

Former Bourne End to High Wycombe Railway Line

Updated Evidence Base

Wycombe Development Framework Delivery & Site Allocations DPD

June 2010 Update

Transport for Buckinghamshire



Background

High Wycombe

High Wycombe is the largest settlement within Wycombe District. It is a prosperous town, however its topography places a number of restrictions upon development in the area, including development of new transport links. The town is almost completely surrounded by the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt which also imposes further constraints on development. There are some congestion hotspots in and around the town, particularly at Junction 4 of the M40 (Handy Cross).

The rail line

The High Wycombe to Maidenhead railway line was constructed during the 1850's with the Marlow spur constructed in the 1870s. This route went via Loudwater and Bourne End and provided connections between Buckinghamshire and the Thames Valley and was the original High Wycombe to London line.

With the publication of the Beeching Report (1963) and a decline in the line's use the 9km's of track between High Wycombe and Bourne End was closed in 1970. This saw the closure of the only direct non-road link, from High Wycombe, to the Thames Valley. In 1976, a policy to safeguard the route for future use was created. This policy has been retained since then because it was recognised that safeguarding an off road public transport route would be a benefit. The route would enable a service to avoid road congestion and provide an alternative modal link to the Thames Valley.

Following the closure of the line sections of the abandoned trackbed have been built on or demolished. There are at least two missing bridges, one of which crossed the A40, and a number of developments now cross or cover sections of the trackbed.

Current Regional Policy

In the 2009 South East Plan a 'hub' and 'spoke' network was presented linking towns (hubs) of national and regional importance with appropriate connections e.g. road or rail (spokes). High Wycombe has been acknowledged in this plan as a regional hub and therefore its connectivity to neighbouring hubs has been recognised as a significant priority. Currently High Wycombe has good links, by a number of modes, to London, Oxford and Aylesbury. However it is only possible to reach the Thames Valley by private car or local bus.

The Thames Valley Multi Modal Study (TVMMS, 2003) highlighted that High Wycombe has very poor links with the Thames Valley and alternatives to private car travel need to be considered. This report promoted the creation of a coach network, coach/bus hubs and continued safeguarding of the Bourne End route for future rail use.

The route is also being looked at as part of the DaSTS north south study investigating better transport links between Milton Keynes and the Thames valley.

To date Buckinghamshire County Council have focused, in the short term, on delivering the High Wycombe Regional Coachway. This facility will link into the wider development of a bus and coach network in and around the Thames Valley. The Coachway facility is programmed for completion in 2012. Consistent with the recommendation of TVMMS it has been local policy to prevent further development along the old rail alignment. This is

so that the route is preserved if the case for re-instatement of a public transport route here increases in the future.

Current District Policy and Planning History

In the current Wycombe District Local Plan to 2011 (Adopted January 2004) policy T10 relates to the abandoned trackbed and safeguarding it against future development:

Policy T10:

- 1) That part of the abandoned railway from Bourne End to High Wycombe, as indicated on the proposal map, will be safeguarded for possible use as a footpath, cycleway or for some form of public transport development proposals which would prevent such future use or function will be refused planning permission.
- 2) Any future development proposal which would prevent suitable diversions being created in the course of implementing any of the above uses will be refused planning permission. In the event of making such diversions from the former railway trackbed, the route chosen will not be significantly less direct or attractive.

Policy T10 was used when considering planning applications for development that may encroach on the line. Policy C16, Transport, of High Wycombe's Local Development framework adopted Core Strategy along with the road improvement lines that will be included in Wycombe District's site allocations document (DSA) includes policy to "Identify and safeguard from development future routes for public transport, walking and cycling, and road improvement lines." This will be the future planning means to safeguarding the route for future use.

It is also supported by the 1980 Highways Act (c66) Section 73 which states that the Local Highways Authority does not have to assign a timescale to any improvement line just that *"where in the opinion of a Highway authority an improvement line prescribed by them ... is no longer necessary or desirable and should be revoked, they may revoke the line or that part of it"*.

Policy T10 does not specify the form of public transport reuse for which the route is safeguarded however it has been suggested that an ultra light rail link between High Wycombe and Maidenhead would provide an attractive public transport link between High Wycombe and the Chiltern Line to the Thames Valley, with the potential to be well used.

Buckinghamshire County Council has been investigating ultra light rail as part of the assessment of alternatives to the High Wycombe Regional Coachway scheme (supported by Regional Policy). Initial work has indicated the order of costs of approximately £100m which is consistent with earlier TVMMS estimates.

The outcome of a recent planning appeal on land forming part of the former trackbed at Wycombe Lane has called into question whether the safeguarding of the former railway line precludes any further development along its length. In 2006 Wycombe District Council refused a planning application for construction over the abandoned trackbed with the support of Buckinghamshire County Council as Transport Authority. An appeal was lodged and subsequently refused on other grounds. However, the Inspector took the view that if development provided a spine road along the length of the site this could be used by future public transport such as a busway. This conclusion was reinforced following a further appeal against a subsequent application when the authorities argued unsuccessfully that the safeguarding precluded further development along the former rail line. The Inspector

continued to uphold the principle of safeguarding but felt that additional evidence would be necessary to show that development and future public transport reuse could not co-exist.

In light of the recent planning history it is necessary that we are clear about the purpose of safeguarding the disused railway as these may have different implications for what width of route is required to be safeguarded.

Options for future use of the rail line

Option 1: Protect the rail line for future heavy rail use

Replace Wycombe District Council's planning policy T10 with a new policy that safeguards the disused railway for heavy rail use. Route improvement or development control lines will also need to be decided upon where development currently covers the abandoned trackbed.

This option would require approximately 8 metres to be safeguarded for the full length of the 9 kms to provide a single track. Due to this requirement and for operational and safety reasons a number of properties located in close proximity to the disused route may also need to be removed to enable such a proposal.

It is expected that this option, due to the type of rail service it would provide, would only stop at Bourne End. This route would link with the existing Bourne End line to Maidenhead currently operated by First Great Western.

Option 2: Protect the rail line for future guided public transport use e.g. light rail/ultra light rail use

Replace Wycombe District Council's planning policy T10 with a new policy that safeguards the disused rail bed for light rail use. Route improvement or development control lines will also need to be considered where development currently covers the abandoned trackbed.

This option would require approximately 7 metres to be safeguarded along the full length of the 9kms to provide a single track.

This option would provide at least one interim stop between High Wycombe and Bourne End.

Safeguarding of the route is supported by the Wycombe Society who highlighted both the congestion and environmental benefits of such a scheme that would enable connectivity between Buckinghamshire and the Thames Valley.

Option 3: Use the remaining rail bed as a walking and cycling route.

Replace Wycombe District Council's planning policy T10 with a new policy that safeguards the disused trackbed as a high quality "Green Corridor" that provides a dedicated walking and cycling route that would form part of the Sustrans national cycle network.

In line with standards set out in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) a preferred minimum width of 5.0 metres (3.0m cycle route, 2.0m pedestrian route) would need to be protected.¹

¹ In accordance with Design Manual for Roads and Bridges TA90/05 paragraph 7.20 - *The geometric design of pedestrian, cycle and equestrian routes.*

The advantage of this proposal is that none of the houses located over the track will be directly affected however, future construction on the existing route would require suitable provision for walking and cycling connectivity enabling direct links that follow the existing route. The long distance nature of the link means that the full width of the route would be required to provide a route that is attractive to users, though there is potential for a walking and cycling route to fit into a more narrow width where this is unavoidable. Whilst this route could be accommodated within developments, usage would be further encouraged and transport and health benefits maximised if the route were traffic free similar to the Phoenix Trail provided between Princes Risborough and Thame which is a dedicated traffic free “green corridor”. This is consistent with experience gained from the national cycle network, which has seen higher rates of growth in usage along traffic free sections. This also fits in with proposals in the DSA to recognise this route as part of a network of green infrastructure offering benefits for open space/movement and biodiversity.

Option 4: To accept development on the disused rail bed

To rescind the current policy and not replace it. This would remove an objection in principle to development along the disused trackbed, subject to accordance with Wycombe District Council’s planning policies.

Consideration

The options above have a number of limitations that need to be considered prior to making the final recommendation. Limitations for each option will be considered in turn. A study was undertaken as part of the feasibility of the Wycombe Coachway that assessed options for connections of High Wycombe with the Thames Valley. This included looking at options for the reuse of the Bourne End track bed and the key point from this study are summarised in options one and two below.

Option 1: Protect the rail line for future heavy rail use

1. Costs for a heavy rail scheme on this route would be considerably higher than that for a light rail equivalent, (although exact costs have not been produced). Infrastructure, property purchase and legal costs related to the need to acquire a dedicated and exclusive route are likely to be the main reasons for such high costs.
2. One form of funding requires the Local Authority to contribute 25% to any rail scheme. This is not a sum of money readily available. This is the main form of funding available for these types of schemes however, if this were to be considered further, alternative funding options would need to be considered.
3. This option is only likely to include stops in High Wycombe and Bourne End commensurate with its role as primarily a mode for longer distance travel and to minimise cost, resulting in fewer people locally having access to the service than the ultra light rail option, which is expected to have at least one additional stop. Although this could be offset by a services without additional stops being more attractive to longer distance travellers over a wider catchment area.
4. Possible routes for the heavy rail option would necessarily cross existing property boundaries resulting in compulsory purchase of land and properties. With the

timescales involved safeguarding the route may also blight for many years a number of properties which are currently on or next to the abandoned rail bed.

5. The route would link Chiltern Rail and First Great Western. Both operators have said, to date, that they do not want to run a connecting service. This raised the question of who would operate the service.
6. There are expected to be capacity problems, particularly at the Maidenhead section of track with Crossrail proposed in the short to medium term and High Speed 2 to Heathrow being considered in the longer term. These capacity constraints could result in the High Wycombe to Bourne End/Maidenhead route being a costly shuttle service.
7. Taking these points into account it is unlikely that the business case for this route would be considered appropriate for consideration by the Department for Transport.
8. Currently this is not on any of the regional infrastructure plans for funding. Therefore, this option is unlikely to receive funding in the next ten to fifteen years.
9. Unless significant new assessment work were to demonstrate that there is in fact a stronger case for this option than currently appears, such as providing a more strategic link from Milton Keynes to the Thames Valley, it is unlikely that appeals relating to safeguarding the route for heavy rail will be successful.

Option 2: Protect the rail line for future guided public transport use eg light rail/ultra light rail use

1. One form of funding requires the Local Authority to contribute 25% to any rail scheme. An ultra light rail scheme could cost approximately £100m in total with £25m required to be contributed. This is not a sum of money readily available to the Local Authority. However, if this were to be considered further alternative funding options would be investigated, which includes possible third party investment. Costs could be reduced by a scheme that went “off-line” where the cost of achieving diversions would be prohibitive.
2. A small number of properties may have to be compulsorily purchased but one of the main costs for this scheme is the infrastructure required to run the service, such as a dedicated depot and investment in rolling stock and also the creation of new stations along the route.
3. There are expected to be capacity problems, particularly at the Maidenhead section of track with Crossrail proposed for completion by 2017. These capacity constraints are likely to result in the High Wycombe to Bourne End/Maidenhead route being a costly shuttle service. However, operating cost would be lower than the heavy rail option.
4. The route would link Chiltern Rail and First Great Western. Both operators have said, to date, that they do not want to run a connecting service. This raised the question of who would operate the service.
5. The business case for this scheme is not as strong as that for the High Wycombe Regional Coachway. Therefore, the scheme has not been put forward for inclusion

in regional infrastructure plans for funding. Until a more robust business case is produced this is unlikely to change.

6. Unless significant investigation is undertaken into this option it is likely that further costs will be incurred by Wycombe District Council in fighting appeals relating to safeguarding the route for ultra light rail, particularly as the scheme is unlikely to be developed in the next ten years.
7. There are also safety issues arising from light and heavy rail compatibility, in so much as that light rail could not operate on the same line as heavy rail. If the route ran ultra light rail services it would not be able to take heavy rail service (for safety reasons) so would only be able to act as a shuttle service.

Option 3: Use the remaining rail bed for walking and cycling

1. Provide a high quality “green corridor” that delivers a walking and cycling route that forms part of the Sustrans national cycle network. This would support policies that encourage the use of more sustainable modes and improve health in Wycombe District. It would be a show case to promote walking and cycling in High Wycombe and would link with the existing east-west cycle route. Its route along the valley floor is ideal, as it runs through/adjacent to urban areas for almost all its length – close to schools, houses, work places, rail stations and town /district centres.
2. It is accepted that some sections of the route will be difficult to achieve due to development along the corridor that does not provide connectivity. However, a cycle route would be able to utilise existing quiet residential roads.
3. Securing financial support from developers to contribute to implementation of the route would be key to its success.

Option 4: To accept development on the disused rail bed

1. The loss of a route that would help to encourage mode shift away from the private car.

Conclusions

Option 1: Protect the rail line for future heavy rail use

Whilst a heavy rail option would link with existing rail infrastructure at either end of the route the cost of implementing such a scheme, for 9km's of track, is not considered to be good value for money. Particularly as there are expected to be capacity issues on First Great Western and Chiltern Rail links which would limit the link to a shuttle service.

Additional consideration may be highlighted by the DaSTS studies if it was considered that the routes had more regional significance.

The cost benefit analysis and timescales for delivery of a heavy rail option increases the risk of incurring further costs at appeal and not delivering an appropriate scheme in a reasonable time frame. However, it is important to keep the route development free if in sometime in the distant future this became a more strategic route providing a link between Milton Keynes and the Thames Valley.

Option 2: Protect the rail line for future light rail/ultra light rail use

In the immediate future this scheme is not considered appropriate to provide a non-car solution to north-south connectivity issues. Instead the High Wycombe Regional Coachway is being developed because it currently provides better value for money. The route has however been highlighted in the TVMMS document as a longer term option “particularly in the context of road user charging and land use strategies that are geared specifically towards optimising public transport use” ².

Buckinghamshire County Council is keen to retain this option for future consideration once the DaSTS study has been completed, particularly as transport and environmental policy continues to evolve.

Option 3: Use the remaining rail bed for walking and cycling

The protection of a 5m “Green Corridor” that would deliver a high quality dedicated walking and cycling route that would connect with the Sustrans national cycle network. Its provision to a high standard similar to the Phoenix trail would encourage both local and longer distance cycle trips.

It is recognised that this recommendation is not ideal for this route because it does not provide a public transport link for longer distance north south journeys but it supports sustainable travel, health and economic objectives of the emerging LTP3 and would deliver worthwhile travel and health benefits, encouraging both cycling and walking in High Wycombe. Its route along the valley floor is ideal, as it runs through/adjacent to urban areas for almost all its length – close to schools, houses, work places, rail stations and town /district centres so could be used for both commuter and recreational cycling and is the most deliverable in the short term.

Option 4: To accept development on the disused rail bed

This is not an option that Buckinghamshire County Council would support. It would contradict advice from the TVMMS study and the County Council and District Council's aspirations to provide a largely off road, non-car route, between High Wycombe and Bourne End.

Recommendation:

Having considered the options further including the responses to consultation and further work to look at north-south connectivity, the emerging position is to safeguard the route as a transport corridor.

In accordance with Design Manual for Roads and Bridges TA90/05 Buckinghamshire County Council recommends protecting a **5m** line to provide a wide “green corridor”. This will achieve **a high quality, segregated traffic free walking and cycling route** with provision for the inclusion of a bridle way. This is the preferred reuse of the former track bed in the foreseeable future.

If in the longer term circumstances were to change and a strategic business case led by Central Government were to emerge a different mechanism for delivery may be employed depending on the line of route. Whilst the route will not be safeguarded for this purpose this approach would ensure that the potential to implement an alternative use in the longer term would remain.

² TVMMS Executive Summary, 2003