

Cambridge busway is a disaster

By Mike Mason

During development of the Cambridgeshire guided bus scheme, the DfT commissioned the Transport Research Laboratory to scrutinise costs and the bills of quantities.

These were quoted at £74 million in 2001 and rose to £86.4 million by the time of the public inquiry in 2004. In a funding statement in December 2003, the DfT had already promised £65 million.

At the Transport and Works Act Public Inquiry the Inspector and objectors were unaware that TRL had reported errors in the preparation of costs.

Requests for the TRL report to be made public were declined, the Inspector subsequently concluding that the county council figure of £86.4 million was correct.

A freedom of information request later revealed that the cost-benefit ratio had been miscalculated by a factor of 4, bringing the previously published figure down to a marginal 1.21 to 1.

Furthermore DfT "optimism bias", normally applied to schemes of this nature, revised the cost to £106 million.

Was Alistair Darling, then Transport Secretary, made aware of the TRL report when he signed the TWA order in 2005?

The decision letter said he was "satisfied" that the busway was "reasonably capable of attracting the funds to implement it."

The contractor's final "target price" rose to £116 million, to be funded by £92.5 million from the Government (a revised grant) and £23.5 million from developers by means of section 106 payments.

But both business case and passenger forecasts were dependent on housing development at Northstowe new town, Cambridge Northern Fringe (Orchard Park) and Cambridge Southern Fringe.

Critically important was the proposed redevelopment of the area around Cambridge station, comprising an interchange with guided bus stops and trackway leading to an underpass at Hills Road, adjacent to the Cambridge rail signalling centre.

Land assembly negotiations between Ashwell Group, the county council and Network Rail, together with section 26 disposal consultations, were supervised, in 2008, by the Rail Regulator.

Cambridge City Council granted planning permission in 2009. The developer was required to contribute £3 million to the guided bus project and £4 million to NR for station area improvements.

In a 2003 report, the county council had previously been warned that the Hills Road underpass route was a high-risk, high-cost option, necessitating replacement of adjacent electrification masts,



HEAVY HAULAGE: A freight train at Histon in 1978. Now the busway has killed any prospect of taking freight off the roads



SPECIAL: This March 1979 picture shows the RDS train which proved the railway could be developed and people wanted it



ENTHUSIASM: People crowded Swavesey station for the RDS special in 1979. Politicians and planners failed to respond

signalling cables and equipment, at a total cost, then estimated at more than £9 million. Nevertheless the rail infrastructure work went ahead in 2008 with the Cambridge area network being shut down over four weekends. Nineteen months later, the Hills Road underpass remained unfinished and was blocked from both directions!

Late design changes, public consultation, discharge of planning conditions and other factors have pushed the busway scheme towards total disaster.

The collapse of the house building market has delayed or severely curtailed major development around Cambridge and put in doubt the £24.7 million contributions the council hoped to receive from developers. Years after the origi-

nal conception, the government's Homes and Communities Agency is seeking a new development partner for Northstowe.

Orchard Park is the only development to provide an "up front" £2 million contribution so far.

The city council in November 2009 agreed to defer the first payment of the guided busway contribution from developer Ashwell, amounting to nearly £1 million, but Ashwell went into liquidation a month later.

Serious construction problems with the guideway at Trumpington may delay the section 106 payments, which include revenue subsidies to the operators.

Guided bus services were expected to start in spring 2009. Three publicised dates for the opening of the

Pictures: ALAN MOORE

northern guideway section have come and gone. Now buses, without guidewheels, are being used on ordinary services, carrying the slogan: "We will be on the busway soon, will you?"

Meanwhile the situation for rail users at Cambridge station remains dire. The published busway map for Cambridge shows no connection with Cambridge station. There is chronic congestion for the six million rail passengers who use the station in a year.

What is the ultimate cost of the busway to the taxpayer? The hidden total may be over £200 million, although the council is officially expecting it to be £161 million.

Cambridgeshire has finally admitted that a decision taken in secret some months ago has authorised borrowing of an additional £41 million.

County taxpayers are thus already paying the interest on loans to make up the difference between "vision" and reality.

The "private negotiations" between the county council and NR, together with contributions from other regional government agencies such as Cambridgeshire Horizons, have obscured the actual financial position. The original railway assets were partly owned by the taxpayers and any disposals, according to the Rail Regulator, should be "transparent".

Cambridgeshire busway disposals do not appear on the ORR website but there is a reference in the Cambridge station document to "an agreement between Network Rail and Cambridgeshire County, dated 19 November 2004."

That date was before the public inquiry closed and the Inspector's report had been written!

Taxpayers and transport users are entitled to answers to the following:

If the county council had already negotiated an agreement with Network Rail, why spend £2.2 million on a public inquiry to acquire compulsory purchase powers, which were apparently not used for the railway land? In addition to being misled by wildly optimistic passenger forecasts and cost-benefit figures, did the inspector have information that had been denied to the public?

Had the promise of funding from the DfT in 2003 prevented him from coming to any other conclusion? Was he in any way unduly influenced to produce such a flawed recommendation?

In June 2005 the *Cambridge Evening News* reported: "City's controversial guided bus proposal hit by new delay. Inspector loses final report on £2.2 million inquiry."

Did the "2004 agreement" include a realistic valuation of the railway infrastructure from Chesterton Junction to St Ives and Cambridge

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From previous page

Hills Road to Trumpington Park and Ride? Will the details ever be published? Have the busway land acquisitions been correctly transferred or were they discounted against the infrastructure work, network shutdown and possession costs at Cambridge station?

A council transport scrutiny committee report dated 8 March 2008 stated: "There was a considerable degree of uncertainty earlier in the project about the price of Network Rail land.

"Potential impact of this risk reduced until agreement was reached at a price less than the budget. The risk was not only eliminated but turned to a benefit." Did

the Transport Secretary, the DfT, the Rail Regulator, Network Rail and the county council act in a transparent manner and in the best interests of the taxpayers and transport users?

Most of what the public was told has been dubious.

They were promised a "step change" in public transport to commence in 2006, and that it would be financially viable by 2007.

They were also told the Government would only fund a busway, and not a rail reopening.

The service was to run from Hinchingsbrook to Addenbrookes on "day one of operation"

No contribution would be required from Cambridgeshire taxpayers.

The cost of reopening the railway was much higher than the busway. Many of these claims came in glossy county council leaflets.

The complete busway may never become financially viable and cracked guideway beams may not remain serviceable for the 30-year life of the project. Other defects remain to be corrected.

Concrete piling would not have been necessary to keep the railway operational for both passengers and freight.

The railway could and should have been used to transport millions of tons of aggregate and other material for the construction of the A14 and Northstowe. The Government and Network Rail ignored

this potential and disposed of valuable assets to allow an inferior system to be built against overwhelming public opinion.

Agreements with the county council have seriously inconvenienced rail passengers and train operators and compromised the long overdue Cambridge station upgrade. This is indeed a public transport disaster!

■ *Mike Mason is a South Cambridgeshire district councillor for Histon and Impington and represented the parish councils at the guided bus public inquiry in 2004. He was formerly a BR traction engineer working in the Eastern and London Midland regions and also served as a deputy traffic commissioner for the Cambridge area in the 1970s. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the authority on which he serves as a member.*

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White elephants

The concrete busway from Cambridge to St Ives has been described as a white elephant.

So the jokers had a field day when the man who has become the public face of the busway, Bob Menzies of Cambridge County Council, was reported to be a delegate at an Australian conference which had an elephant logo (see above).

The Hilton Hotel in Sydney might seem a long way from the Cambridgeshire fens but one of the topics up for discussion was said to include comparison of the performance characteristics of busways and railways.

Many Railfuture campaigners would have happily volunteered to explain the advantages of rail over guided buses – and could have saved people the trouble of journeying to the far side.

For one thing, rubber wheels have seven times more rolling resistance than steel wheels on steel rails and therefore a vehicle on rails will always use less energy than a vehicle on tarmac.

We could also point out the highly successful reopening of the Ebbw Vale line for £30 million which transformed travel opportunities and was far more successful than even its most enthusiastic backers had dreamed of hoping.

The guided busway will probably cost at least four times more and might eventually operate – but it will be successful only when compared to an ordinary bus from St Neots to Cambridge. Sadly common sense took a backseat when it was decided to rip up the Cambridge-St Ives railway and replace it with a guided

busway. But the same attitudes are still prevalent in Luton where there are plans for another railway to be wrecked to make way for a busway.

Perhaps the Government could use the sensible excuse that because of the economic climate, money is in too short supply to spend on a busway for Luton-Dunstable.

Even after the years of neglect the line has suffered, it would be far better as a rail-based system with options to be extended to Leighton Buzzard and Welwyn Garden City.

Railfuture has written to Lord Adonis asking him to cancel the Luton-Dunstable busway and consider the line for tram-trains.

In February it was reported that some English transport projects could be at risk because of budget cuts. Let's hope the Luton-Dunstable busway is at the top of the list.

One sceptical rail campaigner said: "The busway fans are looking for cities where local representatives are still too gullible, needy and poorly informed to make their mark. These have to be cities without a transport authority, hence all the misery in Exeter, Bristol and Cambridge.

"The Busco pitch to government was that busways are quicker and cheaper. 'Shorter lead times than rail investment' was undoubtedly in the PowerPoint presentation. Now we know that busways are slower and more expensive."

Another said: "It is pretty obvious to everyone that busways are not cheaper. Vehicle costs may



BETTER THAN ANY BUSWAY: A computer-generated image of what Edinburgh's trams will look like when they take to the streets in 2012

More info: www.edinburghtrams.com/

initially be lower, for example, but buses require replacement before rail, especially with half-life refurbishment of rolling stock."

But there are still "experts" claiming that busways are cheap. Bring on the white elephants!

Independent experts who attended the "public information" meetings held in Dunstable and Central Bedfordshire were unhappy with the quality of the information.

Maps and diagrams were said to be inaccurate, not reflecting the recent abandonment of the "Luton East" housing expansion, nor the diversion on to normal road to Kimpton Road and up to the airport.

Junctions of the busway with the road network were less than clear. However, the Association of Train Operators' recent Connecting Communities report supported reopening the line as a railway.

And Andrew Selous, the Tory MP for South West Bedfordshire, has said that in the event of an

incoming Conservative government, the busway will be cancelled. Meanwhile in Edinburgh, a much more attractive transport option is taking shape – the tram.

Railfuture Scotland secretary Mike Harrison said: "It's quite exciting being in Edinburgh at the moment, as the whole thing is beginning to take shape. "There's still lots to do, but we seem to be past the long periods of stagnation that seemed to occur during the diversion of services."

Railfuture campaigners will not be surprised to learn that major transport spending decisions across England may be made using analysis from computer models that are not fit for purpose.

That was the conclusion of an audit of regional and sub-regional models released by the Department for Transport in February.

The review, led by respected modelling expert Denvil Coombe, examined 30 models and concluded that 21 were either unsuitable or doubtful.