



Department for
Transport

The Future of the Abbey Line

Consultation Report

September 2010

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Executive summary

- 1.** The Department for Transport (DfT) and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) want to increase the frequency of services on the route between Watford Junction and St Albans Abbey in Hertfordshire (the 'Abbey Line') and the two organisations have worked together to develop a scheme to enable this to happen. In January 2010 we launched a consultation exercise with the public and industry to set out our proposals and see if they were supported.¹
- 2.** We proposed to convert the Abbey Line to light rail, which means that the line will run tram vehicles rather than traditional heavy rail vehicles. We think this will bring significant benefits to the travelling public; in particular a more frequent service and a timetable that is easier to remember.
- 3.** The new services will use the same railway track as the existing service. It will need different vehicles, which will have to be procured, and potentially some modifications to the infrastructure and power supply.
- 4.** We also proposed that responsibility for the line should transfer to HCC, so it would become locally operated and accountable. The consultation document included a draft Statutory Instrument which would enable this to happen, as well as exempting the Abbey Line from some heavy railway requirements which would no longer be appropriate if it were converted to light rail.
- 5.** This report sets out the outcome of the consultation exercise. We received almost 200 responses, which were overwhelmingly in favour of our proposals.
- 6.** As well as a strong level of support for the principle of converting the Abbey Line to light rail, many people who responded offered suggestions of things they would like to see included as part of the scheme, or asked questions about things which they were not clear about. Many of these points have been considered and will be reflected in the specification for the service. Some people suggested ways in which the Abbey Line could be extended further, such as by on-street

¹ The Abbey Line consultation document, which includes a draft Statutory instrument, is available on the DfT website at <http://www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/closed/2010-05>

running into St Albans or Watford. This is outside the scope of the current project, but will be retained for future consideration.

- 7.** As well as giving the results of the consultation this report attempts to answer the questions raised and set out the next steps for the Project.

1. Introduction

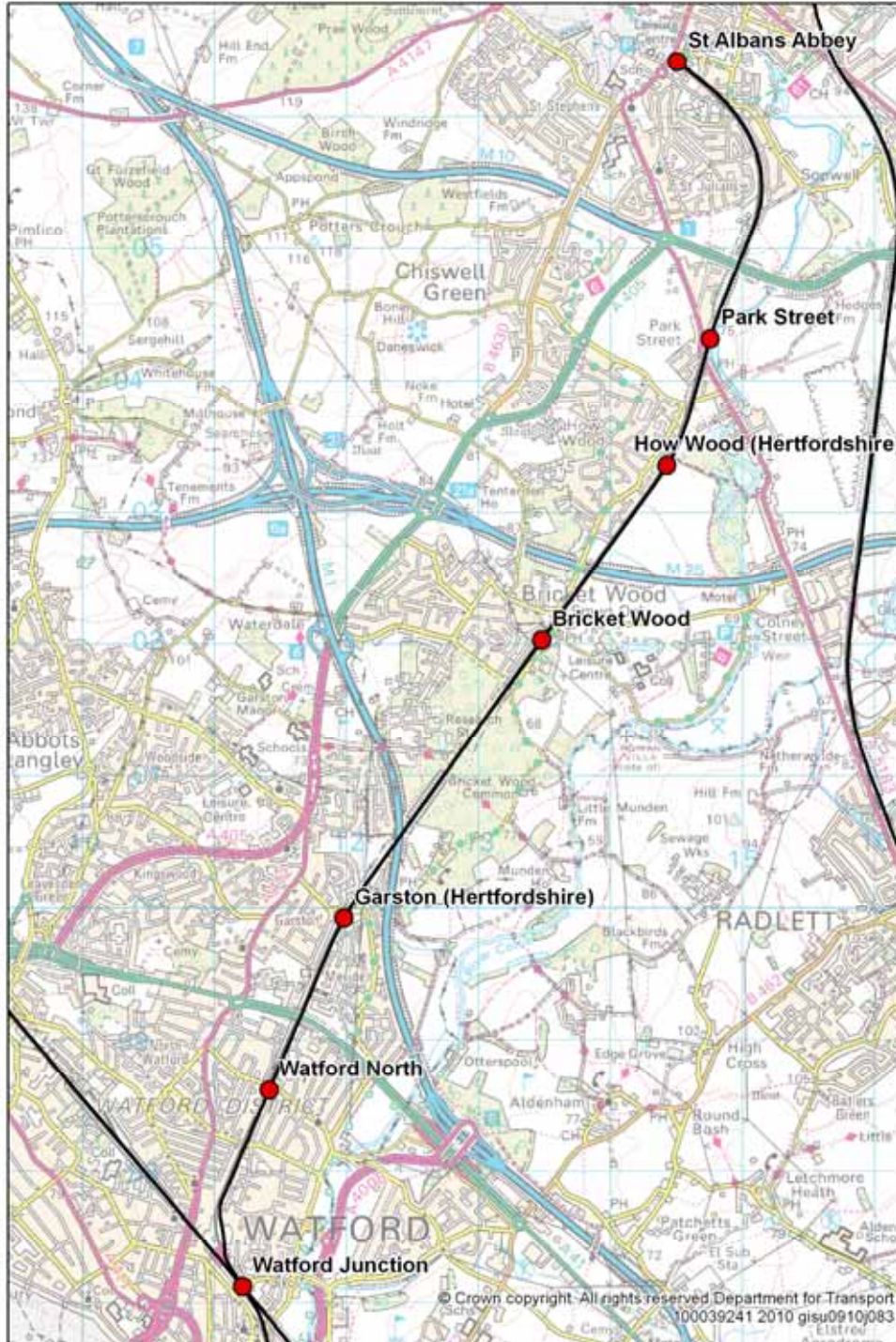
- 1.1** The Department for Transport (DfT) and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have proposed increasing the frequency of services on the route between Watford Junction and St Albans Abbey in Hertfordshire (the 'Abbey Line').
- 1.2** We have proposed converting the Abbey Line to run light rail vehicles such as trams, rather than traditional heavy rail vehicles. Light rail should be cheaper than heavy rail, and the saving would be put back into the Abbey Line to enable a more frequent service to operate. The intention is that this new and more frequent tram service would be provided for broadly the same cost as the existing heavy rail service. We have also proposed that responsibility for the line and services should transfer to HCC. We believe that this could bring significant benefits to the travelling public.
- 1.3** DfT and HCC consulted on these proposals at the start of 2010. This document was jointly produced and reports on the outcome of those consultations.

Existing Services

- 1.4** The current train service consists of 21 return journeys per day between St Albans Abbey Station and Watford Junction from Monday to Saturday and 15 journeys on Sundays. Monday to Saturday, the trains generally run every 45 minutes. On Sundays the frequency is approximately hourly.
- 1.5** Currently, only one train runs on the line at any one time as there is no facility to allow trains to pass on the route.
- 1.6** With the exception of Watford Junction, none of the stations on the line are staffed. A ticket issuing machine has been installed at the upgraded St Albans Abbey Station. However, tickets generally need to be bought on the train from a member of staff.
- 1.7** Around 450,000 passengers used the service in 2009

- 1.8** Network Rail is responsible for the existing railway infrastructure on the Abbey line. Under our proposals Network Rail will remain the freeholder for the land but will lease the Abbey Line to HCC.
- 1.9** DfT is the franchising Authority responsible for letting the London Midland franchise which includes the current Abbey Line services. Under our proposals the role of letting the contract to the operator would be managed by HCC.

Abbey Line



Background to the consultation

- 1.10** 'The Future of the Abbey Line' consultation document was published on 4 January 2010 and the consultation closed on 31 March 2010. It was available electronically on the DfT website at www.dft.gov.uk and via Hertfordshire County Council at www.hertsdirect.org. Paper copies of the consultation document were also available and sent to those who requested them. The consultation launch was covered in the local newspapers and was advertised with posters along the Abbey line route, and via leaflets available at stations and in local libraries and council buildings.
- 1.11** A small number of responses were received after the formal close of the consultation. However, they have all been taken account of and included in this report.

2. The Response to the Consultation

Summary of Responses received

2.1 The table below summarises the responses received to the consultation.

Abbey Line Project: Consultation Responses		
Summary		
	number	percentage
Total number of responses received	172	100.00%
Responses from declared users of the line	76	44.19%
Number of responses to each question in the consultation		
Question 1. Do you support the proposals?	154	89.53%
Question 2. Comments on the Statutory Instrument and exemption from other licensing conditions	46	26.74%
Question 3. Are there any other issues you would like to raise?		
Of which, the number of people who raised specific points:		
rolling stock	63	
infrastructure/ depots	84	
Services	80	
Ticketing	46	
Proposals for additional enhancements or extensions (eg higher frequency, on-street running)	46	
The possibility of later running services	25	
Allow cycles on board new rolling stock	22	
Noise	12	
Other issues	102	
Results		
Number of responses to Question 1 in favour of proposals	114	66.28%
Number opposed	34	19.77%
Number unclear/ no opinion expressed	24	13.95%
Number of users in favour	52	68.42%
Number of users opposed	22	28.95%

Response to specific points raised

- 2.2** We have looked very carefully at all of the responses received to the consultation document.

Question 1

- 2.3** Question 1 asked respondents whether they supported our proposals for the Abbey Line. 154 people responded to this question, of which 114 respondents stated that they were in favour, some 66% of the total. 34 respondents (20% of the total) were not in favour. 24 respondents (14%) did not answer this question, or the response was unclear.
- 2.4** This pattern of responses in favour was broadly reflected amongst declared users of the line. Of those people who indicated in their response that they were users of the line 52 were in favour (66%) and 22 (29%) were opposed.

Question 2

- 2.5** Question 2 asked specifically for comments about the draft Statutory Instrument (SI), which was attached to the consultation document, and about proposals to exempt the line from various license conditions.
- 2.6** There were 46 responses which commented on this question.
- 2.7** The main issues raised in responses were:

Closure processes

- 2.8** Further information was requested about the 'alternative closure regime' which would be put in place by the draft SI. The question was also asked about whether these proposals would make it easier to close the line completely in the future, perhaps as a result of local political or budgetary pressures. In a similar vein, others asked what would happen should the tram scheme fail.

Response

- 2.9** Both DfT and HCC are committed to continuing to run passenger services on the Abbey Line. However, because we propose to change the services from heavy rail to tram we need to first stop the franchised rail services and then to put in place an appropriate mechanism for the line once it is operating with the new rolling stock.

2.10 The draft SI applies the alternative closure procedure which is set out in section 25 of the Railways Act 2005. The alternative closure procedure means that the line cannot be closed outright by either HCC or the operator: it would first need to be proposed by the operator to the national authority. The national authority (in this case the Secretary of State for Transport) must then hold a public consultation to consider any objections if it supported a proposal from the operator to close the line. The operator could not discontinue the services unless the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) had issued a “closure ratification notice” as set out in section 32 of that Act. The ORR would only ratify a closure if it is satisfied that the criteria set out in the relevant part of the closures guidance are met. Guidance can be found at:

<http://www.rail-reg.gov.uk/upload/pdf/closures-procedures-dec06.pdf>
http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/files/Closures-Guidance_0.pdf

2.11 However, there is no statutory duty on the national authority to secure the continued provision of the services in the event that the ORR does not ratify the closure.

2.12 It should be noted that, in the same way as for similar networks operating in other parts of the country, HCC will have the ability to step in if appropriate to continue running services in the event of the operator running into difficulties.

HCC Funding and contract management

2.13 The questions were asked as to what protection HCC would have from central government budget reductions, and whether HCC would be able to divert funding from the Abbey Line to other areas. It was also asked whether HCC was competent to manage a contract of this nature.

Response

2.14 DfT and HCC intend to agree a ‘Grant Determination’ which will set out clearly the amount of funding that HCC can expect to receive from DfT for each year of the contract period. This is intended to give HCC sufficient comfort over long term funding so that it can enter into an up to 22.5 year contract with the Operator.

2.15 It should also give potential Operators comfort that HCC has a guaranteed long term stream of funding available to support delivery of the Abbey Line scheme.

2.16 The grant from DfT to HCC will be ring fenced so it can only be spent on matters relating to the Abbey Line. The amount of the grant will be

determined in due course, but will be equivalent to the saving which DfT makes from taking the Abbey Line out of franchised rail services.

- 2.17** HCC will let a contract with an operator for up to 22.5 years to cover the design, build, maintenance and operation of services on the Abbey Line. HCC already successfully manages multi-million pound contracts in the transport sector and beyond. The contract with the Abbey Line operator should include the necessary mechanisms to ensure that HCC can effectively manage the Abbey Line operator and that local people can be confident in the ongoing operation of the route. DfT is working with HCC to offer the benefits of its experience with rail franchises, both in terms of the design of the specification and for the ongoing management of the operator.
- 2.18** The Abbey Line service would continue to operate as a commercial service, as it does now, although HCC would hold the contract with the operator instead of DfT. The intention is to use only funding that is currently spent on the Abbey Line to provide the new service. There is no intention to use council tax to run the services on the Abbey Line.

Safety Regime

- 2.19** A number of respondents asked whether the safety regime for operation of the Abbey Line would be the same as for heavy rail.

Response

- 2.20** If it is converted to light rail operation using vehicles such as trams, the Abbey Line will still need to be operated in a safe way, as it is today. The Office of Rail Regulation will continue to be the safety regulator for the Abbey Line.
- 2.21** By their nature, light rail vehicles such as trams are different from trains, which is why the new regime will be different in some ways from that currently in place. However, the exact standards which will apply will depend on the rolling stock used. For example, trams are typically lighter than heavy rail, have faster acceleration and sharper braking. Therefore they will need to comply with different, more appropriate, safety standards.
- 2.22** As part of their bids for the Abbey Line concession, potential operators will be required to set out their plans for operating the Abbey Line safely. This will be an important part of the assessment of all bidders. Bidders who fail to provide a detailed plan for safe operation of the line, supported by evidence, will not be able to proceed.

- 2.23** Once appointed, the operator will be required to put in place a safety management system which will be regulated by the Office of Rail Regulation, just as is the case for the heavy rail service today.

Railway Group Standards

- 2.24** A number of respondents commented that in order to succeed the tram service would need to be exempted from Railway Group Standards², as these were costly and not appropriate for a light rail system.

Response

- 2.25** A benefit of converting the Abbey Line to tram operation is to take advantage of standards which are appropriate for light rail vehicles such as trams, rather than the Rail Group Standards which are suitable for trains. The lower cost which this involves is one of the reasons why we believe that it should be possible to run a more frequent service on the Abbey Line for the same cost as the current heavy rail service. One of the advantages of trams is their ability to stop more quickly than trains and thus operate with simpler signalling arrangements than for trains. For example, to construct a passing place³ and associated signalling using existing heavy rail technology would be very expensive. A passing loop similar to those which are used on existing tram networks in the UK ought to be substantially cheaper without any change to safety levels.

Question 3

- 2.26** Question 3 of the Consultation Document asked an open question of whether there were any other issues which we should consider. We received many suggestions for how the Abbey line could be improved further. These related to both our proposals for the Abbey Line, and for the longer term future of the route.
- 2.27** Many of these suggestions followed similar lines so where possible and sensible to do so we have grouped comments together.
- 2.28** 50 respondents made suggestions of things they thought should be included in the scheme.

² Railway Group Standards (RGS) are the detailed set of mandatory requirements which govern the operation of the UK's rail network. Railway Group Standards are produced in accordance with the railway group standards code. Their purpose is to facilitate the management and operation of the shared system that is the mainline railway.

³ A passing place or passing loop is simply an additional piece of track where two trams or trains can pass each other. The Abbey Line is a single track so a passing place is needed to allow more than one vehicle to run on the line.

Proposals arising from the consultation

Services

More frequent service

2.29 The most popular suggestion for improving the proposal for the Abbey Line was for more frequent services. It was generally felt by respondents that a 30 minute frequency for services was a significant improvement on the current 45 minute service. However, it was felt that a 20 or 15 minute frequency would be even better.

Response

2.30 We agree that a more frequent service would be desirable, particularly in peak periods, and this is one of the main reasons for us doing this project. The key factor affecting the frequency of services will be the provision of a passing place or places on the Abbey Line. A 30 minute service assumes one passing place will be in place. Additional passing places would increase the cost of the scheme. However, we believe that it may be possible to deliver a 20 minute frequency with a single passing place.

2.31 When we issue an Invitation To Tender (ITT), we propose to set a 30 minute frequency as the minimum requirement. However, we also propose to ask bidders for options to deliver higher frequency service if it can be delivered within the available budget.

Doubling up of trams in the peak to increase capacity

2.32 A number of respondents asked about the capacity of the trams, and wondered how this would compare to the current space on the existing Class 321 trains operated by London Midland on the line. Several respondents suggested that one option was to 'double up' the trams in the peak period.

Response

2.33 The tender will be output based, and will not therefore specify in detail the design of the rolling stock. However, it will ask operators to indicate which type of vehicle will be used. The tender will also indicate the current number of passengers who currently use the line. In a commercial operation, the operator will want to maximise revenue by ensuring that there is sufficient capacity to carry all of the passengers expected to use the line: how to provide a suitable level of capacity for

users of the Abbey Line is an issue which bidders will need to consider in responding to the Invitation To Tender. It is affected by a number of factors, including the frequency of the services and the type of rolling stock used.

Later running services

2.34 There was support for running services later into the evening on the Abbey Line and this was mentioned as a reason why some people do not use the line at present, or, given the opportunity, would like to use it more in the future. However, it was also noted that later running services could also cause noise into the evening as well.

Response

2.35 Bidders will be required to set out their proposed service timetables as part of their bid. HCC aims to manage the line in the best way to meet the needs of local users and residents, and will assess options for later running services as part of the Invitation To Tender and in the assessment of bidders.

Integrated timetables

2.36 It was suggested that the timetable of the Abbey Line tram should be linked to local bus services and trains from Watford Junction. It was felt that this would help make the local transport network more integrated.

Response

2.37 We will consider this further. The increase in frequency should make it easier for passengers to connect their journeys and avoid long waits, and we will require bidders to consider how they can integrate with other local transport services when they submit their proposals, recognising that buses outside London are deregulated.

Fares and ticketing

2.38 51 comments were received about fares and ticketing. A number of different points were raised on this subject, in particular:

- Strong support for the retention of through ticketing.

- Concern about fare levels once responsibility for the line transfers to HCC, and that once the line was controlled locally fares might increase faster than for the rest of the rail network.
- Suggestions that the new service should fit in with concessionary fare arrangements, with reduced fares or free travel suggested for students, children and the retired.
- Support for smart ticketing being introduced on the line, such as the Oyster Card which is used on the London public transport network.

2.39 It was observed by a number of those responding to the consultation that fare collection on the line at present was not as good as it could be, and that a large number of ticketless journeys were being made, and therefore better revenue protection was essential if the scheme was to be a success.

Response

2.40 We would expect to retain through ticketing for Abbey Line passengers after it has been converted. The way in which this will be delivered will be determined in the tendering process, because we expect the operator to take the revenue risk.

2.41 Under our proposals, HCC will regulate some fares on the Abbey Line, balancing sustaining the commercial operation with the needs of passengers. This will give a greater degree of local control for fare setting than exists at the moment. Fares for routes beyond the Abbey Line (such as into London) will continue to be regulated under the current arrangements. The precise plans for fares and ticketing along the line are being developed and will be set out in due course, once an operator has been selected. The comments and suggestions received will help to shape these plans.

Cycle provision

2.42 It was suggested that the new vehicles should include provision to carry cycles. This should include full size cycles and not just fold up models. However, it was also commented that that cycles take up considerable space, particularly on busy services.

Response

2.43 Operators will be invited to set out how they will address this issue as part of the tender process. As is the case on heavy rail now, the outcome is highly dependent on the capacity of the rolling stock and the number of passengers who wish to use it.

Stations

2.44 A number of suggestions were made to improve stations along the route. These related to the ambience of the stations;

- Installation of real-time information for passengers at stations
- Enabling direct access to Sainsbury's at St Albans Abbey Station
- Improved disabled access at stations
- More CCTV to help to deter anti-social behaviour
- More ticket machines on platforms

Response

2.45 All of these suggestions would involve extra capital expenditure and as such may be outside the immediate scope of this scheme. However, some improvements, such as additional ticket machines and train time information, are already being delivered by London Midland and HCC. We have noted the suggestions made and will take them into account as the scheme develops.

Rolling stock

2.46 A number of comments were made about rolling stock, and questions asked about what they would look like, how many seats they would have and how noisy they would be. The main comments raised were about:

- Reliability of trams compared to existing trains, and the ability of a tram system to cope if, for example, a vehicle broke down.
- The quality of the trams, including seating capacity and cleanliness.
- Accessibility and requirements under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).
- Noise of trams- will they be quieter than trains?

Response

2.47 The type and quantity of rolling stock will be addressed by bidders as part of the procurement. Operators will be required to deliver a reliable service, and enough vehicles to cope with problems. We will expect bidders to deliver appropriate solutions that are fit for purpose, with enough vehicles to run a reliable and resilient service and meet normal maintenance needs. It will be in operators' interests to maximise the number of passengers, so they will want to make the service as attractive and comfortable as possible.

2.48 We have noted that a number of respondents, particularly those who live near to the Abbey Line asked about the noise of trams. In particular, if a more frequent service or later running would mean more noise for those with houses backing onto the route.

2.49 This is an important issue. We expect that the rolling stock would be no noisier, and possibly quieter, than the current train service. However, this will ultimately depend on exactly what rolling stock is used. The operator will be asked to provide a considerate neighbour policy at the time of the bid, and will be held to this policy. As we have said elsewhere in this document, we will expect the new tram operator to be a considerate neighbour to people who live, work or travel on the Abbey Line.

Services

2.50 What if trains to Watford Junction are delayed and arrive after the last Abbey Line service has gone?

Response

2.51 The arrangements if this eventuality should occur will be subject to discussions between operators.

Infrastructure

2.52 What will happen to the level-crossing?

Response

2.53 The level crossing will remain in its current location. The way in which the crossing operates may change in the future to reflect the change from heavy rail to light rail.

Extensions

2.54 A popular area for comment related to ways in which the Abbey Line service could be extended further. A number of suggestions were made of which the most popular were:

- Additional stops along the route;
- An extension of the tram to St Albans City station;
- An extension to Watford town centre or Hatfield; and
- On-street running in St Albans or Watford.

Response

- 2.55** The scope of our project for the Abbey Line is fixed. We are aiming to replace the existing heavy rail service with a more frequent light rail service within the existing funding, but not to extend the route or add additional stations at this time.
- 2.56** However, it may be possible to extend the new service in the future, either in terms of frequency or by extending the route itself such as through on-street running. This would, of course, depend on the success of the line, local support, and be subject to feasibility and any necessary funding being available. The operator could also make a business case on its own terms to suggest changes.

Construction

- 2.57** The question was asked about what will happen during the construction period, and when the line switches from heavy rail to light rail.

Response

- 2.58** This will be addressed with bidders through the procurement of the operator. HCC would expect the operator to act as a considerate neighbour in respect of any noise and disruption during construction.
- 2.59** We would expect disruption to passengers and local people to be kept to a minimum during construction. It may, for example, be necessary to run a temporary bus replacement service when the line changes from heavy rail to tram, but we would expect this to be kept to the shortest period possible.

Alternatives to tram or light rail conversion

- 2.60** As noted above, there were objections to the proposals to convert the Abbey Line to light rail operation, arguing that it should remain as a heavy rail route. Two main points were raised in support of this:

Using heavy rail to run a more frequent service

2.61 The goal of increasing the frequency of services on the line was widely supported, but it was suggested that this should happen using heavy rail.

Response

2.62 DfT, Network Rail and HCC have looked at the possibility of increasing frequency using conventional heavy rail technology. This would still involve the provision of a passing loop, and an additional train. However, the cost of doing so using heavy rail technology was such that this would never be affordable, both in terms of capital cost (i.e. the cost of the passing loop, signalling and other infrastructure) and in terms of running costs (i.e. the costs of the extra train).

2.63 As a result it became clear that only a more innovative alternative, such as the light rail proposal, would deliver increased services and be affordable. It should be noted that if this does not proceed, then the alternative is for the Abbey Line to remain as it is with the current service patterns.

Running through-trains to Euston

2.64 It was suggested that it would be helpful if trains (or trams) could run from St Albans Abbey all the way to London Euston. Several people objected to the tram proposal because they felt that this would mean that through-running would not be possible in the future.

Response

2.65 It is not feasible to run through trains from the Abbey Line to London Euston. Through services do not operate at the moment and we do not believe that there is any likelihood of through services being feasible in the future, whether or not the Abbey Line is converted. This is for a number of reasons, but in particular because there is no capacity on the West Coast Mainline to enable through trains to run. Because of the rate at which passenger demand is growing on the West Coast route, this will continue to be the case even in the event of new high speed lines opening.

2.66 Even if this were not the case, substantial modifications on the West Coast track and signalling at Watford Junction would also be needed to enable a through train to operate from the Abbey Line. It is difficult to envisage that it could ever be more economic to run a through train than for passengers to simply change at Watford Junction.

Using the Abbey Line for Freight

2.67 It was commented that the Abbey Line might be used in the future for rail freight, which may not be possible if the line is converted to light rail operation.

Response

2.68 We have noted that the line is not currently used at all for freight, and the same restrictions which would prevent through trains also apply here. However, if significant demand to use the line for freight were found, then the position would have to be reviewed. Currently, there is no day-time capacity to fit in freight traffic on the line – and so additional infrastructure would be necessary for freight to be carried during the day.

2.69 Following conversion to light rail operation, the fundamental position would not change – additional infrastructure would be required to enable freight onto the line. It could be argued that the position would be worse in some respects as rolling stock such as trams could not run at the same time as freight services and the passing place(s) would not be engineered to take heavy trains. This is currently a hypothetical issue as there is not obvious potential for freight on the line at present.

Community rail

2.70 What will be the future role of the Community Rail Partnership for the Abbey Line?

Response

2.71 The Community Rail Partnership has fostered links between the railway and the wider community and brought about a number of benefits for passengers and local residents. Whilst not being entirely prescriptive over the arrangements for the CRP in future, we would expect the operator to build on existing arrangements to maintain good links with the community and to support the Government's wider "Big Society" agenda.

3. Next Steps

- 3.1** We would like to thank everyone who took the time to respond to the consultation. We have reflected the comments received and our response to them in this document. These comments will help shape the Invitation To Tender that we will issue to bidders asking them to present their proposals to how the service could be delivered. They will feed into the preparation by HCC for a Transport and Works Act Order, and the work by DfT to finalise the Statutory Instrument.
- 3.2** There is still a lot of work to do to make this project a success, and the next steps are:

2010

- Announcement of preferred bidders following the OJEU Notice and pre qualification questionnaire
- Preparation by HCC of a draft Transport and Works Act Order
- Update (following this consultation) of the Statutory Instrument, with Impact Assessment.

2011

- Completion of the Procurement process and signing of a contract with an operator.
- Completion of other agreements and leases necessary to enable the service to operate
- Start of any infrastructure works (eg passing place and depot)

2012 (anticipated date)

- End of heavy rail services on the Abbey Line
- Start of light rail services on the Line.

- 3.3** If you would like to be kept informed about developments with this project you may wish to subscribe to the Abbey Line e mail news letter. You can do this by e mailing lightrail@hertscc.gov.uk with the word 'subscribe' in the subject line.