



Promoting Britain's
Railway
for Passengers
and Freight

Strategic Planner
Western Route Study Consultation
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8th January 2015

Dear Sir,

Response to Western Route Study

Railfuture is the UK's leading independent organisation campaigning for better services for passengers and freight. A voluntary organisation to which many rail user groups are affiliated, the organisation is independent both politically and commercially.

This Western route runs through the area served by Railfuture branches in Devon & Cornwall, Severnside, Thames Valley, Wales, Wessex and London & South East. The comments made are not confidential, and we would be happy for them to appear on your website and you are welcome to use them in discussion with funders and other stakeholders. We would be happy to enlarge on any of the points made above or to work with you to identify the best options for the future.

Scope and Objectives of the Study. Railfuture endorses the approach taken in the study of looking ahead for 30 years with a more detailed look at the period up to the end of CP6. We have pressed for many years for a long-term strategic view of future demand and investment, reflecting the long life of railway assets and the long timescale needed to effect change on the railway, and we welcome the more strategic approach of this study. We are impressed by the breadth of vision and the inclusive process, which allows a wide range of stakeholders to contribute, and our comments are offered in that positive spirit. We support most of the initiatives it contains, and our response is designed to refine some of these and to add some further proposals for consideration.

Making the Case for Rail. Rail is essential to the economy and prosperity of the area served, as was demonstrated by the loss of the line at Dawlish in February 2014 and the economic impact that had on the South West. It is essential for continuing strong growth in the Thames Valley, the Swindon/Bristol corridor and in Devon and Somerset in particular. It also has a key role to play in the development of a major city region covering Bristol/Cardiff and the strong growth expected in Severnside. "Rail is good for business" is the clear message and one that we believe could be stressed more strongly in the document, given its importance as a basis of securing funding to implement the many project proposals it contains. We will be using this message in our work with opinion formers in the coming months and strongly believe that adequate resources should be made available to implement the ambitious plans shown in the document over a thirty year period.

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Forecasts. We endorse the strong growth forecasts made and note that previous forecasts of demand have generally proved to be underestimates, with the consequent shortfall in capacity and overcrowding that we see today. Whilst freight demand to and from the south west is at a relatively low level, we would expect this to change over a 30 year period as more distributors turn to rail for both economic and environmental reasons. In particular, we would expect to see more container traffic using the route over this period, both from the ports and from inland distribution centres.

The maps showing intensity of use of various parts of the network are helpful in illustrating the forecast capacity issues to be tackled, but tend to understate the extent of the problem. The key morning train from Barnstaple, for example, is full and standing but the route is not shown as red. We agree with the Tarka Line response that three car formations will be needed to address this and the further growth expected.

Resilience. The principal requirement by people in the South West is that the railway should be reliable, and for the advertised service to be delivered continuously, whatever the weather or the requirement for maintenance and renewals. Resilience is therefore the principal priority and we recognise that this is reflected throughout the study. However, we remain concerned about the core section of the Great Western main line between Wootton Bassett and Reading for which the alternative route currently is the Berks & Hants line. Electrification of this route between Newbury and Bathampton may be a way of achieving this resilience, as replacement buses via the M4 with the numbers forecast are not going to be a realistic option.

Electrification. The present programme is welcome as are the discussions relating to infill schemes around Bristol to allow local services to benefit from electric trains as well as long distance services. However, we would see this as an important stage towards electrifying the other main lines by 2043, and particularly the main line to Plymouth and Penzance together with some of the branches. The case for early electrification of the Westbury route is referred to above. We believe that electrification is important in reducing operating costs, increasing capacity through the use of higher performance electric trains and for long term energy considerations, given the alternative fuel sources that can power electric trains and which gives rail a unique advantage over other modes. Ideally, planning should be on the basis that over time, the entire main line network and many of the branches, would be electrified.

We support the concept of running through trains to provide direct services for as many passengers as possible, noting that where this involves 'cross conurbation' services at cities like Bristol, Exeter and Oxford, this has the added benefit of minimising the impact on platform capacity. This also applies at Reading and Westbury. The proposed Cowley branch service, for example, should continue to the north of Oxford, either to Marylebone or to Handborough or Charlbury.

Rolling stock. We note the cascade programme proposed following electrification of Thames Valley services, but remain concerned that this will be inadequate to meet future demand and to replace the older trains in the fleet, particularly Pacers. We believe it will be necessary for new diesel trains to be built within this period, and this is confirmed by the passenger forecasts in the study, quite apart from the risk of slippage to the electrification programme.

Heathrow. Clearly, the western link to Heathrow offers a number of interesting opportunities for new direct services to the airport. We do believe that this should now be planned in conjunction with Heathrow Southern Access to ensure consistency and take advantage of any synergies that might exist. This in turn would open up further through running opportunities which might provide alternatives to those listed, and would be linked to the ideas outlined in the Wessex Study. Through services from Oxford and perhaps from the East/West rail link are also supported.

HS2. The proposed interchange at Old Oak Common will give passengers from the Thames Valley easy access to the new line, but for the south west, the route to the north and to Scotland will still be via

Bristol and Birmingham with strong competition from air. Whilst outside the direct scope of this study, we believe that the benefits of HS2 beyond Birmingham need to be shared with Cross Country services from the south west in the longer term, particularly following electrification between Birmingham and Bristol. Forward planning beyond CP6 needs to reflect this, and its potential to mitigate the economic disbenefit to the South West that otherwise results from HS2.

New Lines and Stations. We are delighted to see proposals for reopened lines serving Brentford and Cowley and would endorse these.

We also believe that at some stage during the study period it will be worth considering restoring the short rail link between Bourne End and High Wycombe to give the latter town much better access to the growing employment opportunities in the Thames Valley and to provide better connections with Heathrow.

Other possible links during this period would be to Witney which might be by light rail or tram/train, and for which passive provision should be considered at the Oxford end, perhaps using the space available to the west of the line between Oxford yard and Yarnton.

Similarly, proposed new stations at Ashton Gate, Corsham and Saltford are strongly supported, along with the new stations proposed for Devon Metro.

From the work done locally by our branches, we would also flag up for consideration possible new stations at:

- Wantage (Grove) capable of being served by the new electric services and where the proposed extension of four tracking would alleviate the capacity problems inherent in an additional stop on this busy route.
- Electrification with its additional services would also offer the opportunity to serve directly Royal Wootton Bassett (along with Corsham and Saltford) to provide better access to the railway and to take the pressure off car parking and station capacity at Swindon.
- However, we have more concerns about an additional station at Gloucester, near Barnwood as it is remote from the city centre and, depending on the pattern of service chosen, could risk worsening connections with services to and from South Wales compared with the present approach with reversal of through trains from the Bristol and Swindon direction. For such an important business and retail centre, we believe city centre access on foot is important.

Infrastructure enhancement. We note and agree with the analysis of the need for more capacity in certain key corridors and note that in a number of these cases (for example, between Filton Junction and Bristol East Depot to the Bristol Freightliner Depot), additional tracks were removed in the push to reduce surplus capacity in the 1970s and 1980s. This provides an opportunity, as the land and in some cases the structures are there to support the additional tracks now required. In the case of Bristol Parkway to Westerleigh Junction, it will clearly be expensive to increase the number of tracks given the substantial viaducts and high embankments that exist. It may be in this case that an alternative could be found in using the formation of the closed line between Bristol (East) and Yate via Staple Hill, which now forms part of the Bristol – Bath cycle route. Such a route might also open up commuting opportunities in East Bristol, although we recognise that it would have the drawback of not serving Bristol Parkway.

We agree with the approach adopted in the study of looking for enhancement opportunities where renewals are due, as this often provides an opportunity for improvement at relatively low cost. Apart from the locations identified, we would suggest consideration is given to improving the speed of diverging junctions at Standish, Abbottswood and Wolvercote when the opportunity arises.

We note and endorse the proposals to reduce the risk at level crossings and to eliminate a number of them. We believe, however, that this is a shared responsibility between the rail industry and highway

authorities, and indeed road users. We are concerned that the great efforts being made by Network Rail to reduce risks and eliminate problems are not matched by equivalent commitments from the other parties, and that the high cost of the level crossing programme may squeeze out other important investments which would encourage a shift from road to rail, with significantly higher safety benefits.

Route Section A. Crossrail and the electrification of the Great Western main line offer substantial improvements in terms of frequency and capacity, so we have relatively few comments on this section of the route. Ideally, outer suburban services from stations beyond Reading would continue to serve Twyford, Maidenhead and Slough to meet the levels of demand already existing between these stations together with that which will follow electrification. We recognise that capacity constraints on both the main and relief lines make this difficult but believe this needs to be addressed. The Greenford branch disbenefits significantly from the Crossrail scheme, and to compensate for this it is suggested that the service might be extended to West Ruislip to form a more useful set of connections from the High Wycombe line. Various options for extending Crossrail services west of Paddington are under consideration, including to the West Coast and Chiltern lines. Whilst these will be a matter for the West Midlands and Chiltern and the West Coast studies, the fluidity of the situation suggests that options should be kept open in this corridor, including using rebuilt stations at Greenford/West Ruislip as a terminating point for some Crossrail services that would otherwise terminate at Paddington.

Route Section B. Loss of through trains from Henley and Bourne End to London is also an unfortunate degradation of the service as a consequence of Crossrail. This would suggest the need to introduce the 2 tph referred to on both branches from the start of the Crossrail service rather than at a later date. It will also require a well-understood protocol in relation to maintaining branch connections, particularly in the evening when frequencies are lower and the level of supervision is less. We believe that a service of 2 tph could be achieved between Maidenhead and Marlow with relatively little alteration to the infrastructure at Bourne End.

Route Section C. Amongst the many innovative proposals we would particularly endorse the proposed new services to Paddington via Reading, Heathrow and Old Oak Common from Basingstoke and Southampton, and the Oxford – Gatwick trains as well. Also welcome are the extra Cross Country services between from the south coast to Manchester via EWR (see below for a discrepancy with the Wessex route study here). The need to lengthen the 4- and 5- car Voyager trains is endorsed, as well as the needs of growing freight demand on the busy route between Southampton, Basingstoke, Reading and further north.

Route Section E. Electrification to Newbury will unfortunately result in an enforced change for passengers from Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury. Special efforts will be needed in the interim to guarantee connections from these stations at Newbury and to encourage their continued use rather than railheading to Newbury. Electrification to Westbury (see above) will resolve this problem at a later date. We also believe that the inclusion of a Frome call in the semi fast London to Exeter service would be worth evaluating. Apart from the town (pop 27,000), this call would also provide a good link for passengers from Norton-Radstock (pop 21,000) and a viable alternative for these passengers to Bath with its limited car parking and congested road approach.

Route Section F. The good work done by the Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership on the Bristol to Weymouth route has increased passenger use on this line and is expected to continue to do so, particularly as towns along the route, such as Yeovil and Dorchester, continue to grow. We agree with the first step, of making the service hourly to Yeovil Pen Mill but believe that this should quickly be expanded to cover the whole line to Weymouth, as an hourly service at minimum is really required to encourage full use to be made of this route as an alternative to the A37. We recommend that this should be reflected in the infrastructure capacity planned between Yeovil Pen Mill and Weymouth and that the enhanced service should be delivered during CP6. At the same time, the opportunity should be taken to

consider how better connections with through trains could be provided at Yeovil Junction, including provision of a west to south chord line.

Route Section K. This section is perhaps the weakest in the whole study. We are disappointed that the ITSS for the Cardiff/Bristol/ Salisbury/ South Coast corridor remains at broadly the present level, given the level of overcrowding that is already endemic on the route. We accept that some of this could be overcome by running longer trains, but would prefer to see a specification of at least 2 tph on the core route section between Bristol and Fareham, with most trains running from beyond Bristol to Cardiff or Worcester/Great Malvern and on to Portsmouth, or Brighton. This would continue to meet the strong flows now established, for example between South Wales and Bath and between Filton Abbey Wood and stations in the Bath/Warminster corridor. Given that the route corridor is relatively slow, we should like to see some suggested interventions to reduce journey times, although we accept that the physical nature of the route and the number of sections the trains share with other services mean that this is no easy task. However, it is inconceivable that the present service level, capacity and journey times would meet the needs of passengers over the next 30 years in this busy corridor where the railway's importance is strengthened by the poor quality of the A36. The Sussex route study considers the possibility of journey time reductions on the route between Brighton and Bristol and clearly this is an area for concerted action between the Western, Wessex and Sussex routes and some clear leadership focussed on the route as a whole. We believe that this route has considerable potential and that further plans to meet this latent demand should be prepared in the context of this study.

Route Section L. On the other hand, we are delighted with the proposed frequency increase to 1tph on the Melksham route and its extension to form a Swindon to Salisbury service, and we are sure that the newly formed Trans Wilts Community Rail Partnership will be effective in attracting passengers to such an improved service. The opportunity should be taken to test whether it would work better as a Swindon to Southampton service, replacing the current Romsey/Southampton/ Salisbury loop service.

Route Section N. Whilst the enhanced pattern of cross country services between Bristol and Birmingham appears likely to meet a number of markets in this corridor, the connections between Gloucester and Bristol, between Worcester and Bristol and between Worcester and both Cheltenham Spa and Gloucester remain poor, given the size of the cities involved and congestion on the M5. It appears that this could be improved by the proposed extension of the Paddington to Cheltenham service to Worcester, providing this continues to call at Gloucester (this is not clear from the diagram). We believe that with the increase of cross country services between Bristol Parkway and Birmingham it should now be possible to restore at least 1 tph to Gloucester to improve connectivity beyond Birmingham, and preferably to the South West as well. We recognise the operational challenge given the constraints of the triangular layout at Gloucester with its three flat junctions.

Route Section O. In the South West, we are pleased to see the Devon Metro scheme properly reflected, together with the supporting increase in infrastructure capacity on the single line sections. We would support the move towards a standard pattern of long distance services to integrate with the clock face departures on local services in Devon and Cornwall. We believe that additional capacity may be required between Pinhoe and Honiton if the needs of the Waterloo service, Devon Metro and diverted HSTs are to be met.

The present pattern of train service has room for improvement to meet growing demand, but is already cleverly constructed to make good use of the resources available. For example, while the Paignton to Exeter corridor is normally served by a local Paignton to Exmouth service at hourly intervals, an additional HST is inserted to meet the morning peak demand. This makes use of a train running between Laira depot and Weston super Mare to pick up the regular half hourly Bristol to Paddington slot and is effective at moving around 250 commuters into Exeter each morning. Revision of services with a

self contained Devon metro service and electrification as far as Bristol will need to be flexible enough to provide for such high peaks in the future.

Route Sections O and P. The principal requirement for the rail network in the South West, given the experience of recent years, is resilience and having a dependable service with alternative routes is the first priority for the region. We commend the comprehensive studies put in hand following the loss of part of the sea wall at Dawlish and would put the protection of the existing route along the coast as a first priority given the number of large communities between Exeter and Newton Abbott and the high levels of use of local stations. Our priority beyond that would be for a restored route from Exeter to Plymouth via Okehampton, for the following reasons:

- We believe that a city the size of Plymouth, and of its strategic significance, should not depend on a single route to connect it to the national network. No other city in England of this size and importance is constrained in this way.
- Apart from the risk of damage to the coastal section of the line, the requirements of possessions for routine maintenance and renewals, and indeed for the major task of electrification, requires an alternative for Plymouth and for Cornwall. Reliance on buses for this task is no longer appropriate and, indeed, becomes increasingly difficult as the number of passengers using the railway increases.
- The Okehampton route could provide access to a wide area of West Devon and North Cornwall, which is today remote from the rail network. The existing station at Okehampton and the proposed one at Tavistock could be supplemented by one or more stations to enable interchange from the A30 and would at the same time take pressure of the stations and car parks at Exeter St David's and Tiverton Parkway.
- The line would also bring external benefits in terms of reducing road congestion in both Exeter and Plymouth by providing rail access, which currently does not exist in these corridors.
- It also provides a more favourable ruling gradient for freight trains than the current route via the South Devon banks.

In terms of priorities, we would put this above alternative routes bypassing Dawlish and the minor journey time reductions that these might bring. We accept that the justification for the Okehampton route involves strategic and economic development considerations that are not normally captured by existing conventional rail investment appraisal techniques, but believe that this is an opportunity that should not be missed.

In Cornwall, we welcome the resignalling proposals, which will allow the main line service frequency between Plymouth and Penzance to be increased to 2 tph, complementing the improved frequencies that have been introduced on the branches. The excellent work done by the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership will help to ensure that these services are well patronised from their introduction.

The second priority for the South West is some journey time reductions, given the distance of Devon and Cornwall from London, from Old Oak Common interchange and from Heathrow and Gatwick airports. Specifically, a London – Plymouth three-hour headline journey time should be an objective. The study appears to propose relatively few interventions that would help to meet such an objective and we would hope to see further improvements, whether through line speed improvements, Pendolino technology or electrification, or indeed a combination of these. The additional 1 tph semi fast from London to Exeter should allow stopping patterns to be changed as a step towards reducing journey times to Taunton and beyond.

Relation to Wessex Study. Looking at the detail of the report, we have noticed some discrepancies between this and the Wessex Route Study, and the significant variances are listed below with the intention of helping to reconcile them before the next stage of the process.

1. Electrification. The Wessex study identifies electrification to Exeter St David's via Salisbury as an addition to the electric spine, and this would include the Axminster – Exeter section of route covered in the Western route study and would be relevant in terms of diversion of Paddington services when the Berks & Hants line is electrified.
2. Boundary points: For cross boundary services, there is some overlap between the two studies on routes from Southcote Junction to Basingstoke, Warminster to Salisbury, Castle Cary to Dorchester and Yeovil Junction to Exmouth Junction. Discrepancies on the Reading – Basingstoke corridor are shown below, but it would be worth clarifying these overlaps in future iterations of the study.
3. Paddington service. The Wessex study refers to proposals to route 1 or 2 tph from Southampton or beyond to Heathrow, while the Western study refers to a Basingstoke to Heathrow and Paddington service. Clearly a service routed to Paddington via Heathrow would be preferable because of the additional interchange opportunities offered at Old Oak Common for HS2.
4. Freight. Between Basingstoke and Reading, 3 tph is proposed by the Wessex study and 4 to 5 by the Western one.
5. Cross Country. The Western route study refers to the current service to Newcastle, supplemented by an additional train per hour via East/West Rail to Manchester, while the Wessex studies refer to cross country trains to Manchester and Hull.

Corrections. We have also identified a small number of errors, understandable in a document of this size and complexity and list these below in order to ensure that any revised paper can be completely accurate.

- Page 34 The cement flow from Hope to Moorswater has ceased. There is a significant coal flow from Avonmouth to Aberthaw. There are some aggregates trains from Avonmouth as well.
- Page 95 Section 4.2 - Under Oxford North Junction, the Marylebone – Oxford services should be included.
- Page 155 – the list of trains per hour from Oxford should say 2 tph to Marylebone, not 1 tph.

Yours faithfully,

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