

Henbury rail loop and the sale of the former goods yard

1. Purpose of Report

To review the recent sale of the former goods yard at Henbury and the background behind proposals and campaigns for reopening the Henbury loop.

2. Background

The railway line in South Gloucestershire between the Severn Beach branch and Bristol Parkway Station, known commonly as the Henbury loop, closed to passenger services in 1964. There was one station at Henbury with halts at Chittening Platform (workmen only), Hallen and Charlton (both closed in 1917 after only 5 years in use) and North Filton Platform. The line remains open to freight to and from Avonmouth docks. A route map can be found in Appendix One.

The line has featured in various studies and plans as set out below:

Bristol – Avonmouth – Filton Rail Routes Study, 2003

The former Joint Strategic Planning and Transportation Unit commissioned an extensive study into rail services on the Severn Beach and Henbury loop lines. The study considered new stations at Henbury and Filton North. It concluded that introducing services on the Henbury loop could not be supported on economic grounds. It would have required a £7 subsidy per passenger journey and £4m of infrastructure (2003 prices).

Joint Local Transport Plan (JLTP) Rail Action Plan, March 2006

The JLTP includes a Rail Action Plan setting out short, medium and long term schemes. Investigating and lobbying for the reintroduction of a local passenger service between Avonmouth and Filton (Henbury loop) is included as a long term scheme for implementation after 2011.

Greater Bristol Strategic Transport Study (GBSTS), June 2006

GBSTS tested a 2 trains per hour service on the Henbury loop. It found there would be a maximum of 50 passengers per hour each way. The overall increase in rail trips would have been modest as many of the Henbury line trips would have been people transferring from existing rail services. There would have been no impact on the highway network due to the small number of cars removed. With the low levels of demand GBSTS did not progress the scheme any further.

South Gloucestershire Local Plan 2006

The former station site at Henbury is not safeguarded in South Gloucestershire Council's Adopted Local Plan (January 2006). Policy T2 does, however, state that "Development of railway track beds and associated land which would prejudice their continuing use or reuse for public transport provision or rail facilities will not be permitted."

Network Rail Business Plan 2008 and Route Utilisation Strategy

Reopening the Henbury loop is not featured in Network Rail's Route 13 Great Western Main Line Business Plan (April 2008) covering the period 2009 to 2014. Looking beyond this period the Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS), managed by Network Rail, is looking at ways to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and development of the network. In June 2008 The West of England Partnership submitted evidence to the RUS process based on the Joint Local Transport Plan Rail Action Plan, including the Henbury loop as a long term scheme.

3. Sale of former goods yard at Henbury

After British Rail was privatised the remaining functions of the British Railways Board were transferred to BRB (Residuary) Ltd (BRBR). The company, owned by the Government, reports to the Department of Transport (DfT). BRBR's Property Review Group is responsible for the management and disposal of its remaining land and buildings, which are surplus to the needs of the operational railway. BRBR are required to consult with the rail industry, the DfT, relevant devolved administrations, local authorities and regional planning bodies, and to consider whether surplus land has an alternative transport use.

The table below provides a timeframe for the processes behind the sale of Henbury station.

Date	Action
2006	<p>BRBR consulted local authorities to establish whether there was a business case for retaining the site for transport use.</p> <p>South Gloucestershire Council responded on 6/6/2008 stating the site should be retained for reopening the route and as a potential multi modal interchange. No project sponsors or funding were identified.</p> <p>Bristol City Council responded on 18/9/06 stating the site should be retained for reopening the route, use as a new station, bus interchange and freight aggregates terminal. No project sponsors or funding were identified.</p>
January 2007	<p>Government Office for the South West (GOSW) circulated an email to local authorities updating them on current sites for proposed land sales. Henbury goods yard was included on the list. No reference made to 2006 consultation.</p>

Date	Action
25 April 2008	Via email BRBR inform the original 2006 consultees (including Bristol City Council, South Gloucestershire Council, GOSW, the South West Regional Assembly, Passenger Focus and the South West Regional Development Agency) that the former goods yard has been conditionally released for sale to South Gloucestershire Council with discretion to dispose of the site on the open market if a sale is not “completed or substantially completed within one year.” BRBR did not contact the other authorities either directly or via the West of England Partnership Office.
13 June 2008	South Gloucestershire Council inform BRBR they have no interest in purchasing the site. In coming to this decision the Council took a number of factors into account including: previous studies (GBSTS and Rail Routes); availability of more direct bus services; safety issues arising from a curved platform and the possible need for an alternative site; its potential cost and Henbury’s status as a long term aspiration in the JLTP. Taking all these factors into account the purchase of the site in the short term was not felt to be justified.
October 2008	Site is put up for auction and placed on the BRBR Land Sales website six months after the offer of sale to South Gloucestershire Council. Other consultees were not informed of this decision.
30 October 2008	Site sold at auction for £0.75m.
26 November 2008	Sale of former goods yard site discussed at South Gloucestershire full Council meeting.

These actions show that the local authorities made representations for the retention of the site for railway purposes. BRBR decided to sell the land and offered South Gloucestershire Council the option to purchase it. With no sale the land was put up for auction. BRBR did not inform other local authorities and the West of England Partnership of this decision.

For information the guidance on the disposal of former rail sites issued by the Department for Transport in July 2007 states that the BRBR “is expected to achieve the best consideration reasonably obtainable including when disposing of sites to other public bodies.” Even when sites are disposed of for sustainable transport use the guidance advises that the valuation “takes full account of any alternative sources of funding and secures values for money.”

BRBR, therefore, would have still been required to get the best possible price had they sold the land directly to a local authority.

The sale of the site does not preclude a station in the future. A S106 agreement attached to any future planning application for the former goods yard site could provide a contribution to a station at either an alternative site (see below) or if possible within the former goods yard site.

4. Lesson for Future Railway Land Sales

The need for all parties to communicate and share information over future railway land sales is evident.

The sale of the former goods yard at Henbury was discussed at South Gloucestershire's Full Council meeting on 26 November 2008. It was recognised that there is a need to ensure that other affected authorities and the West of England Partnership office are kept informed of similar approaches in the future. South Gloucestershire Council remain committed to improvements to public transport in the area and the longer term aspiration to reopen the Henbury loop.

The West of England Partnership Office is now on the BRBR circulation list and will act in a co-ordinating role to ensure all parties are fully informed and engaged and cross boundary and strategic issues identified and discussed.

Rail sites likely to be coming up for auction in the future include Westerleigh (land by the Oil Terminal), where South Gloucestershire Council have been granted a licence for a cycle path. BRBR are also in discussions with South Gloucestershire Council on the disposal of the Former Coal Yard at Patchway.

5. Alternative Station sites

If a station were proposed on the Henbury loop an alternative site may be required. The Office of Rail Regulation's Railway Safety Principles state new platforms should be straight. The track at Henbury is curved and this leaves a gap which increases the stepping distance between trains and the platform. Sight lines along the platform for the safe dispatch of trains can be impeded. As curved track is generally on a slant it is more difficult for passenger to board and get off and especially for the mobility impaired.

The Department for Transport still uses the Strategic Rail Authority's 'New Stations – A Guide for Promoters, September 2004,' which clearly states "Although many existing stations have platforms on curved track, new platforms are required to be straight. The safety aspects and operational implications of curved platforms are not generally acceptable for new stations."

The Bristol – Avonmouth – Filton Rail Routes Study (2003) suggested a possible site to the west of the former station.

6. Other Re-opening Issues

Both the Rail Routes Study and GBSTS found there was low demand for rail services. As already noted GBSTS found many trips were simply transferring from existing railway services. The Rail Routes Study suggested a £7 per passenger subsidy is needed.

Demand should improve with up to 2,000 new houses planned for the area north of the railway line. Further work would be needed to assess the impact.

A station at Henbury would provide the closest rail link to Cribbs Causeway. Citing previous experience the Rail Routes Study recommended that a feeder bus should

not be established to link Henbury with Cribbs Causeway. The Study states the demand for retail related bus services that require additional interchanges are not high and do not justify the investment.

At present, relatively direct bus routes serve the Henbury and Filton areas to Bristol City Centre. Other than for journeys to Temple Quay it is arguable, in current circumstances, whether a Henbury loop passenger service has any advantage over more direct bus services.

Two other rail schemes, re-opening the Portishead line and the Greater Bristol Metro (see below) are being progressed through the Regional Funding Allocation.

Given these issues it is open to question whether reopening the Henbury loop should be a priority ahead of plans for Portishead and the Greater Bristol Metro. A reopened Henbury loop would complement and build on the Greater Bristol Metro.

7. Regional Funding Allocation Major Scheme Bids

In October 2008 the West of England Partnership submitted two significant expressions of interest for inclusion in the South West Region's 10 year Regional Funding Allocation:

- Greater Bristol Metro for improving cross Bristol services between Weston-super-Mare and Yate
- Re-opening the Portishead Line.

Greater Bristol Metro Bid for RFA Funding

A key priority for the West of England is developing a 'Greater Bristol Metro' style network of cross Bristol rail services including:

- Enhanced half hourly clock face services on Yate to Weston-super-Mare and Cardiff to Westbury via Bath and Bristol corridors.
- New high capacity rolling stock – faster acceleration, more economical, multiple doors. This is additional rolling stock and it is not to replace existing units.
- New infrastructure including Weston-super-Mare bay platform and Yate turn back.

This will complement First Great Western's proposed bid for 11 new four carriage trains on the Cardiff to Portsmouth route.

It supports employment and housing growth in Weston-super-Mare, Yate, Keynsham, South Bristol and Bath and the draft revised Regional Spatial Strategy (July 2008) Policy HMA1 to tackle congestion on the corridors between Yate, Bristol and Weston-super-Mare.

Re-opening of Portishead Line Bid for RFA Funding

North Somerset Council has recently published a study into re-opening the rail link to Portishead (September 2008). The study examined several different options relaying the track between the Portbury Dock Spur and Portishead with new

stations at Portishead, Ashton Gate and Pill. This study forms the basis of the RFA expression of interest.

9. Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways campaign

In October 2008 the Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR) launched a postcard campaign calling upon the West of England Partnership to include reopening the Henbury and Portishead lines to passengers in their Regional Funding Allocation transport bid to the South West Regional Assembly.

To date over 1,000 postcards have been sent to the West of England Partnership. With around 3,000 postcards handed out this is a very respectable response rate. Given that people had to provide their own stamp it is also an indication of the depth of support for improving rail services. A general summary of the sort of comments made is given below.

- Support for re-opening the Portishead line – majority of all comments and not just people from Portishead
- Lack of road access to and from Portishead and the need for a rail line
- Concern that development in Portishead in recent years not matched by access improvements
- Portishead line would reduce journey times, ease congestion on the A369 and promote tourism
- Limited comments on Henbury with services linked to development in the North Fringe, Cribbs Causeway and Bristol Zoo's proposals
- General comments about the train as a sustainable, environmentally friendly option

The postcards come from across the West of England area as shown in Figures One and Two.

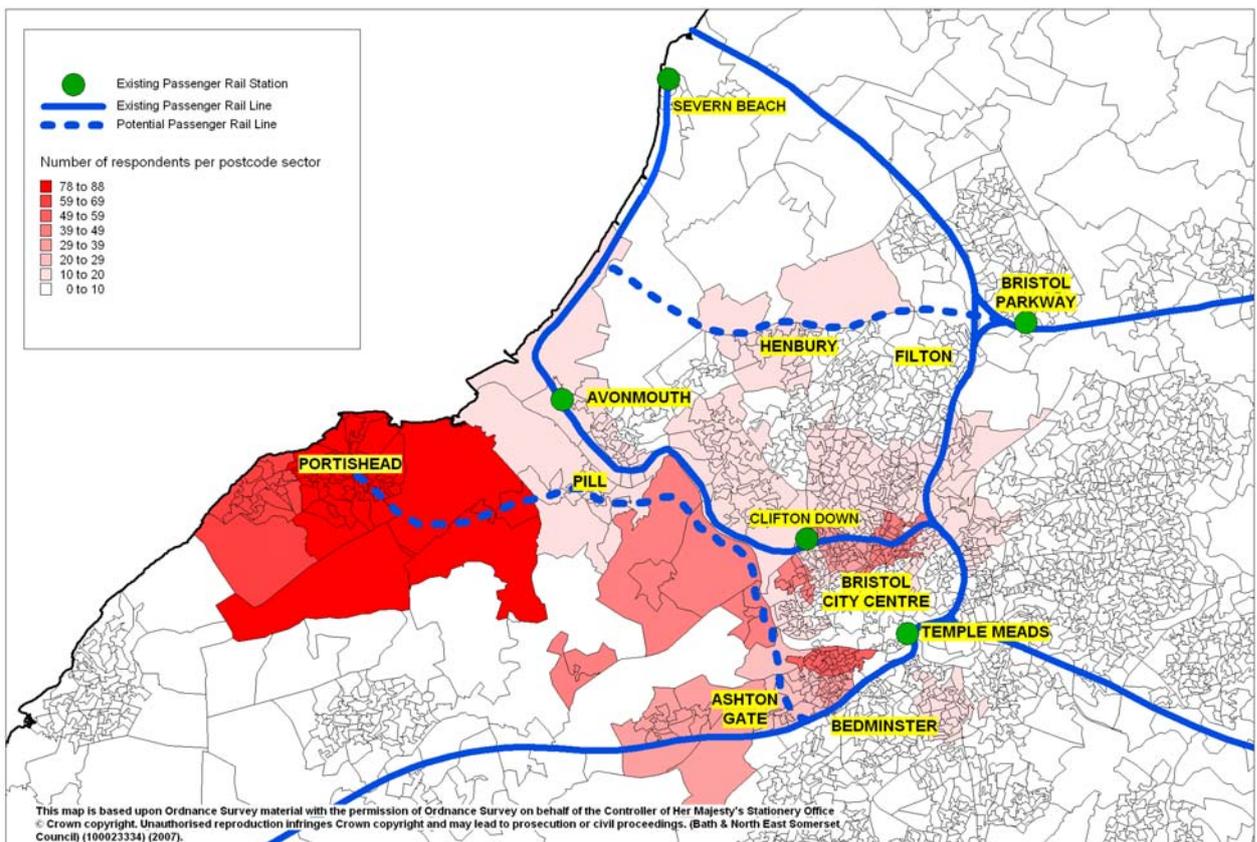
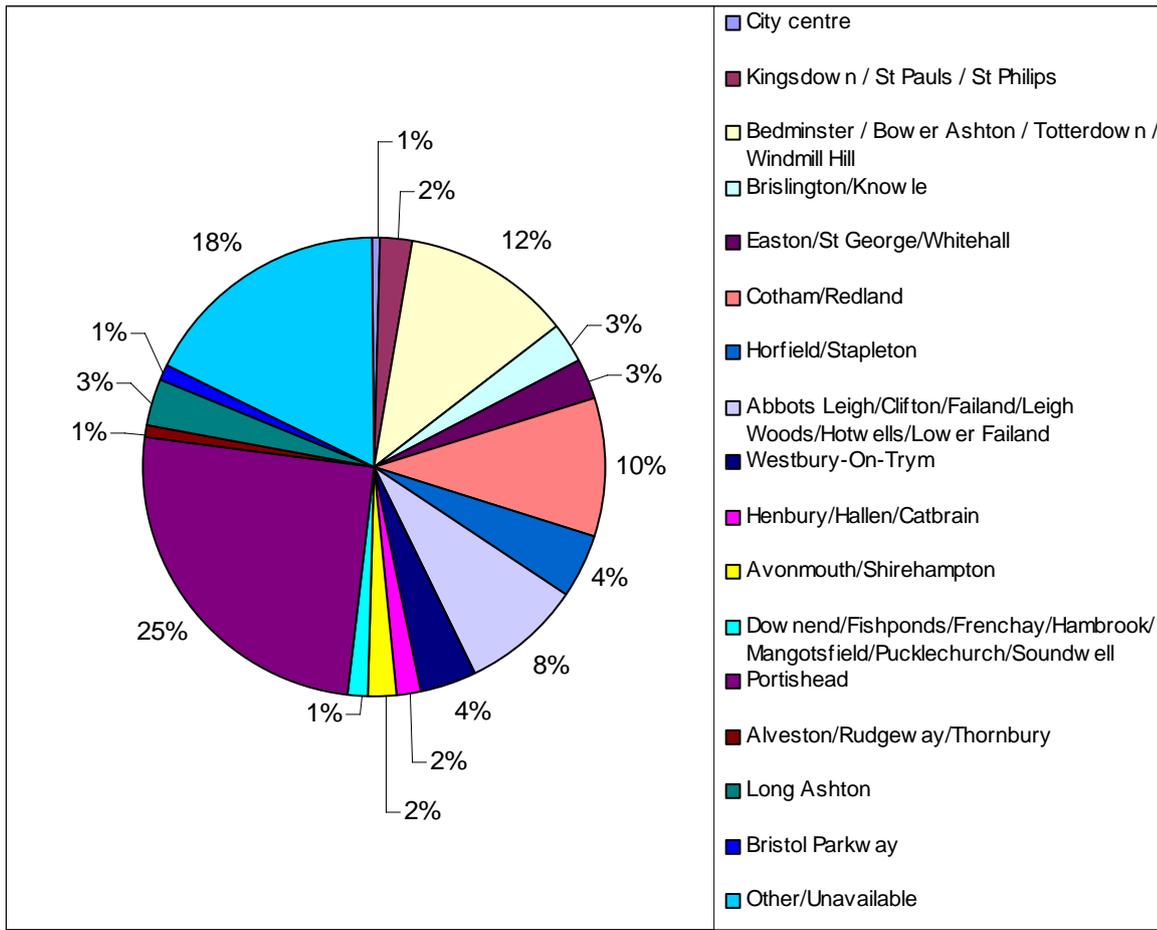


Figure One: Postcard responses by area



Figure

Two: Postcard responses % breakdown by area

Support is strongest from Portishead at 25%. In contrast only 2% of all support came from Henbury. This may reflect that not many cards were distributed in the Henbury area or that demand for a reopened Henbury railway line is not high compared to Portishead.

A rally was held outside Wilder House on 21 November 2008 to demonstrate public support for reopening the two lines. Together with the postcard response FOSBR took their campaign to the South West Regional Assembly's Transport Board on 27 November 2008.

10. Conclusion

The sale of the former goods yard site at Henbury does not preclude a future station or passenger services. New processes will ensure that all partners work together on future railway land sales.

If a new station were to be proposed on the Henbury loop a new site may well have to be found to meet the Office of Rail Regulation's requirements for new platforms to be straight. The demand for new services and a station needs careful consideration and would require further work given the low levels of passenger use forecast by previous studies.

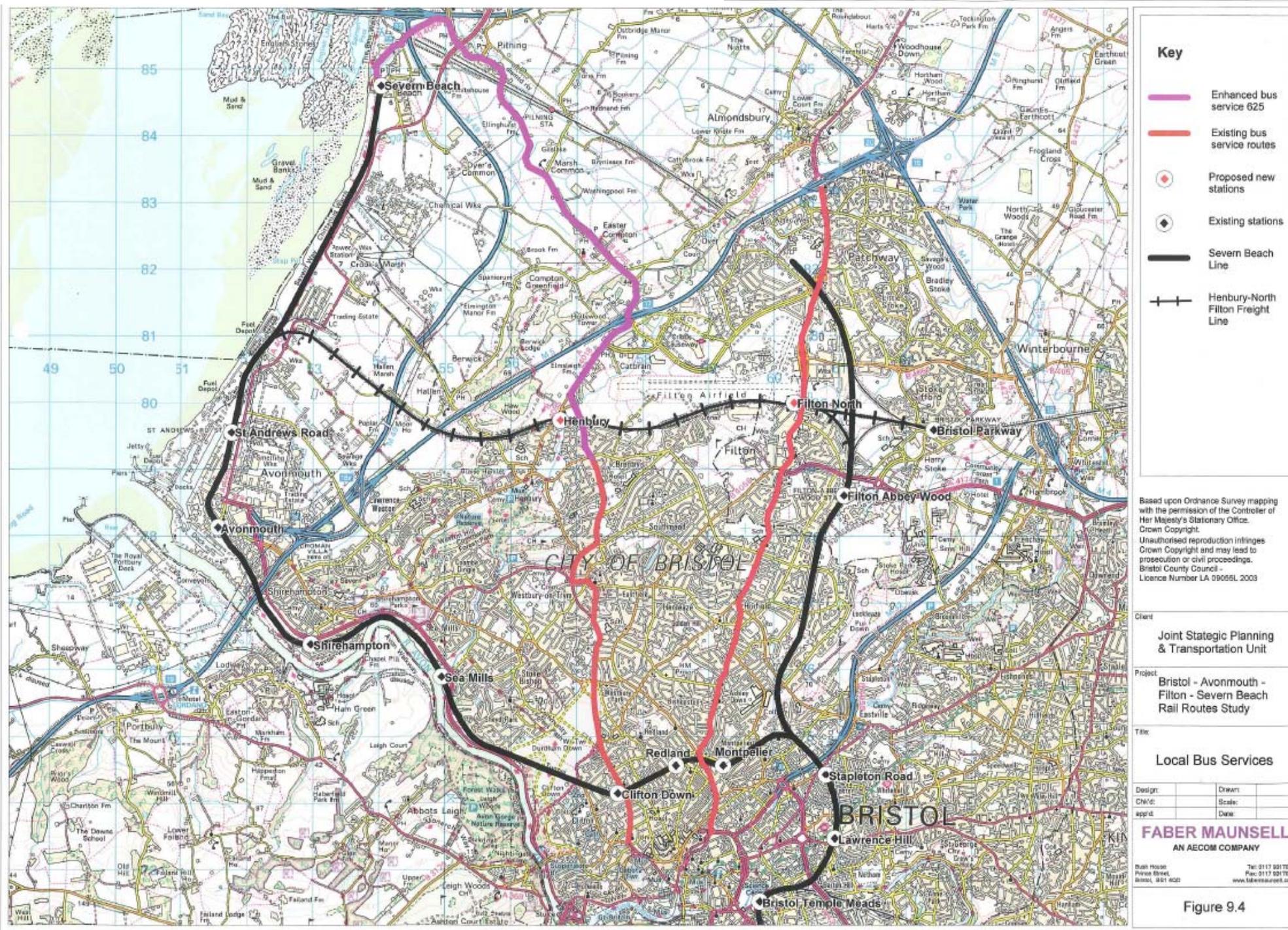
Two key rail bids, for Portishead and the Greater Bristol Metro, are being made as part of discussions on the Regional Funding Allocation. Both present a stronger case for funding with higher passenger levels and benefits. Whilst not ruling out a future long term bid for the Henbury loop, which would build on the Greater Bristol Metro, priority now should focus on delivering the two existing rail bids.

11. Recommendation

That this report be noted.

James White
Group Leader Transport Policy
West of England Partnership

Appendix One: Henbury loop route map
(from Bristol – Avonmouth – Filton Rail Routes Study, 2003)



Key

- Enhanced bus service 625
- Existing bus service routes
- Proposed new stations
- Existing stations
- Severn Beach Line
- Henbury-North Filton Freight Line

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Client
Joint Strategic Planning & Transportation Unit

Project
Bristol - Avonmouth - Filton - Severn Beach Rail Routes Study

Title
Local Bus Services

Design:	Drawn:
CHK'd:	Scale:
app'd:	Date:

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Figure 9.4