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New London-Oxford rail link approved

By Mark Odell

A new rail link between London and Oxford is set to open in 2015 after the government approved the £130m scheme.

The route, from London's Marylebone station, will largely follow the existing line to Birmingham but then deviate west on to half a mile of new track that will link it to a rarely used line between Bicester and Oxford.

The project will upgrade 10 miles of dilapidated track on that line and see the building of two stations – the replacement of one at Bicester and a new one in north Oxford.

It will be built and funded by Chiltern Railways, the operator of Marylebone-to-Birmingham services, under a 20-year franchise. Graham Cross, Chiltern Railways' business development director, said it had taken more than two years to get planning approval.

"We have been through some arduous hoops," he said.

The presence of bats in a tunnel on the route caused delays over conservation fears. Objections were overcome after successful trials of a system to warn the animals of approaching trains using lights in the tunnel.

Chiltern plans to offer two services an hour between London and Oxford, matching the frequency on the existing route from Paddington. Mr Cross said the service would complement the existing one and would help alleviate congestion on the roads.

The new track Chiltern is laying between Oxford and Bicester is part of the planned East West Rail project. The government signalled its support for the scheme late last year.

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