



“The Flyer” – Important announcement about the Abbey Line - May 2013

Welcome to this special edition of “The Flyer”, bringing you an important update from Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and the Department for Transport (DfT) on the project to increase the frequency of services on the Abbey Line.

As you will be aware, Hertfordshire County Council has wanted to increase the service frequency on the Abbey Line between Watford and St Albans for some time. Most recently, we have been part of a pilot project with the Department for Transport and Network Rail to investigate the possibility of transferring the line to county council ownership and running it as a light rail concession.

The original proposal was to convert the Abbey Line to light rail for the same cost as the current heavy rail service. It was believed that a light rail service would be cheaper than conventional rail to operate, and as a result, that a more frequent service could run for the same cost.

Light rail uses lighter, tram-style carriages than conventional trains and once the infrastructure is in place, light rail generally has lower running costs than heavy rail and is particularly well suited to short, frequent journeys.

However, having looked into the possibility of taking the line out of Network Rail ownership and separating it from the London Midland franchise, it became clear that there were some significant obstacles. Issues around the structure of the national rail industry and national fare structures dating back to the British Rail days have proved very complicated to unpick.

The proposal turned out to be considerably more complicated than originally expected and we have found that it is not possible to deliver light rail within the available funding.

The Abbey Line Project Board (including Network Rail, DfT and HCC) has concluded that it is not possible to deliver a more frequent service for the same cost as the current service. Therefore, the DfT has decided to step back from the plan to transfer the line to HCC as well as the decision to convert the line to light rail at this point in time.

All parties have recognised the need to improve the service on the Abbey Line, but it is not currently possible to do this in the current franchise. The DfT has also explored other options for improving service frequency with London Midland but regrettably, they have not been able to find a way of increasing the frequency using the existing infrastructure.

There is a desire by all parties to see a better service on the Abbey Line and future operators will be encouraged to propose their own solutions for the line.

Hertfordshire County Council remains committed to pushing for a more frequent service, and has decided to look separately at whether a case can be made to convert the line to light rail if the redevelopment at Watford Junction and the potential for extension at either end into the towns are included.

We are all disappointed that, in the short term at least, it has not been possible to deliver light rail on the Abbey Line.

The project board has made a commitment to share the lessons learned, and a report will be released in due course. Whilst this stage of the project will be closed down, all three partners (DfT, HCC and Network Rail) remain committed to the overall objective and will continue, albeit to a more limited extent, to work together to explore any potential solutions that emerge.

If you have any questions in the mean time, please get in touch with the team by emailing lightrail@hertfordshire.gov.uk

The Abbey Line Team