

THAMES VALLEY BRANCH

Newsletter 98 September 2020

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RAILFUTURE WEBINAR: Saturday 03/10/2020 11.00 – 12.30 “Attracting passengers back to rail”

This is a free-to-join [zoom](#) event but please register in advance (see below)

Chris Page, Railfuture Chair says: "Britain's railway faces its greatest threat since the Beeching cuts in the 1960s. Because of COVID-19 patronage fell through the floor and has only partially recovered. The government will not be willing to keep the railway afloat at vast cost indefinitely. Fare income from passengers is vital. The public must use the railway or risk losing it. Rail travel must be safe, value for money, punctual, convenient and enjoyable. We have five speakers from the rail industry representing organisations that can offer expert advice and/or take the necessary actions to encourage the public to use our railway."

Join from 10:45, webinar starts at 11:00 and finishes at 12:30

Speakers: [Charlene \[Charley\] Wallace](#), Director for National Passenger & Customer Experience, Network Rail; [Jacqueline \[Jac\] Starr](#), Chief Operating Officer (formerly Managing Director Customer Experience), Rail Delivery Group; [Linda McCord](#), Senior Stakeholder Manager, Transport Focus; [Ali Chegini](#), Director of Systems and Systems and Health, RSSB; [Malcolm Holmes](#), Executive Director, West Midlands Rail Executive ; Chaired by [Mark Valleley](#), Technical Lead, Transport for the South East.

The above is the full list of speakers. After presentations there will be a Q&A session.

For further details about the webinar or to book a place please see:

www.railfuture.org.uk/conferences/#2020_webinar or email webinar@railfuture.org.uk.

Chairman's Comment

This has been a very difficult period for the rail industry and I am pleased to see passengers are returning, albeit slowly, to rail and would urge members to travel; the trains are very clean, offering Swiss levels of punctuality. In the Thames Valley, I have been on a good number of journeys taking advantage of the pleasant travelling environment and have always had a seat, and never been over 3 minutes late. It is, however, clear that leisure travel is increasing but the days of the daily commuter may be history and

this will give us challenges ahead, in arguing for investment. It is also clear that to run a right time railway, there may need to be slightly fewer trains.

The Branch has adapted to the situation and as you will see in this newsletter, we have responded to various consultations and we also held our first zoom committee meeting and have been as active as possible. We are now looking to review our future campaigns, so please let me know if you think we are not lobbying for a realistic objective.

Richard Stow

Our branch media rep Dave Richardson was interviewed on BBC Radio Oxford on 7th September about getting passengers back onto trains; the situation may have moved on by the time you read this but you can listen here: <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Railfuture+in+the+news>

SUMMARY OF OUR BRANCH RESPONSE TO OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL LOCAL TRANSPORT & CONNECTIVITY PLAN

We welcome the broad principles behind the development of LTCP5 but are concerned about the lack of ambition in terms of what is delivered and how quickly. The priorities must be climate change and air pollution/health. For transport, these will only be delivered by reductions in private car use and a change from fossil fuels to electric power. The coronavirus pandemic must not be used as an excuse to slacken off on modal shift to public transport. Issues relating to the virus should be addressed by engineering design of buses and trains – protection of surfaces and operating crews, more generous seating spaces, size of vehicles and frequency of services to overcome overcrowding.

RAIL STRATEGY

The conclusions as to investment priorities are supported – in particular the Cowley branch line, Hanborough, Grove/Wantage, Didcot-Oxford enhancement and Begbroke. Completion of electrification to Oxford and also on East West Rail is vital if the County is to meet climate change obligations. Overall the programme lacks ambition in terms of timing. New stations and other enhancements must be in place before houses are built or new business developments are open – the example of Aylesbury Vale Parkway should be followed. In view of the importance of Oxfordshire to the UK economy, the County should use its influence with DfT, Network Rail and the Treasury to expedite these vital rail investments.

CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Delivering on measures to reduce climate change must be a priority for the Plan. These will only be delivered by reductions in private car use and a change from fossil fuels to electric power. Building on the list of current actions is to be welcomed. Rail electrification including on East West Rail should be added to the list.

CONNECTING OXFORD

The proposals, particularly the Parking Levy, are to be welcomed as they will facilitate modal shift and provide funding for vital investments including on the local rail network and sustainable links thereto. It has to be hoped that over time the example of Nottingham can be delivered in Oxfordshire.

TRANSPORT CORRIDOR CONNECTIVITY

The general approach is to be welcomed as is the suggestion of a new station at Grove/Wantage. The latter should be implemented much more quickly than the timetable suggested in the Rail Strategy. Swindon-Oxford rail services would be very welcome. The North Cotswold railway line should be added to the list of corridors and could enable housing and other developments to be diverted from other less sustainable locations. Hanborough Station is key to much of this. The County should use its influence with DfT and Network Rail to expedite these actions. We would welcome the approach adopted for the A420 being applied to all the other identified corridors but not restricting the routes to Oxford City but to other important destinations – hospitals and medical research, science hubs etc. With respect to the A40 between Oxford and Witney/Carterton consideration should be given to reusing the old railway track bed for a rapid transit route – trams, guided bus or heavy rail – to bypass the congestion on the A40 itself.

REGIONAL TRANSPORT NETWORK

The link to Cambridge is important for the interchange of science research etc but East West Rail should be the main solution. We welcome the County's opposition to the suggested Expressway as it would go against Climate Change policies. Any minor road investment in the corridor should just be to provide links to East West Rail stations. There should be early investment in electrification of EWR as well as appropriate provision of additional facilities for freight trains to provide the necessary long term

robustness for all south-north freight movements. Every effort should be made to divert HGV traffic using the A34 on to rail.

FREIGHT STRATEGY

The main issues relating to freight have been identified but we are concerned that there is an insufficient action plan to transfer more freight from road to rail, particularly new interchanges to permit transfers from freight trains to local deliveries by road vehicles smaller than HGVs, therefore permitting electric transmission. There needs to be increased investment along EWR for freight trains, for example the provision of freight loops permitting extra paths for all south-north rail traffic instead of HGVs on the A34.

We particularly support the references under freight delivery and new developments. For the latter, as well as future proofing all new housing, it is vital that under the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 they are built in sustainable locations, close to existing and future railway stations. It will also be appropriate to ensure that tourist destinations are easily accessible by walking and cycling and by bus from rail stations and are well advertised. A good exemplar is Blenheim Palace by the S3 bus from Oxford Rail station and by the 7 and 500 from Oxford Parkway although more publicity on trains would be appropriate.

The full response can be read here: <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/display2311>

Nigel Rose

REPORT ON INSTITUTION OF CIVIL ENGINEERS – SOUTH EAST REGION WEBINAR LECTURE BY SIMON BLANCHFLOWER, CEO OF EAST WEST RAIL CO LTD 16TH JULY 2020

Background

Simon started by setting out background to project. Varsity Line closed in 1967. EWR Consortium campaign included links to NE of Cambridge and SW from Oxford. Its more than just a railway project, connecting communities including MK, Aylesbury, Bedford. The Arc is an asset for the UK, constrained by lack of transport and housing. EWR will bring down OX-CAMBS city centre journey times to <2 hours. City centre-city centre is difficult by car. EWR opens up hinterland but last mile is vital and will provide facilities for overall journeys – seamless – information – fares. Direct cost savings for businesses, reduce cost pressures, increase labour supply. They are working with EEH Transport Strategy.

Challenges

Industry is trying to be different with track-train integration. EWRCO has a single focus on customer, researching who and why and are working with Network Rail and HS2. Funding started with PFI but now most will be public funded; still opportunities for private cash e.g. around stations. Must demonstrate value for money, be net + on bio diversity, net zero carbon. Must integrate infrastructure and train services, with background of delays to Williams Review and post-Covid. The company role is to drive NR work and provide case for Bedford-Cambridge, and outperform business case, with single point of accountability.

Delivery

Building on Oxford-Bicester delivered by Chiltern. Bicester-Bletchley has returned to nature. Vegetation clearance ahead of main works in Sept 2020. Down to Aylesbury is linked with HS2. Drainage improvements Refurbishing Bletchley flyover is not sensible; reconstruction underway with new WCML bridge and road closures. Now awaiting final investment decision from government in September. Bletchley-Bedford existing but was suspended, mainly school children. Converting from local commuter line to inter-urban. Closures of crossings; working with Borough on Bedford Station. Preferred route from Bedford to Cambridge is now confirmed and details being sorted using GIS mapping. Plan is for consent in 2022-24 with construction from 2025.

Nigel Rose

LAUNCH OF ENGLAND'S ECONOMIC HEARTLAND'S TRANSPORT STRATEGY: 14TH JULY 2020

England's Economic Heartland (EEH) covers the region from Swindon across to Cambridge involving 11 local authorities – effectively the Oxford-Cambridge Arc with the authorities surrounding it. The organisation is hosted by Buckinghamshire Council. It is hoping to be formally recognised as a Statutory Sub-national Transport Body similar to Transport for the North, Midlands Connect and Transport for the South East. It has been working on a strategy for some time and earlier surveyed businesses and residents as to what should be included. The draft strategy is open for consultation until 6th October.

The Launch event can be viewed at <http://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/latest-news/Pages/eeh-launches-draft-transport-strategy-underpinning-green-recovery.aspx>

The keynote speaker was Greg Smith, MP for Buckingham. He welcomed the strategy as timely post Covid 19 with the likely impact on demand for transport. The Select Committee's first post-Covid report had been on aviation, particularly freight. With the reduction of available belly holds, smaller airports will be more important and need ground connectivity. He said he was opposed to HS2 and the Expressway but very pro EWR. An opportunity to get on trains more locally. He recognised the debate about electrification; DfT had ordered bi-mode trains for EWR but he was excited about hydrogen. He opposed more M-ways, just improve local roads that residents wanted like a by-pass round Wing. RIS2 did not mention the Expressway. Decarbonisation is vital and electric cars may not be the best solution – they could be the “new diesel” in 20 years. He also stressed the importance of investing in digital. He offered to host an adjournment debate about the Strategy which would force a Minister to attend.

Martin Tugwell, Programme Director, EEH and President, CIHT, introduced the Strategy. Nothing is fixed about how we travel but transport remains vital for family life. EEH is the centre for advanced manufacture, life sciences, space and creative/digital but cannot take success for granted. Must have investment in infrastructure and housing. 35% live in small market towns – attractive but suffer from poor transport connectivity, which leads to travelling further and by car. CO₂ emissions from transport are still growing. A step change is needed but this is opportunity to develop new technical and business solutions. East-west connectivity is critical. Electrification of rail and road. More active travel. EWR and Cambridge Metro. Hubs in market towns. Freight is major pollutant so more capacity on rail needed for the region and the country. Three STBs had written jointly to DfT about need for Felixstowe to Nuneaton rail freight upgrades.

Two young transport professionals working at Oxfordshire and Luton took part in a panel discussion. Topics discussed included environmental opportunities, impact of house prices on transport decisions, first mile last mile issues, in 20 years half population will be 65+, access to town centres by walking and cycling – influenced by local plans and demography, overcoming DfT “silos” in allocating funds, transport investment alignment with environment and industrial strategies, role of town centres as collection points instead of home deliveries, importance of rolling programme of rail electrification – EWR to follow Midland Mainline, linkage with digital – timetables and ticketing, opportunity to make best to shape tomorrow today.

Nigel Rose

CONSULTATION ON EEH TRANSPORT STRATEGY - THAMES VALLEY BRANCH CONTRIBUTION TO RAILFUTURE'S “ONE” RESPONSE

We welcome the Transport Strategy overall as, if implemented and supported by central Government, it will further the long term needs of the Region in transport terms and go a long way to meeting decarbonisation objectives, while at the same time supporting economic growth. We also welcome the proposal to establish a Statutory Sub-National Transport Body.

However, we are concerned that a number of strategic projects, which are vital for sustainable economic growth, have not been included in the Investment Pipeline List.

The number one priority must be the delivery of East West Rail without delay. This must include full electrification and sufficient capacity for freight to provide not only for local needs but as a diversion route for north-south traffic and a full route for east-west traffic avoiding London. Platform lengths from day one should be sufficient to enable through running of trains typically operating on north-south main lines connecting with EWR. It should not be treated as an isolated “branch” line.

The necessary infrastructure should be provided in association with the build-out of EWR to enable the following through services:

- Oxford not to be seen as the western end of EWR – trains to continue at least to Swindon or further (Swindon is in the EEH).
- Some trains to/from Milton Keynes to start/terminate at Northampton to greatly improve connectivity from there westwards (There are currently not even buses to Oxford. Northampton is also in EEH). This would also liberate platform capacity at Milton Keynes.
- Milton Keynes (not Bletchley) – Aylesbury service to be through via High Wycombe to Old Oak Common.

- Aylesbury to Watford Junction via revived Croxley branch project .
- Some additional stations on EWR itself to be provided in association with new housing developments.

Other vital rail enhancement projects to the west of the region should be listed in the Strategy:

- Cowley Branch
- Oxford corridor capacity enhancement including the "Oxford metro" (Hanborough-Cowley)
- North Cotswold Line re-doubling from Wolvercote Junction to Hanborough
- Implementation of North Cotswold Line Task Force proposals including re-instatement to Stratford (supporting comments of Stratford Transport Group)
- Doubling or loops to enable enhanced (EWR)-Oxford-Radley/Culham-Wantage/Grove Parkway-Swindon services linking Science centres
- Oxford-Witney/Carterton via Hanborough to overcome A40 congestion and link major housing growth areas with centres of employment
- Re-opening High Wycombe-M Maidenhead-(Heathrow via Western Link)

Nigel Rose

GWR Thames Valley Stakeholder conference 8th September

The branch was represented at this virtual meeting. The timetable from 14th September is now up to about 90% with the Didcot – Paddington stopping trains and Saturdays Oxford - Paddington remaining hourly only. A third train per hour on Reading – Redhill on Saturdays and off peak on weekdays has started as the first step to a full 3tph service. These will run to Gatwick once platform works there are completed. Station improvements include works at Reading West on a new street level entrance, new cycle storage at Didcot (600 spaces) and Newbury (300 spaces) and a new Access for All bridge is planned for Theale. Track on the Bourne End – Marlow line will be re-laid this autumn. *Andrew McCallum*

GWR Cotswold Line Timetable Consultation

This was a zoom conference call on 7th September. There were no pressing issues raised and the new timetable has settled in well. The Cotswolds Line Promotion Group has been pressing for GWR to take over traffic flows and set fares from Worcestershire Parkway, with limited success. Members will note that through fares need serious revision from the Cotswold Line (they are far too high, for example Kingham- Cheltenham £33.50 Off Peak Return, no Cheap Day Returns). *Richard Stow*

Reading Green Park

The work is now continuing apace; we as a Branch are keen for Cross Country to stop on an experimental basis, forming a Parkway for Reading and the Kennett Valley.

Short Documentary on GWR & HS2: You might like to see this short film made by a Journalism course student, Adam Landau, as a final year project for which he got a mark of 95%!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rowt4_Y9Sok

Bourne End - Marlow

There is good news and no news here. Network Rail is scheduled to replace all of the jointed track between Bourne End and Marlow. The scheduled date is 14-19 November.

However there is no real news about the scheme to change the track layout at Bourne End to allow two trains per hour without a change at Bourne End, as happens now in the peak. This work would pave the way to have 2 tph throughout the day. Unfortunately some of the funding which we had successfully lobbied for from the Thames Valley LEP has been withdrawn, to fund business problems during the pandemic. Wycombe District Council, who also promised funding, having been subsumed into Buckinghamshire Council seem to have forgotten about it.

Although GWR are behind it, the whole scheme has unfortunately dragged on with NR seemingly making heavy weather. Firstly there were delays agreeing the revised track layout, although fortunately we are told it can be accommodated within the existing site. NR needed to do a level crossing safety audit, and now there are problems agreeing the signaling changes.

We are told there may be further line closures between 15-19 December, and 12-15 January. These may be to allow for overruns on the track replacement; it would be too much to hope that a start would be made on the 2tph layout changes.

Nigel Phillips

PHOTOS with an emphasis on EWR works. All EWR photos taken by John Elvin on 18/19th September 2020.



Work has started on a new 600 space cycle storage unit at Didcot Parkway, seen on 17th September. *Richard Stow*



Two Heathrow Express Class 387 Electric units stored in Oxford Up Carriage Sidings awaiting entry to service, on 6th September 2020. GWR Class 387s would have been operating to Oxford now had the Didcot-Oxford route been electrified as planned, but the stopping service from Paddington now terminates at Didcot. *Dave Richardson*



The old Swanbourne station platforms are due for removal with the edging stones having been recently removed for use at the Gloucestershire Warwickshire Railway.



One of the many construction sites being set up along the route. This one is east of Winslow. Note the haul road being built adjacent to the railway embankment.



Winslow station site. The cuttings may need re-profiling before the platforms can be built.



Just east of Calvert platforms, earthworks are underway for the new re-aligned route from Aylesbury to EWR.



Looking east towards Verney Junction showing the trackbed west of Bletchley has been cleared to facilitate access by construction plant & machinery.



Claydon level crossing and site of former station. The crossing will be replaced by a bridge with land already marked out for the construction.



Westward view of the currently disused Claydon loop with HS2 Depot construction site to the right. A third line will be laid right of the tracks for a freight loop and access to the HS2 depot.



Preliminary work west of Claydon loop where HS2 will pass under a raised EWR trackbed. HS2 is responsible for building all EWR infrastructure in the Claydon/Calvert area.



Looking east from Launton level crossing where a replacement bridge is under construction. The realigned road will cross EWR from left to right in the middle distance.

Edited by Andrew McCallum with contributions from Richard Stow, Nigel Rose & Nigel Phillips.