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St Albans Abbey tram conversion shut down

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Long-running plans to convert the St Albans Abbey branch line into a light rail system have been dropped by the Department for Transport.

Responsibility for the route had been due to transfer to Hertfordshire County Council under a pioneering initiative to cut operating costs and allow a higher frequency service to operate on the six and a half mile route between St Albans Abbey and Watford Junction.

However, the Abbey Line Project Board - which includes Network Rail, the DfT and the county council - has concluded that it is not possible to deliver a more frequent service for the same cost or less than the current service. According to the county council the DfT has therefore "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".

The county says that having looked into the possibility of taking the line out of Network Rail ownership and separating it from the London Midland franchise, currently responsible for running trains on the branch line, it became clear that there were significant obstacles to light rail conversion. "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."

Transport minister Norman Baker said: "The Department recognises that there has been significant local support for more frequent passenger services on the St Albans Abbey line, but following extensive work we have concluded it is simply not cost effective to convert the current heavy rail service to a light rail operation."

He added: "We are committed to providing the best rail services for both passengers and taxpayers and will relook at this proposal if a more robust business case can be developed. I continue to encourage London Midland to improve their offer to passengers on this line."

This recognition that the project cannot be delivered comes as a surprise given the extent of work carried out since former transport secretary Andrew Adonis backed the scheme in 2009 (TB 6335). A public consultation was held on the plans and the county council invited expressions of interest for a 22 and a half year concession, which involved sourcing appropriate light rail vehicles (TB 6925), subsequently shortlisting Arriva, CAF, National Express and a Transdev/Bombardier joint venture (TB 7069).

The St Albans Abbey light rail plans had been viewed as a pilot scheme for reducing operating costs on non-core rail routes as well as making enhancements to community rail services more affordable. But the decision to abandon the scheme reveals fundamental flaws in this approach and is likely to reduce the prospects of converting heavy rail routes to light rail. It also represents a blow for plans to devolve control of local rail services.

For Abbey line users, the prospect of enhancements to services now appear remote. According to the county council: "The DfT has also explored

St Albans Abbey: plan to convert London Midland branch line to tram: operation abandoned



Picture: Bill Turvill

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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."

The council says it has decided to look separately at whether a case can be made to convert the line to light rail if a planned redevelopment of Watford Junction station and the potential for extension at either end into the towns are included. Enhancements to the line could also be proposed by operators bidding for the new London Midland franchise but this is not scheduled to begin until June 2017.

A statement from the county added: "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."

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