

BRISTOL'S RAILWAYS & ROAD CONGESTION

AN OUTLINE PROSPECTUS FOR EXPANDING LOCAL RAIL USE

BOUNDARIES

This paper concerns *local rail facilities* within the *greater Bristol travel to work area*, the limits of which are defined (on existing radial routes) as follows: Bath, Weston-s-Mare, Patchway, and Yate. There are of course many commuters to Bristol from places outside this area, but the distribution of lesser stations, and the location of local authority boundaries, suggests these points as practical.

BACKGROUND

As regards medium & long-distance travel, Bristol is well served by its railways; but for local trips, it is, by a substantial margin, *the worst off large city in the UK*. The reasons for this are many and various, but irrelevant; so concentration is on the key issue, which is *getting better value from rail*.

Currently, a mere 1.6% of Bristol area commuters use rail, but despite the very inadequate services, this figure has grown at a rate beyond predictions, and market share in prime corridors is 10-15%. *This clearly shows that improved train services can be a viable alternative, to unlimited car use.*

NETWORK AMBITION

Half-hourly services at all stations on all routes. Why half-hourly? Quarter-hourly would be better, but *impracticable* with the existing infrastructure: and hourly is *insufficiently attractive* to drivers. *This frequency is vitally necessary:* firstly, for trips between directly connected points; & secondly, for the *value multiplying 'network effect'*, which comes from enabling *interchange between routes*. Achieving such modest (as compared with what has been done in many other cities!) aims, ought to be both easy and economic. *Succeeding paragraphs outline a 4-stage process directed to that end.*

1: MORE STOPS - A completely free gain. Many *local* (ie non-*InterCity*) trains omit stops at local stations, at peak times, in the Bristol area. Patchway is the worst case of this, but others (eg: Keynsham/Oldfield Park/Parson St/Filton) are, to varying degrees, similarly neglected. In many/most/perhaps all cases, these omissions are avoidable losses, without valid counterbalancing gains. *Having all local trains observe all stops (on a route basis), at least during peak hours, would cost nothing, so it can & should be a prime aim.* Note that this would rarely involve adding more than 2 stops to any individual service (ie: *Cardiffs - Patchway/Filton, Yates - Lawrence Hill/Stapleton Rd, Baths - Keynsham/Oldfield Park, Westons - Parson St*), so all *schedule impacts would be minimal.*

2: MORE TRAINS - A low cost addition. Only 1 extra unit is needed to double the Avonmouth service from hrly to 1/2-hrly. With a 2nd additional unit, 1/2-hrly to Yate might be possible (although this may need two). Coupled with the existing 2 local trains/hr on the Bath/Cardiff/Weston routes, this would put us well on the way towards a 1/2-hour network. *Extra costs would be under £1M pa.*

3: MORE STATIONS - A longer term issue. Closed stations could be re-opened and new ones added. Examples: [inner Bristol] Ashley Hill, Horfield, St Annes; [outside the city] Coalpit Heath, Saltford, Winterbourne; [new] Newbridge (A4). *Single £Ms/site - spread them over many years?*

4: MORE ROUTES - A still longer term matter. The Portishead line is the most obvious first choice for the restoration of passenger services. Next might come Avonmouth/Henbury/Parkway.

We may never get to 3, let alone 4, but we ought to be able to have 1, and possibly 2. But if there is no agitation for action, nothing gets done. What to do? See overleaf >

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MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

That first thing that needs to be understood, about the state of our local train services, is that the problem is a political one. Writing to train operating companies about policy matters is pointless. They are merely agents for the Dept for Transport. All the important issues are decided by the DfT.

There being few votes (& few photo opportunities!) in transport, politicians take minimal interest in the subject. If you want to see train services improved, you must press them to pursue the issue. The statement overleaf has been compiled to make this quick and easy for you to do. Just send this (or a photocopy of it) to: a) your local councillor, and b) your MP; with a note saying you want to see the prospectus adopted as policy, by the Joint Local Transport Plan consortium (your 4 local councils: ie Bristol City, S Gloucs, BANES, and N Somerset). [If you do not know councillors/MPs names, ask at your local library.] If you send photocopies, only the prospectus side need go. If you are very keen to stir this issue up, circulate more photocopies, to as many other people as you can, and invite them to do the same. NB. Non-rail users' support is as relevant as that of rail users. We are all affected by road congestion, and everyone gains from improved public transport. The more copies that reach local politicians, the better the chances of success. As for MPs, they should be told that you would like to see them form an all-party regional group, to press for action in this (essentially non-party political) matter. Tell politicians what to do, so that we reach a situation in which the DfT is (unlike now) sensibly directed, for that body to then give its contractors (ie the train operating companies) appropriate orders. In this case, the order should be: Develop plans for better local rail services in/around Bristol, starting with the zero investment improvement option. (This means 1 overleaf. Increased running cost for longer trains may arise, but not capital outlay.)

SOME BACKGROUND POINTS - MAINLY ON WHY LOCAL RAIL IS IN SUCH A MESS

Privatisation! Privatisation wrecked rail finances (the aim was to cut costs, but they were multiply increased, and the system became [for a time] almost unmanageable). At the behest of HM Treasury, DfT priorities are: a) cost cutting, & b) performance (ie embarrassing statistics avoidance). Note no mention of seeking relevance to any transport problems! TOCs manage contracts that are DfT specified, in great detail. Their prime aim is, to make the most money with the least effort in the least time. What interests them is profitable long-distance traffic, not unprofitable local business. Originally, Wessex Trains was created to focus on local services (they never did here, but that is history). Their operations were absorbed by First Great Western in April 2006. We have had 6 months of FGW, and so far, as regards local services, their tenure has been a disaster. Short trains vice longer ones, leading to chronic overcrowding, sometimes with passengers being left behind at un-staffed stations. This is bad enough, but worse comes with the next timetable. From Dec 06, overall fewer local trains will run, and some will be minus well-used calls, at stations such as Keynsham and Severn Tunnel Junction. This is madness. People will not be got out of cars, by fewer stops in fewer and shorter trains. We need to go forwards, not backwards. But an unholy DfT/FGW alliance obstructs progress. In the first instance, no great sums of money are needed. The most basic requirements are twofold: firstly, a little intelligent flexibility in timetabling matters (ie more local stops); & secondly, sufficient units to run trains capable of accommodating current traffic volumes. MPs and councillors should be shouting - loudly & publicly - at central government, to get both, but all are silent. The late British Rail was a public body, and it could be directed to function in the public interest. Because privatisation was such a disastrous failure, the DfT has taken ever tighter control over what happens on the railways. The private operators have minimal say in policy matters. Politicians set the parameters, but they are clearly clueless. If the public fail to tell them what is needed, they will never act.

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