

West of England Partnership: Joint Transport Executive Committee

21 January 2011

The Importance of the Reinstatement of the Rail Link between Radstock and Frome

A Statement by Radstock Action Group

The second paragraph on the Home Page of the West of England Partnership reads, 'The Partnership was formed to focus on things that are better planned at the West of England level, rather than at the level of the individual council areas. One example is major transport schemes, which have an impact on the West of England as a whole and which may cross the council boundaries'.

And that is why Radstock Action Group is approaching you to seek relevant assistance in widening the debate on the possibility of reinstating the rail link between Radstock and Frome. The December meeting received statements from Radstock Action Group on this matter and we now wish to pursue it by seeking guidance and links which we believe you may be in a better position to provide than we are.

As the rail paper you are discussing this morning makes clear, connectivity within the region is increasingly important and is faced inevitably by the impact of the recession and consequent limited possible expenditure.

However, we would like to suggest that the reinstatement of the Radstock – Frome Line should be regarded as a piece in the jigsaw, not simply of rail connections, but as a major contributor to the maintenance and growth of business activity in the whole region, and particularly in the Somer Valley area.

The renewed rail link would provide ready access to and from Westbury, London, the South Coast and the South West. It would also provide a faster service to Bath, and hence to Bristol, than is currently available on log jammed roads where it can take over an hour to do the 8 miles between

Radstock and Bath at peak times.

We would like to draw your attention to the following:

1. All but about 200m of the route of the railway actually lies largely outside Bath and North East Somerset, although Radstock itself is in BANES. We have initiated preliminary discussions with Mendip councillors and wish to extend this to Somerset and other relevant authorities as soon as possible. We would appreciate any help that West of England Partnership can give in facilitating such exchanges.
2. Support for the railway is growing. What ten years ago might have seemed a romantic aspiration is now regarded as probably the single most powerful tool for economic regeneration of the area covered by the market towns of Radstock and Midsomer Norton and the surrounding communities. Local people have not wavered in their great support for it, accepting that it will take time and money; it is one of the issues most frequently raised in discussions about how to improve the economic and travel situation in the area.
3. Initial estimates of the cost were in the region of £70m. This figure continues to be revised downwards, to the point where the latest estimate gives an amount of no more than £42m, with the expectation that this could go down even further once the necessary preliminary studies have been undertaken.
4. The whole area urgently needs jobs. But the difficulties in reaching it by road have been much rehearsed and inevitably continue to provide a barrier to inward investment. There quite simply is no additional road capacity in the area, whether between Radstock and Bath or between Radstock and Bristol, and certainly not beyond. Traffic speeds are slow, public transport is very poor. In fact, bus services which are often regarded as the solution to excessive car use, are getting worse, not only because the timetables are becoming poorer but because the volume of car traffic on the roads means buses are very slow. Without better links, it is unlikely that businesses will wish to come and set up in the area which, in other respects, has so much to offer. For businesses need to be confident that they can link up with the wider business world.
5. The area is full of tourist potential, which would bring with it much needed

jobs. Clearly Bath and Bristol provide huge attractions for visitors, but the offer from the Somer Valley Area could provide additional attractions, albeit on a less grandiose scale. For example, Radstock has, according to English Heritage, 'the best preserved mining town centre' in the country, its museum of Mining Heritage is linked into European cultural and mining networks, exhibitions regularly attract visitors from outside the area, including international tourists. The Roman Fosseway runs through the area and is still visible. The outstandingly beautiful countryside remains largely hidden from visitors to Bath and Bristol, as do the historic towns such as Midsomer Norton and Paulton, and, of course, Radstock. The stumbling block remains the poor transport infrastructure.

6. BANES Core Strategy identifies the Somer Valley and particularly Radstock as a potential centre for renewable energy development and models of sustainability. This would certainly be a step nearer if the rail link were to be reinstated, addressing issues such as pollution from car use. It would also encourage people to come and visit what we hope will become a leading model for low-zero carbon communities.

We would like to ask the West of England Partnership to provide us and all other parties interested in the regeneration of the Somer Valley area and beyond, with guidance and links which we, as a group, can pursue with others, using their expertise and insights to prepare a more detailed case.

We would also request that when the 'refresh' of JLTP3 takes place later this year that more specific detail and steps for the possible reinstatement are contained, even though we appreciate that, at this point, there may not be any firm commitment to the reinstatement. The West of England Partnership is 'cross boundaries' and can provide a bigger picture which is not accessible to just one community – Radstock.

Amanda Leon, Secretary, Radstock Action Group