

Evidence to the Williams railway review

This week I met the Williams rail review team and gave them some analysis and proposals for improving the railway. They are reviewing the current system and will be offering policy proposals to the government. I will send them a formal written follow up.

General aims

The prime aim of the railways should be to provide safe and reliable transport for people and goods in the UK.

The Review needs to consider how we can improve the traveller's experience, placing the customer at the heart of railway reform and improvement. Any structural changes proposed should be ones that will promote improved travel for customers. Greater choice is likely to be a guiding principle to ensure a better passenger experience. This in turn will require more capacity at popular times on popular routes. Punctuality and reliability are crucial to passenger satisfaction.

Capacity

The railway is most useful for commuters and peak time business users wishing to get to work and back at times when the roads are congested, and seeking to travel long distance in a timely way. These essential trips are the ones most liable to shortage of capacity and shortage of choice of trains to meet the requirement.

The industry typically runs just 20 trains an hour on any given stretch of track. On main routes into large cities this can mean just two or three trains an hour when we could do with a multiple of that from any given station along the route. In my case there are only 6 trains between 7 and 9 in the morning to Waterloo from Wokingham, a popular route where more choice and capacity would be welcome.

The railway needs to speed up the introduction of digital signalling to give full system visibility of where every train is, with feedback to each train to ensure no collisions. The railway accepts this could lead to a 25% increase in capacity. In due course it may provide a 50% increase in capacity. The London underground can now manage 30 trains an hour on modernised lines. Effective capacity could also be improved by selective investment in short additional sections of track to allow more overtaking. All too often a fast limited stop train gets caught behind a slow stopper, disrupting timetables. This will be a much cheaper option than building new long haul railway lines. It will also boost network safety.

Home to work, home to holiday travel

Travellers want to know the time it takes to do their whole journey, not just

the time from one station near departure to one station near destination. We also want to know how easy or difficult getting to and from the station is going to be. The railway industry has to work with Highway authorities, car parking businesses, bus and taxi firms on total journey times, costs and hassle.

Station car parking needs to be cheaper, more plentiful and easier to get to. Highways authorities often do few favours to stations, delaying access to station car parks by restricted road space, aggressive lights, unhelpful one way systems and limited roads space on the main feeder roads. This puts off potential train users who may find it cheaper and faster to head away from the town centre where the station lies to get directly onto the motorway and trunk road system to do the whole journey by road.

Bus services need to be more easily accessible for travellers visiting new places. The train companies could make information available on trains about the main public transport options at each station for those needing advice. It is time there are display screens in carriages with more journey and connection information for those interested, with an option of interactive service on a traveller's phone or tablet. They should also offer real time information about the journey and estimated arrival times, to allow re scheduling of your day where a train is running late. For tourist and leisure travellers there could be more information available about the places being passed and visited.

(to be continued)