

Reinstating the Honeybourne Rail Line

A brief note

Background

This project gets raised every 2-3 years. A very detailed study was carried out by consultant Halcrow Fox in 1996 (capital cost about £10 million, plus an annual operating loss of £515,000), involving a level crossing at the Evesham Road roundabout, a new track fitted alongside the first section of Seven Meadows Road, followed by a rail track running along the Greenway.

An organisation called the Rail Transport Group produced another report in 2007 arguing for re-instatement of the Honeybourne link, but presented little hard evidence to support the scheme. Also in 2007, the promoters of the proposed Eco Town (St Modwen and The Bird Group), drafted terms of reference for consultants who were asked to develop a business case for re-instating the Honeybourne rail link. I commented on the initial ToR – outlining the sort of questions the consultants would have to answer to support the business case – and the study did not go ahead.

In 2008, John Deegan (WCC's former Head of Strategy & Economic Development), made a presentation to the Town Management Partnership proposing re-instatement of the Honeybourne link using a low emission tram/train. The vehicle would operate as a train along the re-instated rail right-of-way along the Greenway, but would operate like a regular bus along the public highway to Stratford station once it reached the Greenway car park. In the context of the proposed Eco Town, he envisaged that the tram/train service could operate all the way from Oxford to Birmingham (rail to the Greenway car park, road to Stratford station, and rail from Stratford station to Birmingham). Such vehicles are common in Germany. His proposal was well received, since the tram/train is relatively low cost and does not create the level crossing problems featured in the Halcrow Fox solution.

The Shakespeare Line Promotion Group have now put forward a new proposal for consideration by WCC. This differs somewhat from the Halcrow Fox proposal, in that they suggest re-instating the old rail line in a cutting and taking it under both Evesham Road roundabout and Wetherby Way in a tunnel. Capital costs are roughly estimated at £20-30 million, but no figures are presented for operating costs and hence the required annual subsidy. Two longitudinal sections are presented showing the dive-under bridges at Evesham Place and Wetherby Way.

Review of Above Proposals

The Halcrow Fox scheme raised at least four major questions: (i) the public were not happy with the level crossing at the Evesham Road roundabout; (ii) there were concerns about the environmental impact of the alignment along the first section of Seven Meadows Road; (iii) without a positive business case there would be no grants to finance capital costs; and (iv) since any rail services would have to be let as negative concessions, WCC would have to cover the £515,000 annual operating deficit.

The Rail Transport Group added nothing to the above concerns. It simply argued in favour of re-instatement, stating that it “should be pursued, at a time of increasing growth in rail travel, support for sustainable transport and concern over climate change.” It also claimed incorrectly that the Town Management Partnership were in favour of the scheme.

The John Deegan scheme, on the other hand, is well thought out and may be worth further investigation.

The most recent Shakespeare Line Promotion Group proposal leaves many questions unanswered. Some of the main ones are listed below.

Shakespeare Line Promotion Group Proposals

- (i) The two longitudinal sections presented are vague. The distance from track bed to road surface for the two dive-under bridges is shown as 5.0 and 5.3 metres respectively. That is not enough. The dive-under bridges would need a top slab of about 30 cm and space also has to be provided for the road surface, ballast, sleepers, rails, etc. The height and width of the dive under bridge must likewise conform to Network Rail’s minimum permissible specifications. It is more likely that the slab base to road surface dimension would be closer to 7 metres.
- (ii) With the base slab at 7.0 metres below road level, there would need to be cuttings. Indeed, to drop down 7.0 metres with a reasonable gradient, the cutting would have to start soon after the track left Stratford station and would continue well into the Greenway. Several cross sections need to be provided to clearly indicate how the track bed, cutting and required safety fencing would affect the route on its approach to Evesham Road roundabout and the section of cutting between there and Wetherby Way.
- (iii) It is possible that the width of the cut, plus safety fences near Evesham Road roundabout might take up most – if not all – of the 15 meter space available between the properties abutting the old rail right-of-way, leaving no room for a footpath or cycle track.
- (iv) Re-instatement of the rail line would sever two well established rights-of-way and a footpath across Seven Meadows Road. The rights of way could be protected by erecting two DDA compliant footbridges. However, this would inevitably lead to complaints from residents (overlooking would reduce their privacy) and footpath users would be inconvenienced by having to cross a bridge.
- (v) Since the track bed will be in a relatively deep cutting, both dive-under bridges will have to be protected by suitable safety walls/fences. These need to be shown on the plans and also in cross section.
- (iv) The Greenway cross section (p. 9) is also vague. It needs to show the track bed (ballast plus sleepers and rails), required minimum clearances and the weldmesh security fencing along both sides of the track (plus its height).

Alongside that, it should then show the footway and cycle track, bearing in mind that pedestrians and cyclists currently walk/cycle close to the centre of the old rail formation, because there are no safety fences. The cross section needs to show how their current route would be displaced towards the (unguarded and often steep) edge of the old rail formation.

- (vii) It is probably also desirable to show a cross section through Stannel's Bridge.
- (viii) The report suggests that capital costs may be about £20-30 million. Who is going to pay for this? Without a positive business case, there will be no grant finance and, if WCC wanted to go ahead with the scheme, they would have to borrow. Borrowing attracts an annual finance charge of about 8% (interest, plus repayments). On a £20-30 million project, this would amount to £1.6-2.4 million per year. Where would these funds come from?
- (ix) The report presents no estimates of operating costs, or of potential traffic volumes. The Halcrow Fox report goes into some detail on these matters. However, since then population has increased and a planned 700 home development has been proposed at Long Marston. Traffic volumes should therefore be higher than those prepared by Halcrow Fox. On the other hand, Halcrow Fox based their revenue calculations on adult fares and reduced total income by 30% to allow for reduced fares. They may have underestimated the impact of reduced fares, since 70% of Stratford station users travel on reduced fares and many (if not most) are students attending Stratford College and the High School. The above two effects tend to cancel each other out, so that the Halcrow Fox estimate of an annual operating deficit of £515,000 still seems reasonable. Indeed, with cuttings to maintain, operating costs are likely to be higher and so is the deficit. However, the question here relates to who will cover the annual deficit. Under a negative concession there is no alternative but for central government or WCC to pay for this.
- (x) There seems little doubt that the dive-under bridge solution is more disruptive and more costly. Unless more evidence can be provided – and the above questions answered – it cannot be a serious candidate for re-instatement of the Honeybourne link.

Conclusion

The only scheme that seems worth pursuing in relation to the Honeybourne link is the John Deegan solution. This deserves to be investigated in more detail. Para 7.5.27 of the LTP3 could therefore make reference to undertaking a desk study (i.e., a back of the envelope feasibility study) of the tram/train option to establish whether a more detailed study might be justified.