

Railfuture Severnside response to West Somerset Railway PLC Draft Corporate Plan

Railfuture welcomes the opportunity to respond to this 10 Year Plan. Whilst our aspiration is for regular all year passenger trains between Taunton and Minehead, we recognise that this may not be achievable without external funding. We therefore offer our comments in a constructive spirit and hope that WSR will consider a closer working relationship with us as a pro-rail organisation. Each paragraph of our response refers to numbered paragraphs of the Draft Corporate Plan.

10. We are encouraged that the Company views the revised franchising process for the Great Western franchise as an opportunity to examine the possibility of regular train services between Bishops Lydeard and Taunton. We would caution, however, that the Cardiff-Taunton train service is likely to be extended to Exeter in order to serve Wellington and Cullompton. Feasibility studies towards this are due to begin during 2014. This would therefore appear to rule out the extension of local trains in marginal time beyond Taunton to Bishops Lydeard. Additionally there is the strong possibility that the main line will be electrified in the 2020s. Taken together, these factors suggest that the Company needs to give thought as to how trains could operate directly from WSR into Taunton station to provide its main line connection.

11. We strongly support the view of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Heritage Rail that there is scope for heritage lines to provide proper public transport services, if necessary by means of grants or franchise payments. The WSR most definitely has potential to provide such connectivity because of known demand for access from West Somerset to jobs in Taunton and beyond; and for tourist traffic into West Somerset from other parts of the South West and other regions of the UK. A significant increase in commuting into Taunton can be expected when the Firepool development, which will create several thousand jobs within walking distance of the station, is completed during the next decade.

15. As the Company rightly says, the WSR does not operate in a vacuum from the local economy and population in this area of Somerset. It already contributes enormously to the local economy in terms of visitor trade. A regular link with the national railway system would encourage even more visitors to West Somerset and also enable local people to reach major centres of employment and education such as Taunton, Bridgwater, Bristol and Exeter. Faster access to jobs by public transport would help keep younger people resident in West Somerset. This is particularly relevant with the high cost of motor insurance for younger drivers. It is also an important issue because nearly half of the population of the West Somerset District is over 65 and well paid jobs are not abundant within the District. Bus services on the Taunton- Minehead route are probably carrying only a small proportion of the potential market and are not attractive to car users. Evening bus services are now minimal because of local authority funding cuts, making it no longer feasible to live in West Somerset and use the bus to reach Taunton station for a long distance day trip by train. Evidence from elsewhere suggests that rail access to major employment and shopping centres is important in maintaining a balanced population.

17. We support upgrading of ticketing technology on the WSR to enable its passengers to book through to any destination on the national rail network, London Underground and possibly other heritage railways. Through ticketing to the WSR is surely technically possible from the national rail system and ought to be made available initially at least from FGW stations. East Midlands Trains already offers through booking from its stations to the Ecclesbourne Valley Railway, which has interchange with EMT at Duffield.

21. The South West Peninsula Rail Spine Report emphasises the need for better rail connectivity to redress the natural disadvantage of the Peninsula's peripherality. West Somerset suffers from its own peripherality, regionally as well as nationally, because of its

poor public transport and poor road access either via the A39 or A358. Neither of these roads are capable of much improvement and safety is a significant concern on the A358.

Core Railway and Operating Season

27. Is it not the case that the line speed under the Light Railway Order is 25 mph for steam operation but 40 mph for diesel ? Even with growing road congestion, the higher figure would be essential for any future diesel services from either Minehead or Bishops Lydeard to Taunton if they are to be attractive to commuters and long distance passengers. We believe the eventual objectives of the WSR should include the operation of public transport compatible with time critical journeys.

28. We accept that extending the core operating season to the whole year would be challenging but believe it to be achievable. In Germany the Harzer Schmalspurbahnen is a heritage line using steam trains in the middle of the day, with modern diesel railcars running in the morning and evening peaks. In the UK the most serious attempt to offer a daily, all year community rail service was made by the Weardale Railway from May 2010 to the end of 2011. It received no subsidies and failed to attract enough passengers but the local population was much smaller and the stations less well sited than on the WSR. Arguably the nearest that a British heritage line has come to running an all year service is the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway, which operates for most of the year and has a contract to convey schoolchildren to Marsh Academy. This core local traffic is no doubt why RHDR is able to sustain winter operation. Given the seasonality of employment in West Somerset, WSR may be able to exploit the demand for travel to Taunton and other major centres of work. Other potential core traffics may be Butlins holidaymakers, as is acknowledged in para. 59; and workers at Hinkley Point, at least during the construction phase. The Swanage Railway hopes to operate regular services into Wareham station from 2015, initially on 50 days of the year, increasing to 90 days in the second year. We welcome the objective (para. 176) to learn from Swanage and other major heritage railways regarding sources of external funding.

Taunton- Bishops Lydeard link

34. All the reasons listed on Page 17 are powerful arguments why some kind of regular service between Taunton and the WSR deserves serious investigation. Whatever option is pursued, we reiterate that through ticketing to / from national rail stations is essential if potentially lucrative travel markets (eg between West Somerset and major UK cities) are to be exploited. Had the Minehead line survived under BR, it would have contributed substantial revenue to the rest of the system (and vice-versa) because Taunton now has far more InterCity trains than it had in 1971. For this reason we believe that a Taunton connection would provide a net financial benefit to the UK rail network as a whole and would therefore justify significant investment in WSR. The question would seem to be how to devise an arrangement financially attractive both to WSR and the other parties involved. One solution may be payment of commission to WSR on ticket sales to destinations on the national network.

36. We welcome the PLC's intention to become involved with Severnside CRP and a working group of County and District Councils with a view to discussing Taunton- Bishops Lydeard within the context of rail improvements in the South West.

Marketing and Commercial Activities with External Partners

58, 59. More use of social media, as suggested by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Heritage Rail, would widen the appeal of WSR. Around a quarter of Butlins holidaymakers arrived at Minehead by rail in the final years of B.R. operation. With good marketing and

through ticketing that proportion could be regained or bettered. Package promotions including discounted rail travel to Minehead could be developed.

Proposals from Support Organisations

61. WSRA has rightly said that WSR needs to move its emphasis away from being a showcase for steam locomotives, towards becoming more of a tourist attraction with a wider appeal. We would develop this proposition by suggesting that if a regular link with the main line at Taunton were established, WSR would be ideally placed to develop Green Tourism, with the railway helping to reduce road congestion and enabling more visitors to reach towns and villages in West Somerset without a car. Holidaymakers arriving by public transport are more likely to spend money in local shops and eating places because they do not bring cars packed with provisions bought elsewhere. They are also more likely to use local bus services, eg Minehead- Porlock- Lynmouth. This is currently hampered by the nearest arrival point by rail for visitors to Minehead being 25 miles away at Taunton.

Infrastructure Strategy

108, 109. We welcome the plans for proactive renewal of infrastructure because it would increase WSR's ability to accommodate more trains, including freight such as the stone trains for sea defence work which ran over four periods between 1997 and 2011.

Consumables

124. It is significant that coal represents the largest item of non staff costs for WSR. Taken together with the challenges of reducing sulphur emissions and procurement of spare parts for steam locomotives, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that a higher proportion of trains on WSR will be diesel worked by the end of the Plan period. This is a situation facing all heritage railways in the UK, many of whom take pride in marketing their diesel services, particularly heritage DMUs which offer excellent forward views and have good window / seat alignment. Unless coal becomes more readily available at an acceptable price, the long term strategy for heritage lines must involve the exploitation of markets which require less emphasis on steam haulage, such as genuine public transport as suggested in the Report on the Value of Heritage Railways (para. 11). We are not proposing elimination of steam traction altogether, as we recognise its marketing appeal and educational value.

Partnerships and External Relationships

188. We certainly agree that WSR needs to raise its profile regarding its role in the local rail network in the West Country. Our vision is for WSR eventually to become the transport artery between West Somerset and the rest of the UK while retaining its unique character and continuing its contribution to tourism and education. The WSR would then become the engine (excuse the pun) of growth for an area which badly needs better connectivity as a means to revitalisation.

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