

Report of the Cabinet Member for Economy, Growth & Cabinet Liaison for Exeter

I have been asked to report, by Councillor Westlake, on the following

.....on the Peninsula rail working group review of alternative routes in Devon with particular emphasis on the northern route via Okehampton.

I would like to draw Councillor Westlake to the recent Place Scrutiny Committee where a full report on Rail Infrastructure was considered, including possible future rail routes and resilience of the rail infrastructure.

Introduction

The PRTF, which comprises Devon County Council, Cornwall Council, Plymouth City Council, Torbay Council and Somerset County Council has recently consulted upon its 20 year plan for the railway, which is due to be submitted to Government in July 2016.

As the consultation ended on 27 May, this report contains a short summary of the work undertaken to date.

Background

The Government asked the Peninsula Rail Task Force to work with the Department of Transport, Network Rail, train operators, our communities, businesses and rail users to develop a plan for better rail resilience and connectivity for the South West peninsula. This report provides a 20 Year investment plan that will provide the railway network that is needed for the SW Peninsula economy to function effectively in the 21st century.

Good transport infrastructure and better connectivity is vital to our economy, enabling our widespread rural communities and urban centres across the peninsula to access markets, services, employment, leisure and people across the UK, Europe and beyond.

Poor resilience and connectivity have been shown to be prime constraints on the South West Peninsula economy. The events of two successive winters, culminating in the flooding of the Somerset Levels and the breach at Dawlish, confirmed that the railway needs improvement across many aspects before it can provide the much needed reliability and connectivity.

The PRTF has worked with the rail industry and partners to progress a number of workstreams and studies that seek to deliver a three point plan for the railway that:

- Enhances resilience
- Improves connectivity and faster journey time
- Provides more capacity, quality and comfort

Enhanced Resilience

Record levels of rainfall throughout November and December 2012 and during the winter of 2013/14 led to widespread flooding and exposed the fragility of the Great Western Mainline, impacting hugely on the economy, with Cornwall and large parts of Devon cut off completely.

The priority is to safeguard the existing route for train services so that it may be as resilient as possible. The PRTF has nevertheless also explored options for additional railway routes into the peninsula, which not only offers improved resilience but also the potential for greater capacity and additional freight paths (large rail freight contracts tend to be based on the availability of a diversionary route).

East of Exeter / Somerset Levels Resilience

Network Rail are currently delivering the remainder of a £31.3m programme of flood mitigation works to significantly improve the resilience at a number of locations including Cowley Bridge, Hele and Bradninch and across the Somerset levels. These should be completed during Control Period 5. In addition, Somerset Rivers Authority / Environment Agency have been delivering improvements since the flooding of 2012 and 2013/14, which will also help reduce the impact of flooding and duration of disruption in the future.

Seawall and Cliffs Resilience

Network Rail have undertaken an extensive study investigating a long list of interventions along the Great Western mainline between the Exe Estuary and Newton Abbot and will be holding a public consultation later this year on the shortlisted options.

Following this consultation, there will be a desire to take forward development work of the proposals to help influence CP6 industry plans.

Exeter to Castle Cary Diversionary Route

Following the publication of the Western Route Study, Network Rail have undertaken further work to test a range of interventions to deliver the minimum infrastructure needed to run the West of England services and fit an additional hourly Devon Metro service around the infrastructure.

Dawlish Additional Line & Northern Route (Exeter to Plymouth via Okehampton)

In both cases, the benefit cost ratio for opening the lines is very low. Devon County Council nonetheless continues to secure land and investigate funding options to reopen the line between Plymouth and Tavistock. The new community led OkeRail Forum is working with stakeholders to restore a regular all year service between Okehampton and Exeter and is confident that improvements can be delivered from 2017. Devon County Council is a key contributor to the Forum and is clear that it wants to see direct services from Okehampton to Exeter restored for the benefit of the sub-region. This would see two out of three stages of a Northern route delivered during the plan timeframe.

Improved Connectivity

Improving the key connectivity flows for the South West peninsula is vital to align connectivity with the economic needs of the Peninsula, and will provide the catalyst for economic transformation:

- Within the Peninsula
- With Bristol and beyond to the rest of the country
- With London and the South East
- with e.g. key UK airports, HS2, Crossrail
- for Hinkley Point, given its size and logistics/ labour needs.

Journey Time Improvements

The new rolling stock (AT300), which are to be introduced from 2018 onwards will enhance services across the south west, delivering faster journey times and 26% more capacity on its trains.

To maximise the return on the AT300's investment, GWR commissioned Network Rail in March 2016 to look at infrastructure improvements which could further improve headline journey times for services connecting London, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall beyond 2018.

The final 'Speed to the West' GRIP 2 report has been delayed and will be published in due course.

Exeter to Waterloo

There is scope to also reduce journey times between Exeter and London Waterloo, which is the second strategic route into the peninsula. Infrastructure improvements would allow both increased frequency and line speed improvements, with benefits to journey times between Salisbury, Yeovil and Exeter, extra capacity and frequencies west of Salisbury and East of Exeter and better connectivity with lines serving the South Coast.

More Capacity, Comfort and Quality

High patronage growth, across all peninsula lines, has driven the need for frequency and capacity enhancements (reflected in the 2018 Great Western franchise enhancements). Network Rail predictions indicate the need for further line capacity/ infrastructure enhancements if future growth is not to be choked off. The investment in the new AT300 trains for Paddington services is one important step in improving services; but will need investment in line speed improvements to maximise the economic return on this investment.

Next steps

The scale of a number of these interventions would require substantial investment to progress the design work, let alone the future construction costs. The PRTF work is ongoing with the final report, which will include more details on the sequencing of interventions.

Councillor Andrew Leadbetter

**Cabinet Member for Economy, Growth
& Cabinet Liaison for Exeter**