

Heart of Wessex Line

The Case for Service Improvement

Summary

The Heart of Wessex Line (HoWL) links the major centres of Weymouth, Yeovil, Trowbridge, Bath and Bristol. Despite this, its timetable is irregular and infrequent, having changed little in the last three decades. It is, for example, unsuited to commuting into Yeovil from either the north or south. Yet there are no significant obstacles to making a major improvement to the timetable - and even without taking into account the wider economic, social and environmental benefits that would accrue the net cost would be neutral. The new 'Great Western' train operator franchise in 2013 is the ideal opportunity to deliver this enhancement.

The problem:

- The HoWL timetable has remained relatively unchanged for decades, the few changes there have been reflecting external resourcing issues.
- This is in stark contrast to most comparable routes, where there have been significant increases in service frequency and moving to clockface timings.
- Despite being the major town on the route (between Westbury and Weymouth) Yeovil is poorly served. Despite employing 33,000 people, including many from Bristol, Bath and Weymouth, it has no services suitable for commuters.
- Day trips on Sundays outside of Summer are effectively impossible, due to the late start in operations. This goes against changes in modern leisure demands and the national aspiration for a '7 day railway'.
- Whilst current usage has grown faster than average for the region (the credit is in no small part due to the HoW Community Rail Partnership), it is nonetheless lower than that of similar towns and routes where the timetable has improved.

The solution:

- Direct modelling plus a consideration of spin-off benefits indicates that a significant timetable upgrade can be achieved at little or no extra subsidy requirement, and without the need for capital investment in infrastructure.
- This will, however, require extra trainset and traincrew resourcing; but the timetables tested (see next page) are theoretically valid and robust.
- The proposed timetable upgrade brings wider benefits through meeting 4 of the 5 'transport goals' stated by Government for Local Transport Plans, including carbon reduction per rail passenger journey in the medium term.
- To achieve this upgrade it is essential that it is tied into the Greater Western refranchising process, so as to achieve resource balancing and optimisation.

The options:

Timetable options for evaluation had to meet the following enhancement criteria:

- A choice of services for commuters to Bristol, Bath, Yeovil and Weymouth (through services by preference).
- A choice of services for taking leisure day trips to these key places from both ends of the line (including on Sundays year round).
- A 'clockface' departure pattern, hourly at peak times and two-hourly off-peak.

Four options were developed. Of the four, option A **Optimisation** and option C **Attachments** require no additional subsidy, and so should be taken forward for detailed consideration. Their description, pros and cons can be summarised as:

- **Optimisation.** This represents the best use of train set resources to meet the varying needs. One extra train set is required, producing 8 extra round trips on weekdays (doubling the current total). A balance is made by providing the basic hourly pattern south of Westbury whilst also maintaining through running to and from Bristol at peak times.
- **Attachments.** This joins most Weymouth services with existing Portsmouth to Cardiff services at Westbury. 2 extra train sets are required, and 8 extra round trips produced. It has the highest cost and highest risk, but provides the greatest increase in revenue, and also generates extra seating capacity between Bristol and Cardiff.

The timetable for Yeovil Pen Mill weekday departures is shown below:

