

Western Route Study Consultation

I write on behalf of Cheltenham Borough Council to respond to this consultation document, which has been considered by our Overview & Scrutiny function, as part of our longer term interest in improving rail connectivity generally and the facilities at Cheltenham Spa specifically.

Cheltenham is part of the Severn Vale urban heart of Gloucestershire and is both uniquely placed and an active partner in the delivery of the Gloucestershire LEP Strategic Economic Plan. Whilst we appreciate that the Western Route Study has reflected inputs from the LEPs we would like to reiterate some key points from the business community, many of which are reflected in the SEP SWOT analysis, the underpinning EU Structural & Investment Strategy, and Gloucestershire LTP3.

- Modern economies need high-quality rail infrastructure to support and sustain [economic] growth, and to help businesses compete and win in global markets
- There are currently limited direct rail services to London
- The County has a high car dependency
- High levels of commuting within the County (although not by rail)
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Whilst underlying data¹ shows

- household growth formation to be at 9% up to 2020
- Cheltenham experiencing strong jobs growth (+500 jobs pa) and this is forecast to continue to 2031 (between +500 and +770 jobs pa)
- Cheltenham has a strong rate of growth in its business population and higher business survival rates than average
- The rate of patenting is higher than average in Gloucestershire
- Productivity rates in Gloucestershire are below average, suggesting headroom for improvement
- Future growth is anticipated to be in ICT, finance & insurance, real estate, business services, public administration, defence and communications

So in essence, a positive picture of entrepreneurialism and future growth potential, which will rely heavily on interconnectivity with other regions for delivery. For this reason, a rail strategy and infrastructure improvements are needed to unlock the economic potential of the region. Connectivity is considered to be one of the key factors for delivery of a sustained improvement in Gloucestershire's export potential.

Against this backdrop we were particularly pleased to note

- The potential for ' Access for All' and National Station Improvement funding – noting that CBC has been very supportive of recent GLTB bidding and has jointly funded the development of the Cycle-Rail bid with GCC LSTF
- The recognition that “reversing moves at Cheltenham Spa” are a “System capacity Constraint”.
- that demand analysis demonstrates that more capacity will be required on the corridor between Cheltenham Spa, Bristol Temple Meads and Taunton in order to

accommodate forecast increases in peak passenger demand and an increase in frequency of the London Paddington to Cheltenham Spa service from two-hourly to hourly.

- The Long Distance Market Study Conditional Output is for two journey opportunities per hour. However, the Gloucester zone in the Long Distance Market Study also includes Cheltenham Spa. Within the Western Route Study, it is assumed this output is delivered by providing one London Paddington – Gloucester and one London Paddington – Cheltenham Spa train each hour (extending to Worcester) This allows the service to Cheltenham Spa to be improved by potentially avoiding reversal at Gloucester, which could reduce journey times to/from Cheltenham Spa by at least 12 minutes in each direction.
- The commitment to improving rail connectivity – very important for growth within the South Wales/Cheltenham corridor;
- Anticipated 2019 Service Patterns – 1 tph London Paddington – Cheltenham Spa; 1 tph South Wales – Cheltenham Spa

However, we are disappointed that such improvements are not envisaged until 2019, given that delivery of the growth agenda is critically important to the region now.

Furthermore, service improvements to 1 tph connectivity to London is conditional upon an extended service to Worcester. A proposal which we are aware of for additional bay - or island - platforms at Cheltenham could obviate the need to take trains which might not be commercially viable to Worcester, whilst dramatically improving the passenger arrival experience at Cheltenham Spa.

Whilst we applaud the adoption of the new Long Term Planning Process (LTPP) as a strategic methodology, our concern is that there is a risk that the timescales envisaged for delivery may create a drag upon economic growth. Also, that high impact schemes at relatively modest cost, such as that envisaged at Cheltenham Spa, could fall victim to short-termism e.g. extended routes rather than investment in station capacity/facilities.

It is essential for the future growth of businesses in the town and county that we get a destination station fit for the 21st century and in so doing, realise our economic potential for creating the jobs and prosperity that is so easily within our reach.

Working together, with local authorities and Gloucestershire LEP, the rail industry can help serve our ambitions, not stifle them.

We would welcome further discussion around how we can assist in delivering improvements to Cheltenham Spa station, a vitally important asset for the future of the town and its wider catchment.

I attach the resolution passed at Cheltenham Borough Council's meeting of its full Council, held on 15th December 2015.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Stephen Jordan