

Railfuture Wessex Branch Submission
for Isle of Wight Restoring Your Railway Feasibility Study

We have pleasure in submitting our comments, observations and ideas in response to the above.

Railfuture is Britain's leading independent voluntary organisation campaigning for better rail services for passengers and freight. Railfuture has 20,000 affiliated and individual members and is not affiliated to or funded by train companies, political parties or trade unions.

Railfuture Wessex Branch essentially covers Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight. Many of our members live on the Island.

1 Making the Case for Rail

If the Government is serious about meeting its carbon reduction targets, it follows that greater use should be made of railway transport. Rail vehicles require less energy per passenger-kilometre than road-based alternatives due to less air resistance, considerably less rolling resistance from steel-wheel-on-steel-rail, minimal holdups and the level nature of railway trackbeds.

Rail transport is inherently easier to electrify than road transport. Where the railway is electrified there is no need for the vehicles to carry an on-board power source. On a partly-electrified rail network, the on-board power source (e.g. batteries) would be comparatively lightweight.

Some loss of patronage on bus services which parallel the routes of the extended railway is inevitable. However public transport usage overall can be expected to grow with improvements to the rail network on the Island, and there would be new opportunities for connecting bus services.

The proposed line extensions will do much to promote car-free tourism on the Island by roughly doubling the number of destinations that can be reached by train. New stations and journey opportunities on the Island will support housing and commercial developments, therefore the proposed line extensions could be partly funded through land value capture. Access to employment, shops and health facilities will be greatly improved through an enhanced railway network.

2 Service Pattern

We advocate a service pattern throughout most of the day comprising at least: (i) a train every 30 minutes between Ryde Pierhead and Ventnor, and (ii) a train every 30 minutes between Ryde Pierhead and Newport. This could reduce to hourly at quieter times such as evenings. This reflects the level of service following the 2021 upgrade.

A major benefit from extending the railway would be quicker journey times between Ryde – Ventnor and Ryde – Newport. Throughout most of the day, it should be possible to make end-to-end journeys without changing to achieve a time advantage over the current situation, where part of the journey has to be by road transport, usually bus. This implies running Ryde – Ventnor and Ryde – Newport as through services.

3 The Ventnor Extension

Closure of the line between Shanklin and Ventnor in the 1960s is to be regretted and the resulting decline in the fortunes of Ventnor as a resort is well documented. Reinstatement of the line to Ventnor would restore the balance of journey opportunities for the east side of the Island and provide greater revenues for the railway overall.

It is fortunate that most of the former trackbed southwards from Shanklin falls under the ownership of the Isle of Wight Council. This should greatly simplify land acquisitions and keep costs to a minimum.

The main road (A3055) from Shanklin to Ventnor is rather hilly and passes across geologically unstable terrain which has seen land-slipage and other faults. The Victorian engineers when setting out the railway route between Sandown and Ventnor very wisely took this on board and chose a route through more stable terrain via Wroxall.

The alignment at Wroxall has been partly developed – a timber yard occupies the old station site and housing has been built. A route deviation would be required in order to reach the next obstacle, the 1300 yard-long St. Boniface tunnel. Although the tunnel is in reasonable condition, Southern Water have routed water pipes through it.

At Ventnor, the tunnel opens out into the site of Ventnor station which is now an industrial estate. However, previous studies have indicated that a single-platform station could be built but there would probably have to be the loss of some of the existing buildings.

4 The Newport Extension

Past studies about extending Island Line services to Newport have indicated that the Isle of Wight Steam Railway were not averse to considering the development of a (diesel) passenger service over their route. This would be in addition to operating their steam-hauled services. Railfuture Wessex Branch wish to see the Steam Railway prosper and we are very much aware of the tourist value to the Island.

Smallbrook Junction needs to be improved: (i) because track access to/from the existing Island Line would be required and (ii) to support the planned 900+ housing development at Pennyfeathers adjacent to Smallbrook Junction. The station itself needs improving in order to provide a rail service for the new residents as well as to allow easy interchange with the Steam Railway.

The trackbed to the outskirts of Newport is reasonably intact, but there has been some development encroachment over the years. The main problem is deciding where the extension would terminate. There have been previous consultations/studies, some of which favour on-street running through Newport town centre and on to Cowes, which could serve the Isle of Wight College, St Mary's Hospital and the industrial/business estates. Part of the alignment to Cowes is intact and used as a cycleway; this is the subject of, perhaps, another feasibility study.

5 Rolling Stock

From mid 2021, the train fleet on the Island Line will comprise five 2-car Class 484 sets. We estimate that, to achieve the service level stated above on an extended railway, the train fleet would need to be augmented by an additional three 2-car sets. Ideally, this would be achieved simply by purchasing additional Class 484 units. On a rail network of this size, all trains should be able to run anywhere and be of a standard design for ease of maintenance.

If parts of the network are non-electrified, all vehicles in the fleet would need to have on-board self propulsion, ideally battery power. We understand that the Class 484 units can be converted for dual-mode operation.

If parts of the route are to be operated in tramway mode (line of sight), relevant cab modifications would be needed. The manufacturer, Vivarail, should be consulted as to the practicalities of such modifications.

A further solution would be to specify a new build of rolling stock to operate on the extended Island Line network, perhaps based on tram-train designs from elsewhere in the UK or Europe. The current Class 484 units could be redeployed elsewhere on the third-rail network in the South or on Merseyside: the Lymington branch in Hampshire would be a suitable candidate, for example.

6 Complimentary Line Improvements

There are a number of ways in which the existing section of the Island Line could attract more patronage in order to boost the business case for the proposed line extensions.

For example, Ryde St John's Road could be developed as a 'park and ride' station to reduce car journeys on the Island, especially to the Pierhead. An increase in parking capacity could be achieved by building a multi-story car park, as being provided at some South West Railway stations on the mainland.

Another example would be to improve the interchange at Ryde Esplanade between Island Line and HoverTravel services. Conventionally, a footbridge could be provided linking the station to the south side, but a more cost-effective approach would be to build out the disused platform so that train doors can open on both sides, allowing direct access to either the town or to the HoverTravel terminal.

7 Conclusion

We fully support extending the Island Line to both Ventnor and Newport in view of the huge benefits that would result from a more comprehensive railway network on the Isle of Wight.

*Robin Attwood, Railfuture Wessex Branch
2 Langford Villas, 24 High Street, Brading, IoW, PO36 0DG*