



## **RailAble response to HERT public engagement**

RailAble researches an improved rail network and is not based in Hertfordshire. In responding to the HERT public engagement 18 November 2021 - 28 January 2022, it would not be appropriate to respond to many of the survey questions, hence this free-format document.

In responding to the HERT public engagement, the focus is on the Oxford to Cambridge arc.

Part One : east west rail

HERT is the result of plans made over a number of years on the assumption that east west rail in Hertfordshire is not feasible. Our research calls this assumption in to question. Our primary proposal in Hertfordshire is a St Albans to Hatfield conventional rail corridor. The basis for this is the assessment of business case. Not only does the business case seem to be good but also seems to be significantly stronger than for a Luton to Stevenage rail corridor. Given that Hertfordshire rail strategy includes the aspiration of a Luton to Stevenage rail corridor, we would strongly urge Hertfordshire County Council to consider abandoning the aspiration of a Luton to Stevenage rail corridor, with a St Albans to Hatfield rail corridor in its place. Our published research suggests this would be an appropriate decision.

The implications of a St Albans to Hatfield conventional rail corridor are considerable, including for HERT. Firstly, the Abbey line would feed into it. For this and other reasons, it is inappropriate to propose closure of the Abbey line and conversion to a busway. Secondly, a St Albans to Hatfield rail corridor would provide east west rail travel in Hertfordshire with the potential subsequently for this to be of a comprehensive nature, including for example Hemel Hempstead to Harlow and Rickmansworth or Watford to Harlow. In these circumstances it is appropriate to consider bus or coach services on an interim basis. Of course longer term east west bus or coach services could compete with rail services, there being nothing new about this. The 724 Green Line coach has been operating for at least 40 years and was running in the 1970's. The 724 service runs from Watford to St Albans Abbey, St Peter's Street, St Albans City and onwards to Harlow. Therefore the 724 competes with the Abbey line but does not offer a basis for proposing closure of the Abbey line.

The future of the Abbey line has been called into question over some 30 years. We need to re-assess this, since the facts have changed. Noteworthy is the publication of Passenger Rail Study Phase Two by Network Rail for England's Economic Heartland.

## Part Two : bus and coach services

Let us turn our attention to the core proposal of HERT, being frequent services between Hemel Hempstead and Harlow and between Watford and Harlow. Any professional assessment of future transport provision would include knowledge of existing provision for which the council's own website [intalink.org.uk](http://intalink.org.uk) is useful. Immediately we detect a problem. Buses provide flexibility : where there is demand for travel between two towns, a direct service would generally be provided. However HERT assumes that a leg of east west journeys will be made by use of HERT with bus interchanges en route. When the M11 motorway was opened, road signs were changed to encourage journeys via the motorway - we still recall it. By analogy, the same applies to HERT. Bus passengers will be encouraged to interchange with HERT. The effect is a reduction in the provision of direct door-to-door journey opportunities. This in turn will give buses in Hertfordshire a poor reputation and potentially lead to an increase in car usage.

Whatever HERT is, it is not a professional-quality proposal. We would strongly urge Hertfordshire County Council to take the entire project back to the drawing board, particularly noting, as we have indicated (i) the core assumption of east west rail in Hertfordshire being not feasible is demonstrably incorrect; (ii) HERT suffers from an inappropriate, if not warped, architecture by the assumption of fixed frequent travel on fixed routes, having lost the flexibility that buses offer.

If we compare conventional rail, buses and HERT, it is clear that HERT is the worst of all worlds.

From [intalink.org.uk](http://intalink.org.uk), we note (i) service 302 provides a service from Hemel Hempstead via St Albans Abbey station, St Peter's Street and St Albans City station; (ii) green line 724 provides a service from Watford via St Albans Abbey station, St Peter's Street and St Albans City station to Harlow. Complementing these, in terms of travel between Hemel Hempstead and Harlow, a trial bus or coach service could operate, bypassing St Albans on the A414. We will refer to this as service HH-414.

## Part Three : large-scale projects

We infer that there is no justification for large-scale capital-intensive projects birthed by HERT. It is sad to note that redevelopment of Watford Junction station, presented as an opportunity to capitalise on the commercial value of the site, seems to be proposed for an entirely different reason : conversion of the Abbey line to a MRT/busway requires MRT vehicles to take over the underpass from Station Road to the car parks, rendering the car parks inaccessible and therefore triggering redevelopment. It is most unfortunate that this consequence of HERT has been mistakenly presented as an unrelated project.

We believe that plans for a new road at Hertford as a result of HERT are subject to review, with the possibility that there will be no new road. We will assume this.

The large-scale projects understood to implement HERT are now listed :

(a) downgrading of the A405 to single lane, documented in South West Herts 2018 Growth and Transport Plan. This facilitates buses competing with the Abbey line with the intention of resulting in its closure;

(b) access to St Albans City station to provide interchange;

(c) additional interchange on the A414 south of St Albans so that MRT vehicles can turn off the Abbey line and onto the A414;

(d) conversion of the Abbey line to a MRT/busway;

(e) redevelopment of Watford Junction station.

Let us now list the projects implementing HERT if the Abbey line were to be retained as a railway line :

(f) train passing facility on the Abbey line, enabling a more frequent train service; rail costs are high, indeed far too high, nevertheless this is no more than a modest project;

(g) as described earlier, service HH-414, with no requirement for any significant capital investment.

If we compare the costs of converting the Abbey line to a MRT/busway i.e. (a) to (e) with the costs of retaining the Abbey line as a railway line i.e. (f) and (g), it is reasonable to estimate the capital costs of HERT with conversion of the Abbey line to a MRT/busway as ten times the cost of HERT with the Abbey line retained as a railway line.

## Conclusions

1. We urge Hertfordshire County Council to call into question the long-held assumption that the Abbey line must close;
2. We urge the council to call into question the very basis on which HERT has been proposed and developed. A professional-quality proposal for developing transport provision in Hertfordshire would take account of multiple factors, including the flexible nature of bus services and inevitably result in HERT as currently envisaged being regarded as a straight jacket, to be replaced by pragmatism.

Complementary information is available on the RailEnable website <https://railenable.com/>