



Local Authorities' Central Railway Consortium

Briefing Note: February 2002

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What is the Local Authorities' Central Railway Consortium (LACRC)?

19 local authorities have come together at the suggestion of South Bucks District Council to address common concerns about the Central Railway project. We are pooling information and resources to track and react to the proposals and are seeking to influence the Central Railway debate. We want to ensure that approval is not given to the Central Railway proposal unless, or until, its contribution to a national rail freight system has been established, and the needs and concerns of our local communities have been met. Other Councils are currently considering joining LACRC.

What is the Central Railway project?

Central Railway plc wants to build and operate a 672km-long freight railway between the north-west of England and northern France via the Channel Tunnel, mainly along under-used and disused railway corridors. The route is described in an appendix. By offering a roll-on-roll-off service for lorries, the company claims that it can take much UK-Continental freight traffic off the roads. Currently, most railway bridges and other structures are too low, and the sets of tracks too close to each other, to accommodate standard lorries and trailers. Central Railway says that the width and height proposed on its system will overcome these problems. During the mid 1990s, Central Railway promoted a scheme under the Transport & Works Act that involved a freight route scheme linking the Midlands and France via London. This failed at parliamentary approval stage. The latest scheme preferred by the company would involve providing a freight line between Liverpool & Lille, without passing through London, including a new section of railway around the west side of London, inside the M25. Central Railway's website, recently updated, www.central-railway.co.uk is a source of information about Central Railway's proposals.

Why are we concerned?

Local authorities want to see freight transferred from roads onto railways, but are concerned because of:

- The lack of any substantive or convincing assessment of the environmental impact of the Central Railway project.
- Doubts about its suitability as a strategic transport solution due to its lack of integration with the rest of the British rail network. Freight destined for Central Railway's proposed regional terminals will arrive by road, often from great distances.
- Doubts about the financial viability and feasibility of the project. Central Railway predicts a 40% share of the cross channel freight market. Work done on behalf of the Consortium by Arup Transport Planning suggests that the forecasts can only be realised if there is a substantial switch from accompanied roll-on roll-off traffic to unaccompanied movement.
- Technical concerns relating to track construction and operation. There are also problems with re-using closed alignments, e.g. much of the former Great Central line has been assimilated into surrounding agricultural land, or been built on and parts of the proposed route also run through existing urban areas and in places already have planning permission for incompatible developments.
- Conflict with existing rail services. e.g. Chiltern Railways currently operates a very successful service between Birmingham and London. The Consortium has been advised that the frequency and pattern of services that would be operated by Central Railway would be incompatible with Chiltern Railways services and would adversely affect their operation.

- Concern about the environmental impact of the length of new railway, particularly along the M25 stretch and the demolition of, and adverse impact on, properties
- Many other issues, set out in a comprehensive report (see below) which require in-depth study and which have not been fully addressed by Central Railway.
- Inadequate examination of alternatives and an absence of cost benefit analysis of fundamental route choices around London, Rugby and Leicester in particular.

What stage has the project reached?

Central Railway is no longer seeking approval via the Transport and Works Act and is pushing the Government to promote the scheme through a Hybrid Bill. This procedure allows the Government to obtain approval for a scheme that is implemented by the private sector (for example, the Channel tunnel rail link). LACRC considers that the use of a Hybrid Bill would deny people the rights of a proper hearing in front of an independent inspector. In the absence of an environmental statement and other details about the project, and in view of the ever-changing and confusing nature of the scheme, LACRC considers that it is unreasonable for Central Railway to ask the Government to back the project. Given that the location of terminals and track is not yet fixed, we believe that an Act that would permit the scheme to proceed, along with the associated compulsory purchase, would possibly be legally flawed and certainly contrary to the principles of natural justice.

It is noticeable that the Strategic Rail Authority's plan for the railways published on 14 January 2002 includes no reference at all to the Central Railway project.

What is the Government's position?

The Government is considering whether to promote a Hybrid Bill. It asked the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) to examine the Central Railway proposal and to identify the factors that are critical to the success of the project. The SRA appointed consultants Oscar Faber and Mouchel to advise it. Having assessed the advice, the SRA sent its report to Ministers at the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DLTR) in the autumn of 2001. The Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Stephen Byers MP is expected to make a statement about the Government's position very soon.

What has the SRA advised?

We do not know officially. We have been told that the SRA's advice will not be published. However, the SRA's press office recently issued a statement, apparently in error, which stated:

"The SRA has advised Central Railway that Government backing for the project cannot be given at this time because there are some fundamental issues that need to be resolved through further study. These include the High Speed Line, the cross-Channel market and the review of all the potential schemes that can deliver 10 Year Plan targets and beyond. More work is required on terminal design/development, resource planning and timetable development to deliver robust proposals" Although the statement was subsequently withdrawn, LACRC believes that it reflects the SRA's position. This suggests that the SRA agrees with many of the key concerns expressed by LACRC. Central Railway asserts that the SRA has backed its proposal.

What action is the Consortium taking?

The Consortium has presented a comprehensive report on the Central Railway scheme to the SRA, Government Ministers and MPs setting out its key issues and concerns. This is available at www.southbucks.gov.uk/lacrc.pdf. Central Railway has prepared a rebuttal report which is available at <http://www.central-railway.co.uk/inprogress/business.shtml>. LACRC will be further challenging points made by the Company.

Some of the key work that LACRC has carried out, both collectively and individually, is set out below:

- Organised a very successful conference about the project and the direction of rail freight, with particular reference to Central Railway. Speakers included Lord Berkeley, Chairman of the Rail Freight Group as guest speaker. The conference was the forerunner to establishing the Consortium
- Employed and managed parliamentary agents to advise on Central Railway
- Met with Adrian Shooter of Chiltern Railways to establish the Company's concerns about CR and subsequently to arrange contact between our consultants and Chiltern
- Met Central Railway, with other Consortium members, and attended CR presentations to outline our concerns and to seek/ request further information
- Provided questions for the House of Commons Select Committee's consideration of rail freight
- Employed consultants, Arup, to prepare a report on the financial and technical aspects of the CR scheme
- Prepared a detailed submission on Central Railway to the Strategic Rail Authority (copied to Ministers, MPs and important organisations)
- Issued press releases, dealt with follow-up enquiries and gave radio interviews
- Met with the National Central Railway Action Group (NATCRAG) and established liaison on all matters
- Responded to SRA consultation documents on rail freight
- Sent information on Central Railway to all sitting MPs and Prospective Parliamentary Candidates at election time
- Sent a letter to Secretary of State, Stephen Byers, and other Ministers outlining our concerns about CR and urging him not to promote a Hybrid Bill
- Provides regular updates to MPs
- Prepared an Early Day Motion, below, tabled in the House of Commons in October 2001 by Dominic Grieve, MP for Beaconsfield. The motion received cross-party support and was signed by 31 MPs:

"That this house welcomes the establishment of the Local Authorities Central Railway Consortium by 17 councils with a combined population of nearly four million people to address the common concerns about the Central Railway Project; notes that the Central Railway scheme involves the construction of a 627km long freight railway between the north west of England to northern France via the channel tunnel, offering a lorries on trains service; regrets that the promoters have failed to undertake any substantive assessment of the environmental impact of this massive project, to provide evidence that it would integrate effectively with the existing rail freight network and not disrupt passenger services on the Chiltern Line, or to show that lorry journeys to the proposed huge freight terminals would not substantially increase heavy goods vehicle mileage on congested roads and motorways; observes that Arup Transportation, on behalf of the consortium has raised serious concerns about the construction costs and financial viability of the project and its advisability as a strategic transport solution; views with alarm the intention of the promoters of the project to persuade the government to fast-track its progress by introducing a hybrid bill rather than allowing normal consideration under the Transport and Works Act 1992; and whilst supporting a shift of freight from road to rail, invites the minister to decline to be pressed by Central Railways into a premature acceptance of the project unless and until the legitimate concerns of the Local Authorities Central Railway Consortium have been properly addressed."

What else can be done?

We think it could be constructive if future dialogue directly involved the Strategic Rail Authority.

Recipients of this briefing note might wish to write to

- a) Stephen Byers MP, Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (Eland House, Bressenden Place, London SW1E 5DU) urging that he should not support this scheme and that he should not be "bounced" into a decision on a Hybrid Bill prior to careful consideration of all issues;
- b) their own MP at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA asking him/her to make urgent representations to the Minister

Further Information

This briefing note has been issued by Paul Geehan, Director of Communications at South Bucks District Council. (paul.geehan@southbucks.gov.uk) More information on the work of the can be obtained from him on 01753 676205 or from Rebekah Walters on 01753 748382 (rebekah.walters@southbucks.gov.uk) Central Railway's website is www.central-railway.co.uk

Appendix

The Route of the Scheme

The latest scheme preferred by the company would involve providing a freight line between Liverpool & Lille, without passing through London. The route would involve:

- Largely existing track between Bootle Docks and the Pennines, including an upgrade of short sections of disused and dismantled track
- Reinstatement of disused track between Hadfield and Sheffield
- Refurbishment of the former main line freight track, which carries local passenger trains, north of Leicester
- Either refurbishment of the former Great Central Railway between Leicester & an area south of Rugby or the provision of a new track east of Rugby alongside the M1
- Reinstatement of the dismantled Great Central Railway south of Rugby to Ashendon
- The Chiltern Line between Ashendon and Gerrards Cross with new track and additional facilities for existing services
- Construction of a new track around the west side of London, inside the M25
- A major tunnel under the North Downs
- Addition of tracks to the existing lines from the M25 to the Channel Tunnel

Road/rail terminals would be provided at strategic points to the motorway network in the following areas:

- Liverpool Docks
- M6/M62 junction
- M1 at Sheffield
- M1 at Toton
- M1/M6 junction
- West of London close to M25/M40/M4 and Heathrow
- Near Lille

Other Information

Central Railway is currently consulting a wide range of organisations on a document entitled: "Central Railway: Appraisal and Assessment"