

Restoring Your Railway Fund - Stratford- Honeybourne-Worcester/Oxford (SWO)
DfT Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC)

To wide acclaim from the rail industry and media, the Government launched a long awaited, 'Restoring Your Railway programme', Beeching Reversal Fund, in January 2020, with a budget of £500m. The DfT invited MPs, local councils and community groups across England and Wales to propose how they could use funding to reinstate axed local services and restore closed stations. The funding is split into three categories to ensure DfT can support different projects at different phases. SWO was promoted in the Ideas Fund, for early stage ideas to restore rail services.

Through the Ideas Fund, the DfT were seeking proposals for projects to restore lost rail connections to communities, restoring track and services to an old alignment, including modifying an old route due to construction or other unavailability over the original route. The DfT will fund 75% of costs, up to £50,000, of successful proposals to help fund transport and economic studies and create a business case. Future funding to develop projects would be subject to agreement of the business case.

Applications for the Ideas Fund had to be sponsored by one or more Members of Parliament, whose constituencies would benefit from the scheme. The group promoting the scheme could include local government, community groups, local enterprise partnerships or other interested parties.

In our case Nigel Huddleston, Mid-Worcestershire, agreed to be the Sponsoring M.P and our bid was endorsed by 11 M.Ps in total, including our Cotswold Line members of Harriett Baldwin, Robin Walker, Robert Courts, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and Layla Moran. The bid was also supported by 18 other organisations including the local authorities along the route.

The Ideas Fund expert panel comprised of five people including Chris Heaton-Harris MP – Rail Minister, DfT (Chair); Luke Hall MP – Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Sir Peter Hendy – Chair, Network Rail; Jackie Sadek – Chief Operating Officer, UK Regeneration and Isabel Dedring – former Deputy Mayor of London for Transport.

Any bid for funding had to focus on making the strategic and economic case for the scheme, as well as setting out any recognised challenges. This will include socio-economic benefits, services proposed and infrastructure and operating costs.

The main purpose of the SWO study was to commission an Economic Impact Study for the restoration of passenger rail services, between Stratford-upon-Avon station to Worcester and Oxford via Honeybourne Junction on the Worcester-Oxford, North Cotswold Line, as a heavy rail through route, as part of the national rail network. Services south of Stratford to Worcester, could potentially be part of a circular service via Kidderminster, Birmingham and Solihull, subject to line capacity on the North Cotswold Line.

It will also look at the broader regional impact of the reopening proposal on both the area served between Stratford and Honeybourne, including the proposed new housing developments at Long Marston Airfield Garden Village and its hinterland, but

also across the wider region. Overall, it will consider the wider economic benefits of any such reopening proposal, including tourism, employment and education.

Following discussions between the four rail promotion groups, i.e. the Cotswold Line Promotion Group, Stratford Rail Transport Group, the Shakespeare Line Promotion Group and the Solihull & Leamington Rail Users Group, it was agreed to promote a second round Bid. This was duly submitted to the DfT, by Nigel Huddleston, as the Sponsoring M.P on 19 June 2020.

On 25 November 2020, the DfT announced that the SWO Bid had been successful, as one of 15 successful bids out of 50 submitted and included in the National Infrastructure Strategy. The DfT held a successful bids webinar on 14 December followed by a Welcome Pack on 17 December. Work then started in earnest since then, with a tight deadline to completion in June 2021. The two week Christmas break, tendering process and lockdown have not helped, but we were pleased to learn that Stantec were appointed to carry out the study in February 2021.

As the Scheme Promoter, we have various responsibilities. These include:-

- Putting the organisation needed for the proposal in place;
- Managing the work, the progress and delivery of the project;
- Working with the community on support and concerns about the proposal;
- Reporting into the Restoring Your Railway Programme on progress, risks and Issues;
- Producing a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC);
- Managing the costs, timescales, quality, scope, benefits and risks;
- Setting up governance;
- Submitting monthly progress updates to the RYR Leads.

As a community group, we asked Wychavon District Council to act on our behalf for the procurement of the study and tendering. The support for this scheme from the Council's Leader and Officers has been particularly noteworthy, for which we are very grateful. Thanks should also go Nigel Huddleston and his staff, the other 10 M.Ps and 18 supporting organisations.

Nigel Huddleston, as the M.P 'lead promoter,' also has a role in:-

- Providing local leadership;
- Making sure the project is organised as set out;
- Being the link with the wider local community and
- Linking into Ministers and Parliament.

During my involvement in SWO, I have been asked why should this rail link be restored when there already is an alternative northbound route to Oxford via Leamington, albeit 12 miles longer, as well as to Birmingham?

The real challenge is to capture the latent demand for rail travel from Stratford and South Warwickshire that will never be realised as long as it remains at the truncated, stub end of a branch line with slow and infrequent services.

A letter from an American tourist to the Stratford press summed it up quite neatly:-

“As a visitor to your beautiful town who would choose not to be categorized as an ugly American, it seems the network of railways in England, somehow omitted Stratford from its planning, and although my stay in your historic town was a dream come true, further trips to England would either convince me to rent a car or to stay somewhere more agreeable to the rail network.”

A previous Stratford Rail Study by Arup in 2012, revealed that Stratford only attracts 6% of tourist trips by rail compared to 13% for equivalent centres. Stratford-upon-Avon, has 3.5m visitors Town/6.0m pa District, and lies on a major international tourist route. i.e. London Paddington (Heathrow Express/Elizabeth Line/4 tube lines)-Reading (Heathrow Western Access Link/Gatwick)-Slough(Windsor Castle)-Oxford(& Blenheim Palace) - Cotswolds - Stratford-upon-Avon - Birmingham – Edinburgh. This is the very rail corridor that exists now other than the 6 mile missing link between Stratford and Long Marston from London Paddington. The Chiltern Marylebone route does not serve these markets and can take 2hr 30m, 20 minutes longer than a Liverpool to London train. As a tourist destination, Stratford is home to the Shakespeare heritage sites, including his birthplace, spending £300m pa and supports 7,000 jobs.

But the demand is not just from tourists. Stratford-upon-Avon has a committed population growth of 36,195/3,500 homes by 2031. Six miles south, the Long Marston hinterland has a committed population of 24,176/6,087 homes, including the Long Marston Airfield Garden Village, 3,500 homes/8,000 people.

A new station site at Long Marston Airfield Garden Village is protected in the Stratford Core Strategy. A journey time of just 50 minutes with Birmingham could be provided and Evesham - Birmingham taking just 65 minutes, could be facilitated, which aligns with the West Midlands Rail Executive's, A46 South.Worc-Warks-Cov-Leic corridor initiative.

As a local resident, Stratford is my nearest station, but it's the one I use least. My regular trips to London force me to drive 15 miles to Moreton in Marsh, when I would rather drive 5 miles to Stratford. The Stratford-Birmingham service can take over an hour, stopping every 3-4 minutes. The reason Warwick Parkway to Birmingham takes 20 minutes is because its on a through route, but involves a 10 mile journey and the nightmare congestion of M40 Junction 15 and a £9 parking charge. As Stratford lies at the stub end of branch line, with slow rail services facing the north only, it does not offer attractive journey times or destinations.

Stratford Town and the rapidly expanding Long Marston area, already suffer from ever worsening traffic congestion, in which all traffic from the south has to use two bridges to cross the R. Avon, one of which is a narrow medieval structure. Rat

running through adjacent villages to the A46, A435 and M40 Jc 15, is common place, in an affluent area with high levels of car commuting.

The Stratford Core Strategy Inspector's Report, 2016, considered that the southbound rail link would *"provide a long-term solution to the town's traffic congestion."* *"There can be no question that the service would provide a sustainable alternative to the use of the private car for many residents and Visitors."*

The new Worcestershire Parkway station would also facilitate connectivity between Stratford-upon-Avon with the South West /South Wales, avoiding the need to travel 27 miles north via Birmingham to come south again. Stratford-Oxford services would also enable direct rail connectivity between the Cotswolds, Stratford, Solihull and Birmingham.

In the longer term, the Gloucestershire Rail Investment Strategy, March 2020, identifies the possibility of restoring Stratford-Honeybourne-Cheltenham, for East Midlands to Bristol/Cardiff services.

Gloucestershire's Local Transport Plan (2015-2041), identifies Moreton in Marsh to become a major interchange hub for sustainable travel, to encourage much needed modal change on the A429 corridor. A Moreton in Marsh-Stratford-Birmingham rail service would relieve this congested road corridor.

We now have to wait and finally hope the message will get through to local authorities, that roads cannot be built to meet demand, a fact established in the landmark Government SACTRA report in 1994. Road traffic also accounts for 80% of Nitrogen Dioxide emissions compared to 1.6% for rail.