



ABBEY FLYER USERS' GROUP

Watford Junction to St Albans Abbey Line

Abbey Flyer Users' Group (ABFLY)
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West Midlands Consultation
 Department for Transport
 4/15 Great Minster House
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Dear Sir or Madam

West Midlands Rail Franchise Consultation – aspirations for the Abbey Line

We are writing to you as representatives of users and supporters of the Watford Junction to St Albans Abbey branch (Abbey Line), in answer to selected questions from the West Midlands Rail Franchise Consultation.

We are a Rail User Group (RUG) with a respected and long-standing presence in the local community and a direct line to local politicians and council officers. Formed in 1995, we have a core membership of around 200 plus many more friends and supporters. Since its inauguration in 2005 we have also been a partner in the Abbey Line Community Rail Partnership (CRP). Please visit www.abfly.org.uk for more information about our work.

Q1) Thinking of the journeys you make by train, or journeys you could make by train but where you decide to use an alternative transport mode instead: what specific changes could be made to make the railway easier and more attractive to use for all; and why do you think these changes would help? Please provide your reasons why and details of the journeys you refer to where possible.

Service frequency

Currently the line operates on a 45 minute timetable from Monday to Saturday, and hourly on Sundays. The 45 minute frequency is a major disincentive to use, but the end-to-end journey time of only 16 minutes is highly competitive against the road alternative.

The line connects St Albans (population 70,000) with Watford (population 103,000), with several intermediate settlements. It connects with the West Coast Main Line (WCML) at Watford Junction, which with over 6 million passengers per year is the fourth busiest station in the whole of the West Midlands franchise. Watford Junction is set to become an even more important north of London transport hub with the coming of the Croxley Rail Link (post 2018) and potentially some Crossrail services being routed up the WCML as far as Tring.

With a predicted 20% growth in population and 16% in employment in Watford up to 2031, there is a huge potential for passenger growth on the Abbey Line and an urgent need to ensure that the growth in general travel demand does not result in more traffic on the severely congested local road network.

The minimum standard should be a 30 minute frequency at all of the stations on the line, although previous studies by Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have suggested that a 20 minute frequency throughout the day would increase passenger numbers by over 200%. This prediction is backed up by the success of other branch lines in the UK where frequency has been increased, for example the Truro to Falmouth line.

Improving the frequency to a minimum of 30 minutes would make the service more attractive to use in the following ways:

- By offering a more easily memorable, 'clockface' timetable
- By opening up many more practical connections to other train and bus services
- By encouraging more 'turn up and go' journeys
- By reducing the wait to an acceptable level should a train just be missed

Evidence of demand for such an improvement was recently provided by a survey of people living within 15 mins walk of the Abbey Line (Appendix A). There are some 38,500 households which fall into this catchment area (Appendix B).

75% of survey respondents use the Abbey Line service fewer than five to seven times per week - this includes those that do not use the service at all. These 'infrequent' users were asked what, if anything, currently stops them from using the service more regularly, i.e. what are the barriers of use to the Abbey Line service. By far the strongest barrier, cited by 61% of these 'infrequent' respondents, was the fact that the service doesn't run frequently enough. This is the number one reason for people not using the service more often.

At the last passenger count, commissioned by the CRP (Appendix C), annual patronage was estimated at 550,000 – representing a 39% increase and the highest level recorded since counts began in May 2006. Note however that these estimates differ markedly from official Office and Rail and Road (ORR) usage figures, on account of longstanding revenue collection deficiencies. Comparing passenger counts with ticket sales data, it is estimated that the real number of passengers using the Abbey Line is 15 – 20% higher than the official figures (Appendix D).

Note that the average fare on the line is £4.34 (Appendix E). If patronage was doubled through frequency increase and other improvements, and all revenue was collected, the line could be generating in the region of £4.8 million p.a (550,000 x 2 x £4.34). This should be more than adequate a foundation for building a positive economic case to enhance the service frequency.

On a practical note, trials have been done and it is not possible to comfortably increase the frequency to much more than 40mins within the existing single track, one train operation. We would therefore expect the new franchisee to take the lead in developing, promoting and delivering, within 2-3 years of franchise start-up, an economically viable package for both the infrastructure investment required (passing loop and signalling), and the rolling stock required.

Note that several opportunities for taking advantage of potentially 'bargain' lease prices are afforded by forthcoming rolling stock cascades from other franchises. In particular, substantial numbers of Class 313s, 315s and Class 317s are coming off-lease at Govia Thameslink Rail (GTR), London Overground (LO) and Crossrail between 2016-2018 (Appendices F, G and H). With electrification severely delayed in parts of the country where these might otherwise have been cascaded to (e.g. Welsh Valleys), these units may be without work or scrapped unless otherwise employed.

The 313s are particularly well-suited to the characteristics of the Abbey Line, being a line that is 6.5 miles long, with 5 intermediate stations. The average station-to-station distance is 1.1 miles, with the maximum being 1.7 miles and the minimum being 0.66 miles. Capable of 'metro'-style acceleration and deceleration, the Class 313s worked the line for several periods between electrification in 1988 and the end of Silverlink Metro in 2007.

However it is acknowledged by the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC), that work will be required to life-extend these Electric Multiple Units (EMUs), which are 35 years old. This is likely to include re-tractioning and PRM-TSI compliance work, and a major internal upgrade (Appendix I).

A more innovative and radical solution to the problem of providing a higher service frequency whilst driving down operating costs may be found in the use of 'Ultra Light Rail Vehicles' (ULRVs). In particular, a proposed development of the Class 139 'Parry People Mover', stretched to allow for greater carrying capacity and more demanding peak flows on the Abbey Line, could be utilised.

A passing loop and signalling would still be required to facilitate the enhanced service frequency, but adoption of ULRVs, potentially combined with tramway style 'driving on sight', could help to substantially reduce both the infrastructure enhancement and running costs thus tipping the balance in favour of the investment (Appendix J).

Note that whatever rolling stock is employed, it should not compromise on reliability, and the passenger environment should be in line with the standards expected of modern rolling stock. Diesel traction shall not be tolerated, on the basis of the impact it has on local air quality, and because the line is already electrified.

If onboard toilets are provided, every effort should be made to keep them available and in working order.

Late night services

Returning to the large body of infrequent users identified in the survey (Appendix A), the second most commonly cited reason for not using the Abbey Line more often was that it stops too early in the evenings. Three quarters of users rely on the service to get them to leisure activities / social events, many of which may finish later of an evening. The current timetable means that while the service may be relied upon for getting to an event, it cannot be used for getting home. The last train from Watford to St Albans leaves at 21.31 Mondays to Saturdays, and at 22.04 on Sundays. This is wholly inadequate for anyone wishing to partake in evening entertainment in Watford / St Albans or further afield, as well as for shift workers who have to take taxis home. It is noted that the current Direct Award will introduce one later train from December 2016, but this needs to be embedded into and enhanced further within the new franchise specification, with services operating preferably until midnight as a minimum, to match LO levels of service.

Through running

Another potentially attractive improvement identified in the survey (Appendix A) is that offered by through running. The ability to take a train into London without having to change at Watford Junction is identified as a driver to greater use of the line, particularly amongst those who don't use it at present but use other modes to get to Watford Junction and train journeys beyond.

An automatically signalled connection from the Abbey Line to the mainline was installed at Christmas 2014 as part of the Watford signalling works. Network Rail have confirmed that this would allow services to be timetabled in order to use this capability if requested by a TOC (Appendix M).

There are three workings per day which currently start or terminate at Watford Junction:

Watford Junction	dep	0755
London Euston	arr	0820

Watford Junction	dep	0815
London Euston	arr	0840

London Euston	dep	1734
Watford Junction	arr	1758

The franchisee should be required to explore the options of extending these peak-time workings, or others, to either start or terminate at St Albans Abbey.

The presence of a passing loop and second train could allow greater flexibility in achieving this.

Q2b: Thinking of your train journeys as a whole, how could we improve your experience of: finding information and planning your journey; accessing your railway station in an environmentally friendly way such as by walking, cycling, tram or bus; accessing your railway station by private car (including car parking and drop off areas)? Please let us know the reasons why. If you are aware of any examples of particularly good or particularly poor connections between transport modes at stations, either within the franchise area or more widely please let us know including reasons why these are particularly good or poor.

As previously noted (Appendix B), some 38,500 households fall within a 15 minute walk of an Abbey Line station, and as such, the vast majority of people using it gain access on foot. Given the nature and location of the stations, providing further car parking would not be practical or appropriate.

Access to local bus services at St Albans Abbey needs to be improved. Whilst there are several bus routes that operate between Abbey station, the city centre and City station (GTR), the bus stop is on the opposite side of a busy road and the number of different services can be confusing to the casual user.

We would expect the franchisee to take the lead in investigating the possibility for a new bus/rail interchange at St Albans Abbey station.

Q3: Please list, in priority order, the facilities you would like improved or introduced at the station(s) you use or could use? For each point that you raise, please provide the name of the station(s) that you are referring to and why you think these improvements are needed.

ABFLY supports the CRP's list of key improvements required at stations which is as follows:

- St Albans Abbey – shuttle bus link to city centre and City (GTR) station to provide connectivity and improve the attractiveness of the line.
- Watford Junction – improved link between Platform 11 (where Abbey Line trains terminate) and the main body of the station. Better still would be any scheme to re-route the branch back into the existing bay platform 10, thereby providing a cross-platform interchange with mainline services departing from platform 9.
- Ticket vending machines at all stations on the line (although these are now expected to be delivered during the current Direct Award period).

Q4: Thinking of the train journeys you make, how important are the following on board passenger facilities to you on short distance and long distance train services (1= very important; 15 = not important). Where possible, please explain why. Please also identify any other on board passenger facilities not listed that you deem very important and you think should be improved or introduced. This can include any comments you have about the presentation or cleanliness of your train. Please note capacity and seat availability is covered in the next section.

The following responses refer to services on the Abbey Line:

<i>Facility on board train</i>	<i>Importance on short distance train services (1–40 minutes)</i>	<i>Importance on long distance train services (over 40 minutes)</i>
Luggage space	1	n/a
Cycle storage	1	n/a
Audio passenger information e.g. announcements	1	n/a
Visual passenger information e.g. next stop information	1	n/a
First class areas	15	n/a
Catering	15	n/a
Tables	5	n/a
Seat trays	5	n/a
Staff presence	1	n/a
Plug sockets	1	n/a
USB sockets to charge USB devices	1	n/a
Pushchair/wheelchair space	1	n/a
Baby changing facilities	5	n/a
Suitable toilets	1	n/a
Free Wi-Fi	1	n/a

Train presentation and cleanliness has improved markedly since the introduction of Class 319s in late 2015, but it had deteriorated to an all-time low just before London Midland's Class 321s were cascaded to Scotrail. We would therefore expect the franchisee to be subject to specific, demanding train presentation and cleanliness standards which apply throughout the lifetime of the franchise. These standards should ensure zero tolerance on litter and graffiti, and that a daily clean is undertaken, regardless of where the unit is stabled overnight. The standards should also ensure that seat covers, carpets, wall panelling, windows etc are not allowed to become excessively threadbare, stained, scratched etc. when units are coming up for overhaul. This 'pre-overhaul blight' may be acceptable on economic grounds to TOCs and ROSCOs, but it is not acceptable to passengers who pay for the service.

Q6: Thinking about stations served by the West Midlands franchise, are there any particular locations where you feel that connections between rail services could be improved? If relevant please provide specific details about the services, times and locations where train times are not coordinated as well as they could be. Please also provide information on any other factors at stations or on trains that would make changing between services easier and more attractive for you, including your reasons where possible.

Connection between the Abbey Line and main line services at Watford Junction is impaired by the 45 minute frequency and lack of later evening services (see Q1) and by the length of walk to Platform 11 where Abbey Line trains operate from (see Q3).

The policy for holding Abbey Line trains at Watford Junction when advertised mainline connecting services are running late could be more consistent and better advertised, with less of an emphasis on hitting punctuality targets and more of an emphasis on ensuring that passengers are not inconvenienced. The existing policy is detailed in Appendix N.

At the St Albans Abbey end of the line, connectivity with GTR services at City station could be substantially improved by the introduction of a dedicated shuttle bus link.

Q7: In order to make improvements to the network, we would like your views on how specific train services could be changed to better meet demand.

It has already been stated that the 45 minute frequency and lack of late evening services stifle demand (Q1), but in terms of 'persons per hour' (pph) the Abbey Line currently has a vast amount of excess capacity, organised in a sub-optimal fashion. Official figures put the capacity of a Class 319/2 at 330 (214 seats plus 116 standing). At a 45min interval, equating to 1.33 trains per hour (tph), this amounts to $1.33 \times 330 = 439$ persons per hour (pph).

But the Abbey Line is currently dominated by peak loadings, being of the order of 130-145 people for just 2 or 3 trains per day (Appendix C). Outside of those peak trains, the numbers carried currently drops off very sharply (average 27 per train).

It would therefore seem like an acceptable proposition to substitute the 4-car Class 319/2 for shorter units working at a higher frequency. This concept has already been explored in Appendix J with respect to ULRVs, but could apply equally to conventional rolling stock, e.g. 3-car Class 313s as mentioned in Q1. Such a re-organisation of capacity would not only be a more efficient use of resources but would also unlock latent demand.

Q10: During railway disruption what information would you like to know, and when and how would you like to receive it during: Known disruption such as engineering works; Unplanned disruption such as signalling issues? Please provide your reasons and examples of where this works well either by the existing train company or elsewhere on the wider rail/public transport network.

Planned disruption:

London Midland have handled planned disruption well, in particular the blockades at Watford Junction at Christmas 2014. Locations of Rail Replacement Bus (RRB) stops are better signposted now at Abbey Line stations than they used to be, but regular review and monitoring of this should take place by the new franchisee to ensure that the customer experience remains as smooth as possible during times of disruption.

Greater auditing and tighter management of RRBs should be a requirement of the new franchise. There have been several recorded instances of RRBs getting lost or not stopping – for this, local knowledge is paramount.

Information should be made available through all channels, including press, website, Twitter, station announcements, Passenger Information Screens (PIS), posters and leaflets. Information should be sent directly to local authorities and major employers so that they can use their own networks to help disseminate information. The information should clearly state the duration of the disruption and the reason for it. Alternative travel arrangements should be clearly set out.

It is key that consultation is undertaken with local authorities and major employers in advance of any major disruption. Local knowledge will be able to plan alternative routes and identify key times which need to be avoided.

Unplanned disruption:

The Abbey Line has suffered particularly badly through unplanned disruption in recent times. This has often been through technical faults with the trains. Poor train reliability has caused many people to look for alternative transport modes and was highlighted in the survey (Appendix A) as being a major reason for not using the service more often.

The Abbey Line also tends to be the last route to be attended to following widespread events such as inclement weather e.g. removal of fallen trees. Whilst it is understood that the railway industry's limited resources have to be prioritised, it should also be recognised whereas on the main line a limited service may still be operated, a single fault on the Abbey Line will halt all services.

Information at times of disruption should be provided through station and train announcements, PIS, staff, help points, Twitter feeds and the web. Often this information is not consistent between these media, leading to passenger confusion.

One problem on the Abbey Line is that the location of trains is not tracked in real time, due to the lack of track circuits. Therefore the PIS relies on 'secondary' sources of data to inform waiting passengers about the expected arrival time of their train. A solution to this may be found in that adopted by Northern Rail on the Middlesborough to Whitby line, which uses a low-cost GPS based system from Nomad Digital that can track a train in real-time without the need for costly fixed infrastructure (Appendix K).

Semi-planned disruption:

Falling into this category is the leaf-fall period. The Abbey Line suffers more than other routes during the leaf-fall season on account of its long wooded and shady stretches (through Bricket Wood, and north of Park Street), and the relatively light traffic.

Whilst the disruption that can be caused by slippery rails is partly mitigated every year by the introduction of a special leaf-fall timetable in conjunction with 'defensive driving' techniques and training, in autumn 2015 the line was affected particularly badly by trains developing 'wheel flats' and having to be withdrawn from service. Again, it is understood that the railway industry's limited resources have to be prioritised, but the franchisee must ensure that Network Rail keep on top of their scheduled visits with the Railhead Treatment Trains (RHTTs), ensuring that visits are made as often as required to reduce the risk of slipping to a minimum.

If necessary, other short-term methods should be explored for maintaining a reliable service, e.g. introducing temporary diesel loco-hauled trains which are heavier and to some degree 'scrub' their own wheels clean on account of their braking system.

Q12a: What are your views on the value for money you receive for your train journeys in the franchise area when compared to other transport choices available to you?

Journeys on the Abbey Line are generally seen to be good value for money. The greatest selling point is the end-to-end journey time, for which passengers seem prepared to pay a small premium above the comparable bus fare. However, the buses already have an advantage in terms of the destinations they serve, in particular being able to reach town and village centres. Therefore the railway must work hard if it is to keep up, matching both 'macro' and 'minor' service expectations – the former in areas where it could compete and excel, such as improved service frequency, connectivity and later evening service, the latter in areas such as customer service, provision of free wifi and train presentation / cleanliness.

Q12b: Does the range of ticket types available meet your needs or are there specific examples of new types of fare that you would like to see introduced? Where possible please give the reasons for your answer.

Introduction of carnet or more flexible types of season ticket (e.g. half week) would be attractive to less frequent yet regular users of the line.

Competitive pricing would be appreciated to increase off-peak use of the line. Directly undercutting services on the Thameslink line used to be something that Silverlink Trains engaged in pre-2007, for example by offering 2 for 1 deals on travel from St Albans Abbey to London Euston.

Q13: We want to make it easier for passengers to pay for their journey and reduce the number of people travelling without tickets. Please list what you think are the priorities for the new operator to focus on to: a) ensure it is as easy as possible to pay for your journey; and b) deter people from travelling without a valid ticket? Please provide your reasons and state if you are aware of any specific locations where it is difficult to buy tickets or where people travel without a valid ticket.

60% of respondents to the survey (Appendix A) expressed as their top priority to see the introduction of pre-payment / pay-as-you-go readers on the branch (e.g. Oyster). It was the most preferred option for purchasing a ticket, followed by ticket machines at stations (49%), followed by train conductor selling tickets aboard the train (43%), with other methods scoring lower.

Ticketless travel on the Abbey Line has already been highlighted as major issue, with estimations showing that the real number of passengers using the Abbey Line is 15 – 20% higher than official figures (Appendix D).

ABFLY members and supporters have also been contributing towards an ongoing 'Revenue collection log' since January 2015, for which there are now five reports (Appendices O to S). This under-reporting of usage almost certainly suppresses demand forecasting and erodes the case for investment.

The Abbey Line works on a 'pay train' basis. Passengers are expected to buy a ticket on the train. But revenue protection is currently very poor, especially outside of peak hours. Often this prevents a user from obtaining a ticket for the next stage of a journey. The time taken to visit the ticket office at Watford Junction can lead to a missed connection or the understandable temptation to indulge in ticketless travel.

At present, ticket machines are available only at Watford Junction, Watford North and St Albans Abbey stations, although it is understood that more stations are to be equipped during the final year of the current franchise.

The key challenge for revenue protection on the branch remains the logistical difficulties of both operating doors and checking / issuing tickets – practically impossible with the frequency of station stops. This problem is alluded to under paragraph 6.17 of the consultation document.

As such, the base staffing level on the branch is inefficient – at least three people are required; driver and guard to ensure safety and operate doors, a separate ticket inspector, plus security guard at certain times. Compounding the problem is an underlying, self-inflicted staff shortage which has been prevalent for several years at London Midland.

'DCO' – Driver Controlled Operation (of doors), is suggested as a possible solution for certain routes under paragraphs 6.17 and 6.18 of the consultation document. DCO gives the driver complete safety responsibility, including the opening and closing of doors, whilst allowing a second member of staff to be devoted to customer service. It is noted that DCO is being gradually rolled out on parts of the Northern franchise (Appendix L).

DCO would have several advantages for the branch, not only boosting revenue protection but also making staff more visible to customers, discouraging anti-social behaviour and being on hand to help those who need more assistance. It could also reduce dwell times at stations, which could lead to an improvement in end-to-end journey times and help make the case for a more frequent service.

If DCO can both reduce the current base staffing level on each train (from current three or four including security guard) to just two, this will only help to improve the economics of the line whilst simultaneously improving customer service. Greater visibility of staff for security reasons was also highlighted as being highly desirable by many respondents to the survey (Appendix A).

We would therefore expect the new franchisee to radically re-assess staffing arrangements and procedures on the branch to ensure that the operation is more streamlined, considerably more customer-focused, and much more effective at protecting revenue. We believe there should be a 'zero tolerance' approach to ticketless travel, but there must be reasonable provision for buying tickets in the first place.

Q14: What could be done to improve security to make your train journey better and encourage more people to use rail services? This could include on the way to or at the station or on board the train. Where possible please provide specific details and your reasons why.

As already outlined (Q13), the presence of uniformed staff at stations and on trains provides the biggest reassurance to passengers.

There are specific security concerns at Garston station where anti-social behaviour is common, but this has long been tackled through a partnership approach which involves both 'soft' initiatives (e.g. school engagement, publicity campaigns, station adoption), and hardware (the installation of CCTV and vandal-resistant station furniture). The next franchisee should be encouraged to work closely with the British Transport Police (BTP), local police force, authorities, schools and the CRP to continue this good work.

Q18: How could communities, businesses and/or other organisations within the public, private and voluntary sectors be encouraged to play an active part in the running of the railway stations or services in their area?

The Abbey Line is already a CRP. The CRP has played a pivotal role in promoting the line to the wider community and increasing ridership. We welcome the support that the DfT provides to this initiative. The new franchisee should be required to provide funding and practical support to the CRP throughout the franchise period, at or above existing levels.

At times there have been difficulties in maintaining on-going dialogue with the operator of the West Midlands franchise, due to the size of the network and the fact that the main offices are in Birmingham. It would be beneficial if the franchisee could be required to provide a more locally based liaison point.

Yours sincerely



Dave Horton
General Secretary, The Abbey Flyer Users' Group (ABFLY)

Appendices

A	Abbey Line user and non-user survey report v2.0
B	Estimation of households within 15min walk
C	Abbey Line passenger count report September 2015
D	Ticketless travel lost revenue analysis v01
E	Average fare matrix
F	Class 700 variant to displace GTR class 313s
G	Electrostars to displace GTR class 317s
H	Aventras to displace LO class 317s
I	ATOC rolling stock strategy
J	PPM operation of Abbey Line discussion document
K	GPS train tracking Northern Rail
L	DCO introduction on Northern franchise
M	Letter from Network Rail through running
N	Abbey Line connection policy
O	Revenue collection report 01 (14 th January 2015)
P	Revenue collection report 02 (26 th May 2015)
Q	Revenue collection report 03 (8 th October 2015)
R	Revenue collection report 04 (22 nd February 2016)
S	Revenue collection report 05 (15 th March 2016)

All Appendices can be downloaded as ZIP files using the following URLs:

Appendices A to H:

<http://www.abfly.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ABFLY-2016.03.18-DfT-West-Mids-ABFLY-response-Appendices-A-H.zip>

Appendices I to S:

<http://www.abfly.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ABFLY-2016.03.18-DfT-West-Mids-ABFLY-response-Appendices-I-S.zip>