

First meeting of East West Rail's accessibility panel held

May 24, 2023



A pioneering panel which aims to ensure the varying needs of disabled people are fully met by East West Railway Company (EWR Co) has held its first meeting.

The Accessibility Advisory Panel is thought to be the first of its kind for a UK based rail company building a new railway and will help EWR Co set industry-leading standards for accessibility and inclusivity.

The customer-first initiative has been set up in advance of trains operating from Oxford to Bletchley in 2025 and aims to ensure the needs of disabled people are considered early in the design and construction stages so East West Rail (EWR) can be accessed and enjoyed by everyone.

Panel members have hailed the scheme as exciting and inclusive, and called for it to be adopted by the whole of the UK railway network.

One in five people in the UK is disabled – and different disabilities mean that different people access and experience the railway in different ways.

Last November, EWR invited disabled people living locally to apply to be part of the panel to provide

insights on the barriers to rail travel faced in local communities along the route. Twelve local residents have been appointed from across the route:

- Philip Ashbourn, Milton Keynes
- Ernie Boddington, Bedford
- Ian Cook, Flitwick
- Gary Dormer, Buckinghamshire
- Kevin Hickman, Bicester
- Ross Hovey, St Neots
- Stephen Liney, Wellingborough
- Joe O'Dwyer, Cambourne
- Liz Owen, St Neots
- Sam Penney, Bedford
- Sara Scott, Oxford
- Mark Taylor, Cambridge

Speaking after the first meeting, the **Accessibility Advisory Panel members shared their thoughts:**

Liz Owen, St Neots: "My hopes are that the opinion of rail travel for disabled people will change for the better. That we'll not be an afterthought, and that this project will pave the way for other Rail companies to have an access panel and give others a voice too. I feel included and already listened to by being given a voice for so many. I am excited to be a part of something so big and for many, life-changing."

Stephen Liney, Wellingborough: "Our aims are to lead the way and create accessibility as standard. For far too long accessibility has been a last thought. It's time for more organisations to set up access panels and learn from people who live the disabled experience, we are the ones who can add value to your service and change perspective on disability which is urgently required. Accessibility is a basic right for all, let's make it standard practice."

Ross Hovey, St Neots: "I feel very proud to be on the panel but most significantly because the route will be part of my local community. I am hoping the Accessibility Advisory Panel will achieve the creation of the most accessible and inclusive train route in the UK."

Mark Taylor, also Access Officer at Cambridge City Council: "Many disabled people assume public transport and public transport facilities are inaccessible and difficult. I hope the new rail link will be easy for everybody to use, and the Panel's insight will become the actuality of the design."

Gary Dormer, Buckinghamshire: "As someone with sight loss issues, I am very happy and excited to have been asked to join the accessibility advisory panel and help to make a difference. I am extremely grateful that EWR are putting customers first, and engaging positively with those customers who experience disability, to make the travelling experience more enjoyable, and actively trying to reduce or eliminate the obstacles which may make that more difficult or demanding."

Ian Cook, founder of Step Free Access at all Stations and on All Trains, Flitwick: "I have been campaigning

for Step Free Access for some years now and being on the panel is my chance to be able to make a difference in design and accessibility on this new project. Hopefully this will be adopted by the whole of the railway network in the UK.”

Philip Ashbourn, Milton Keynes: “I hope the Panel can make EWR passengers with any form of disability feel confident, not nervous, and safe on any EWR journey.”

Mary Doyle, Accessibility Advisory Panel Co-Chair and independent inclusive transport consultant: “By having the panel consult on activities and projects and how they impact the access needs of the community from the beginning, EWR Co will lead the way. We are solution focused and interested in preventing and dismantling barriers to participation. “This is an exciting opportunity to craft the best practices and standards for rail inclusion with the knowledge and experience being shared. Ongoing co-creation will be foundational in the success of the partnership between the Accessibility Advisory Panel, local communities and EWR Co.”

Caroline Eglinton, Head of Inclusion, EWR Co: “We are overwhelmed by the positive response we had to our announcement of the Accessibility Advisory Panel in November and the volume of submissions we received. I’m pleased that the first meeting of panel members has taken place within three months of applications closing, testament to the desire of everyone involved to make the most of this opportunity, boosting the quality of life for the local community, and particularly for those who have been excluded from rail travel in the past by the barriers built into the system. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and I hope we’ll demonstrate what can be achieved by designing an inclusive and accessible railway from the start.

“I’d like to thank everyone who applied to join the panel and everybody who is supporting this initiative, it’s invigorating to see so many people as passionate as I am about turning our vision of a fully accessible railway into a reality.”

The next meeting is scheduled to be held in June 2023 with following meetings approximately every 2-3 months. Panel members are paid a nominal fee of £50 per meeting plus expenses.

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