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please reply to:

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21 September 2018

Dear Sir or Madam

Draft Somerset Passenger Transport Strategy 2018-26

I am pleased to present Railfuture's response to the above Consultation. We have commented on the Rail Strategy section of the Consultation document, using the same references as in that document.

I hope this response is helpful. If anything requires clarification, please let me know.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Bray

Nigel Bray
Railfuture
Secretary, Severnside Branch

Rail Strategy

6.1 Background

Actually Somerset has five passenger lines on the national rail system. Regular services have been operating between Yeovil Pen Mill and Yeovil Junction stations since December 2015, largely as an extension of South Western Railway services calling also at Castle Cary, Bruton and Frome. They are mostly confined to Monday to Friday afternoons and evenings but an enhanced service would link Yeovil's two railways more effectively. Introduction of permissive working at Yeovil Junction, allowing trains to combine in the same platform, would maximise the benefits of this connecting line.

6.1.1 Bristol-Exeter-Penzance

Although Bridgwater has some direct services to London Paddington via Bristol, a town of its size and industrial importance deserves better than just an hourly service of mostly local trains. The Railfuture response to the recent Cross Country consultation suggested that at least some of the Cross Country services linking Devon with the Midlands and North should call at Bridgwater.

In view of significant planned housing development in the Highbridge area, we suggest an hourly frequency of GWR services to both Highbridge and Bridgwater by extending some trains from Weston-super-Mare to Taunton.

Taunton needs a later train from Exeter to cater for theatre-goers and tourists. The current last services are 21.49 Monday to Friday and 20.45 Saturday.

6.1.2 Paddington-Reading-Taunton-Penzance via Berks & Hants line.

Castle Cary is the railhead for much of central Somerset but the irregular pattern of stops there both on this route and Bristol-Weymouth make integration with bus services difficult. We would like to see the Exeter-Paddington semi-fast services become hourly, serving Castle Cary, Frome (on at least some journeys) and Westbury. This would be in addition to faster InterCity services linking the far South West with London; these could run non-stop between Taunton and Reading in most cases. We agree that Castle Cary needs a service timed to suit normal office hours in Taunton, which could also serve a reopened station at Langport.

6.1.3 Waterloo-Exeter

We are pleased that the County Council participates in the West of England Line Strategy Group and SELCA. The main issue for this route is infrastructure capacity, eg more loops or double track sections west of Salisbury to improve services and increase the resilience of the line west of Yeovil Junction as a diversionary route.

6.1.4 Bristol-Weymouth

We agree with all the points made in the Consultation document. The route needs an hourly service in order to shake off its branch line image. There is definitely a need for trains timed for normal office hours in Yeovil. Together with more frequent main line calls at Castle Cary, an hourly Bristol-Weymouth service would greatly improve connectivity between Taunton and South Dorset via Dorchester.

6.1.8 Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP).

This way of starting up rail enhancements could provide a means to get rail enhancements off the ground. For instance, a regular service linking Taunton with the West Somerset Railway would seem to meet at least two of the required criteria, namely keeping people and goods moving smoothly and safely; and offering new and better journey opportunities in the future.

6.1.9 Partnership Plan for the West of England

Provided the scope of this Plan is not confined to the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), we would support it in principle. We would also expect the aspirations of Train Operating Companies (TOCs) and Network Rail to be closely aligned so that there is one voice from the rail industry responding to stakeholders.

6.2.1 A Resilient Network

We strongly support the principles outlined in this part of the document and would like improvements to the diversionary route between Exeter and Castle Cary to be a priority, not just to cope with the effects of extreme weather but for any other disruption on the main lines via Taunton. During the 2014 floods, the main line between Castle Cary and Taunton was closed for only one day, although some local roads were closed for much longer. Had a station been open at Langport at that time it would have been of immense value in mitigating the isolation of communities in the Somerset levels.

We agree that the creation of freight and logistic hubs as proposed for Bridgwater depends on a resilient network. Other locations in the county which have rail sidings are Taunton Fairwater Yard and Yeovil Pen Mill.

We support the proposed development study for improving the resilience of the Exeter-Yeovil-Castle Cary route and the infrastructure improvements listed.

6.2.3 Increased Capacity and Comfort

We support the Peninsula Rail Task Force (PRTF) proposals listed on page 31, including additional signalling sections between Castle Cary and Cogload Junction; and track redoubling and passing loops between Salisbury and Yeovil. Line speed between Castle Cary and Yeovil Pen Mill needs to be increased from 75 mph to 90 mph because Class 158 and Turbo sets are 90 mph trains. GWR InterCity services diverted via Castle Cary and Yeovil are higher speed trains.

Whilst we agree that additional train sets are needed to provide a better frequency on the Bristol-Weymouth route, that may be achievable through the cascade of Turbo sets from the London area.

6.2.4 Rail Station Improvements

Whilst we welcome improvements planned for Taunton and Bridgwater stations, interchange with buses needs to be better at both locations. At Taunton there needs to be space for buses to turn so that more routes (eg to /from Chard and Ilminster) can be extended from the bus station. A proposed multi-storey car park alongside this part of the station would make this difficult to achieve and ought to be resited. In view of the proposal to relocate the main entrance to Taunton station to the down (Platform 2) side, consideration should be given to reinstating the former east-facing bay platform on that side for trains terminating at Taunton. This would avoid the long walk from bay Platform 6 via the subway and along Platform 2 to the down side exit.

Bridgwater station needs buses not only to stop in the station forecourt but a clear, well designed map of local bus routes to be displayed at the station.

We agree that Castle Cary station needs more parking spaces but it also needs a more clearly designated bus stop with weather protection. Some of the demand for parking at Castle Cary could be reduced by opening a station at Langport.

6.2.5 New Stations and lines

We welcome the proposal to reopen the freight line to the Huntspill Enterprise Zone.

We strongly support the proposed reopening of Wellington station and the Council's request that the new GW Franchise should develop a business case for the station. Some of the Exeter-Paddington semi-fasts could call there, as could the longer-distance GWR regional services such as Cardiff-Paignton.

We are pleased that the Council supports the proposal for a station in the Langport area and agree that the site at Langport East is a higher priority than Somerton. Whilst there may be pathing constraints with existing signalling, it is worth noting that if the Exeter-Paddington semi-fasts were to add Langport to their existing stops between Taunton and Reading, they would still be making fewer stops than the Exeter-Waterloo trains do between Exeter and Salisbury.

We support reopening of Chard Junction station because Chard is the largest settlement on or near the Exeter-Salisbury route without a station. We welcome the Council's request to Network Rail for turnaround facilities at Chard Junction rather than Axminster because this may be more cost-effective. An alternative solution would be extension of Exeter-Axminster local services to Yeovil Pen Mill (see 6.1 above).

We strongly support aspirations for regular non-heritage services over the West Somerset Railway and hope the Council can expedite moves to trial a summer connecting service between Taunton and Bishops Lydeard in 2019 as a first step.

We welcome Mendip District Council's investigation of the feasibility of serving Shepton Mallet by a Parkway station via the currently freight-only line from Witham. We would suggest that the trackbed beyond the proposed parkway to Wells is safeguarded for possible reopening at a later date.



Although not mentioned in the document, the Frome-Radstock line is partly within Somerset. The line is currently open for freight between Frome North Junction and Hapsford, where the branch to Whatley Quarry diverges from the disused line to Radstock. We understand that North Somerset Railway is in contact with Bath & North East Somerset Council and Norton Radstock Regeneration Company to progress reopening from Radstock, initially as a heritage line.

Railfuture Severnside
September 2018.