have faced in Buckinghamshire from the railway we do not want, HS2, and the significant disruption East West Rail has itself brought on the main line during that construction phase, it can be only fair and equitable for the full East West Rail connectivity to be delivered. As he outlined, the spur is on a line that is already in existence and being used for aggregate deliveries and freight.

The spur is the key to unlocking the full potential of this east-west connection, which is why, despite those disruptive and frustrating impacts building East West Rail has caused—the subject dominates so much of my time and I am grateful that the Minister has engaged with it in trying to help resolve things—I truly welcome the boost it will bring to the north of Buckinghamshire. It will reduce congestion and pollution, create new job opportunities and allow for that decisive step towards enhancing economic prosperity, particularly for our rural communities. My constituents need to know that their patience will be worth it and that they will reap the full benefits of restoring this vital link between some of the fastest-growing areas of the south-east. We have waited long enough. We really need the Aylesbury spur to be delivered.

Minister of State Department of Transport **Chris Heaton Harris** - I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) and for Buckingham (Greg Smith). My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury has made a compelling case for the spur and has done well to secure this debate on transport in his constituency. He made an informative speech on the potential for East West Rail to serve Aylesbury in the future and outlined the fantastic attractions that exist in his county town and constituency. Obviously, he is a strong advocate for a place he truly loves. I thank him for his kind words about the East West Rail project. I feel lucky in this instance that I am the sponsor Minister for a railway that people want, rather than for one that others do not.

I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend's representations about the importance of East West Rail to his constituency and will try to address many of them now. As he knows, in January the Government demonstrated their commitment to supporting national and regional connectivity by announcing £760 million of funding to deliver the next stage of East West Rail between Bicester and Bletchley, reinstating direct rail services for the first time since the 1960s. This funding highlights the crucial underpinning role that East West Rail will play in supporting Government ambitions for the

Oxford-Cambridge arc. It is part of our nationwide commitment to build back vital connections and unlock access to jobs, education and housing.

Alongside this important step forward, the design, development and delivery of this and future stages of East West Rail was changed. Instead of delivering East West Rail in sections—western and central—it will be delivered in “connection stages”. Connection stage 1 represents delivery of the scheme up to Bletchley and Milton Keynes. Connection stage 2 will take it further east, from Bletchley to Bedford. Connection stage 3 will deliver a brand new railway between Bedford and Cambridge. I understand my hon. Friend’s concerns and those of his constituents that the proposed spur connecting Aylesbury and Milton Keynes, which previously formed part of the western section, is not included as part of the three main connection stages. That does not mean that the Aylesbury spur will not go ahead by any means, but it is important that a strong economic case can be made for proceeding with that element of the East West Rail scheme, and that a reliable rail service can be introduced without jeopardising existing services.

As we level up our economy, I look to my hon. Friend to marshal the support and resources of organisations in his constituency. The Government’s response to the covid-19 pandemic has placed a great strain on finances, and led to many difficult decisions having to be made on the prioritisation of resources that meet the levelling-up agenda. Through partnership funding and regional commitment, I believe that a much stronger case can be made to deliver East West Rail services to Aylesbury. To match that regional commitment, the Secretary of State for Transport and I have instructed our officials in the Department to include financial provision for the design and delivery of the Aylesbury spur as part of the comprehensive spending review that will take place later this year.

As my hon. Friend will appreciate, there will be many competing demands from a wide variety of schemes as part of that process, and boosting the available funding through local contributions will make the Aylesbury spur an even more attractive proposition. As Rail Minister, I will continue to ensure that East West Rail works hard with its stakeholders to drive down costs and make the strongest possible case for the scheme to be delivered in full. If we can work together to find a way to deliver the East West Rail Aylesbury spur, that will build on the investment already made by this Government in my hon. Friend’s constituency. That includes funding for the Stocklake and Aylesbury eastern link roads to support crucial housing development in the area, and £170 million

has been awarded to Aylesbury's housing infrastructure fund bid. Aylesbury has also benefited from the rural mobility fund. That demonstrates the Government's commitment to investing in Buckinghamshire through both infrastructure and public transport and supporting those growth ambitions. As my hon. Friend may be aware, East West Rail is currently undertaking a non-statutory consultation on the future direction of the scheme, and I urge him and his constituents to respond to that.

I hope that I have kept the door open as far as I possibly can, without treading on the toes of my Treasury colleagues. I hope to work with my hon. Friend on completing the Aylesbury spur as we move forward in this Parliament.