

MP hits out as Shapps says he would axe East West Rail

News editor GEMMA GARDNER gauges the reaction to the transport secretary's admission.

Labour MP Daniel Zeichner has hit back at the Conservatives for "reducing the future prosperity of the region to a pawn in the Tory leadership battle" following the transport secretary Grant Shapps' revelation that he would scrap East West Rail.

Mr Shapps said he believed the project should be the first to face the axe when asked what he would cut from the transport budget during an interview with LBC radio last week.

But the Department for Transport has said that a decision on the future of the £5bn East West Rail link from Oxford to Cambridge is one for the new Prime Minister.

During his aborted campaign to be the next PM, Mr Shapps said he would ditch the latter stages of the project, which would include the Cambridge section.

He said: "I would cut East West Rail on what's called two and three – the second and third tranches of it – that would save £3m to £5m straight away."

A Department for Transport spokesman said no major policy decisions would be made during the leadership contest.

Mr Zeichner has repeatedly challenged the transport secretary on his intentions, most recently on June 30 in a debate on the modernisation of the railway.

This week, the Cambridge MP said: "For the secretary of state to announce on a radio programme that he would scrap a key infrastructure project is a new low, even for this government and this secretary of state. Restoring the rail link to Oxford has been a key priority for businesses

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Daniel Zeichner
Labour MP for Cambridge

and councils across the regions for many years, and failure to complete will damage Cambridge.

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The first section of East West Rail to upgrade the railway between Oxford and Bicester was completed in 2016.

The second 21-mile (33km) £760m Bicester to Bletchley stretch is on time and on budget, according to the East West Rail Company Alliance.

The last two sections are from Bletchley to Bedford and from Bedford to Cambridge

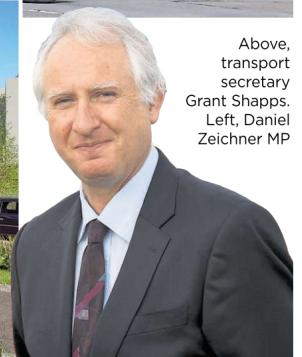
A DfT spokesman said: "It will be for the next Prime Minister and government to make a decision on East West Rail.

"Work is currently under way on having advice ready to provide to the government later this year."

Neil O'Brien MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Levelling Up, The



East West Rail would link up with the forthcoming Cambridge South station on the Biomedical Campus, seen in this illustration, via a new stop at Cambourne



Above, transport secretary Grant Shapps. Left, Daniel Zeichner MP



William Harrold, centre, talks to South Cambridgeshire Tory MP Anthony Browne
Picture: Keith Heppell

Union and Constitution, said in a letter to council leaders in May that the planned "direct rail link between Oxford and Cambridge will play an important role in boosting connectivity and unlocking productivity within the [OxCam] Arc, supporting access to jobs, education, and other opportunities".

William Harrold, co-founder of the Cambridge Approaches campaign group, said "there would be delight in South Cambridgeshire" if the project was brought to an early end.

Cambridge Approaches argues there is a stronger case for the route to approach Cambridge from the north, connecting with the Ely line near Milton.

Mr Harrold has been calling for East West Railway Company (EWR Co) to publish a business case to justify the southern route, but has yet to have a response.

He said of Mr Shapps' comments: "It must be tough on the staff at EWR Co to hear their main sponsor saying this. It's also tough on the thousands of residents blighted by this railway year after year with no end in sight and no meaningful changes or answers from EWR Co in response to

our many objections and questions. It's also really tough on the taxpayers if they have to fund a project without a decent business case.

"How long can this bizarre limbo continue? EWR Co is full steam ahead on the ground and the transport secretary wants to cancel construction stages two and three."

In April, minister of state for transport Wendy Morton MP, responded to a letter sent to Mr Shapps, via South Cambridgeshire's Conservative MP Anthony Browne, calling for the EWR business case to be published if the project is to continue.

She said: "Reviews are common for a complex project of this size, particularly before making critical decisions... and it is important to ensure that the investment continues to offer value for money for taxpayers.

"It is therefore right that EWR Co. keeps the viability of the business case for the railway under constant review."

She said the project plays an "important role in boosting connectivity and unlocking productivity within the Oxford-Cambridge Arc" and the "government

and EWR Co will set out next steps for the project in due course".

South Cambridgeshire MP Anthony Browne said: "This letter can be summed up in four words: small consolations, greater concerns."

A face-to-face meeting with representatives from East West Rail was cancelled this week due to the extreme weather conditions.

The event in Haslingfield yesterday (Tuesday) would have been the first chance for residents to ask about the plans, with all events so far being held virtually.

The results of East West Rail's consultation, which was held last year, have still not been published and residents feel they are living in limbo.

But the meeting was cancelled given "the potential risk extreme heat poses to staff and guests".

A date for a rescheduled meeting has not been set but EWR Co hope that it will be later this month.

A statement said organisers were aware of "significant interest" in the event, but their "primary responsibility must be toward the safety of everyone attending".