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Our Ref: MC/136460
Your Ref: St Albans11328/CM

08 JUL 2015

Thank you for your letter of 18 May, about the passing loop on the Abbey Line.

I do appreciate the work both you and the Abbey Flyers User Group have and continue to put into this matter.

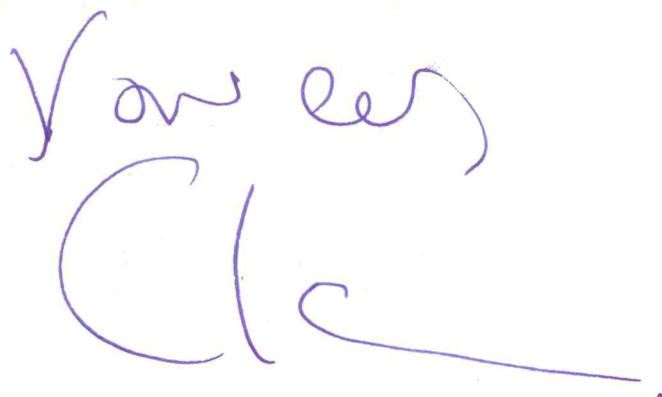
I do not doubt the consequences of the installation of such loops as you mention, nor do I doubt that the installation of such a loop would enable an increase in service provision on the Abbey Line. However, on the Abbey Line, demand forecasts indicate the current level of train service is sufficient to meet future demand, and therefore at this time there is no transport case to increase the service frequency

I both recognise and appreciate the fact that local authorities may want to consider a frequency increase for local socio-economic reasons. Should this be the case I would expect them to work with the train operator and Network Rail to establish the most cost effective way of doing this. If the increased frequency requires infrastructure such as a passing loop – as it would on the St Albans branch – this needs to be built into the business case for the increased service frequency.

Funding is available to local authorities both for capital investment and (albeit in small quantities) to provide ongoing public transport subsidy should this be required, although the Department recommends local authorities try to focus on service enhancements that are self-sustaining in the medium term.

I note that Hertfordshire County Council is involving itself in this matter, and I look forward to seeing their next Local Transport Plan. As you note, where local authorities have involved themselves in the backing of such schemes, success can indeed be forthcoming, and I have no doubt that your personal involvement can only improve that chance in this instance. Obviously the next step is to see if Hertfordshire County Council does see increasing the frequency on the St Albans branch to be an important part of the local public transport strategy.

The competition for the next long-term West Midlands franchise will be launched later this year, and will see a public consultation run (for which we hope to see a healthy response) which will help shape the services offered by the next operator. We are committed to putting passengers at the heart of the rail network. Such consultation will help us prioritise the improvements that people want to see and as we make clear to franchise bidders, our evaluation methodology encourages bidders to exceed our minimum specification.



CLAIRE PERRY