

M25 Alternatives - Paper One



There are alternatives to spending hundreds of millions of public money on expanding the M25. This paper looks at the South West sector. It is the first of a series published by Railway Development Society.

The M25 question

Nowhere is the debate about car use more acute than the argument over whether part of the M25 motorway should be widened to 14 lanes. Local residents are angry about the loss of more of the South East's precious countryside, covered in tarmac. The dangers from exhaust pollution such as asthma and climate change are nagging concerns. The Government's 1994 Sustainable Development policy is very clear about the problems of continued growth in car use. It says: 'If people continue to exercise their choices as they are at present, the resulting traffic growth would have unacceptable consequences'.

A major economic centre

The area to the west and southwest of London is a major economic zone in its own right. The centrepiece is Heathrow Airport. The positive economic influence of this giant extends well beyond the Home Counties. A third of all passenger trips between the European Union and the rest of the world pass through a UK airport. The activities of the Airport area provide 620,000 jobs with travel needs to match. This puts it alongside Birmingham or Manchester, ahead of Glasgow and double Newcastle's employment base.

An underdeveloped public transport system

Compared to other cities, Heathrow's public transport system is still underdeveloped. Vast expansion since 1946 has not been matched by equivalent public transport improvements. The level of public transport trips per inhabitant in Hillingdon (Heathrow's Borough) is the lowest in London.

Economic viability threatened

The lack of effective public transport is a threat not only to the local environment but also to the economic future of the Airport. Over the past decade the Heathrow area has been losing a thousand jobs a year, twice as many as Birmingham.

Concentrating on local transport needs

Most travel to the Heathrow area is from adjacent localities, much of it by airport employees. For example, 90% of M25 traffic travels less than 100 miles and 60% of vehicles joining the motorway leave it one or two junctions later. Solutions must concentrate on access from within a 20-25 mile radius.

Solutions - immediate

RDS suggests a comprehensive package of immediate public transport measures for the Heathrow area, designed to improve access from all directions:

1. PTA (passenger transport authority) covering Heathrow and the surrounding area, to plan and coordinate all public transport needs
2. Travelcards centred on Heathrow and complementing the existing London scheme.
3. High quality local and longer distance bus services:-
 - 24 hours 365 days services to reflect the operational hours of the Airport
 - high frequency services including off peak periods
 - faster peak time services using bus priority lanes on M25 and other roads
 - faster to locations on the south side by using the cargo tunnel
 - dedicated fast coach service to Gatwick (and other airports), pending introduction of equivalent rail services
 - dedicated or fast links to existing railheads at Hayes and Feltham
 - improved information and information systems
 - improved waiting and interchange facilities
 - most suitable vehicles for each type of service
4. Car park pricing to reflect the value of the land in an increasingly densely developed area.

Solutions - medium term

RDS is also suggesting, for the medium term, a combination of two relatively low cost rail schemes which will enhance further the bus improvements. These would be high frequency walk-on stopping services operating round the clock. Work must start now so they can be brought on stream as soon as practicable.

1. Paddington and Slough/Reading into Heathrow, with electrified Great Western main line, initially to Slough and Reading and ultimately beyond.
2. Clapham/Woking and Feltham into Heathrow using a new south link to Feltham. This scheme, known as SWELTRACK, already has the strong support of all the local authorities and Railtrack.

Once East / West CrossRail is operational it will provide direct rail access, or access with just one change of train, from central and east London.

Cost comparisons- M25 vs. public transport upgrading

Public sector costs are assessed as follows:

M25		
item	basis of estimate	cost £m
junctions 12-16 (4 junctions)	published government figures	231.0
junctions 10-12 (2 junctions)	extrapolation on a simple per junction basis since no government estimate published yet	115.5
total development cost of M25		346.5
Public Transport alternative		
item	basis of estimate	cost £m
signing/signalling of bus priority lanes	costings for similar schemes elsewhere	7.0-10.0
new buses	100@ £100,000	10.0
bus interchange waiting areas	3 terminals, 2 railheads @ £500,000	2.5
rail infrastructure works	firm indications from Railtrack are that this can be largely financed through the private sector; a public sector contribution is budgeted for possible socially necessary enhancements.	50.0
total development cost of public transport		69.5-72.5

Operational costs of public transport

Operational costs will be more than fully met from the farebox, for the following reasons:-

- usage is less subject to peaks than other centres due to round the clock operations
- high traffic volume
- relatively high income of workers allows economic fare levels
- premium fares achievable from airline users in return for high quality of service

Summary

The case for expansion of the M25 has not been made. This road will damage the environment and appears to cost the nearly five times as much as realistic public transport alternatives. RDS has therefore lodged an objection to the proposals and calls upon the government and transport operators to:-

- **Create a passenger transport authority for the Heathrow area**
- **Urgently expand the area bus network into a high quality round the clock system**
- **Plan and implement bus priority measures on the M25 and other roads at an early date**
- **Electrify the Great Western line to Slough and Reading as a high priority**
- **Initiate work on SWELTRACK immediately**