

Emergency Measures due to Coronavirus

Important

The **Wessex Branch AGM** scheduled for Saturday 18th April 2020 has been cancelled and members of the committee will remain in post for a further year.

The **Three Rivers Community Rail Partnership** has had to postpone operation of their **charter train** between Southampton and Fawley. The diesel special was scheduled to run on the same day as our Branch AGM.

Railfuture's National AGM scheduled for Saturday 27th June 2020 has also been cancelled.

Following news that the Dept. for Transport is allowing the operators to implement a revised timetable with a reduced number of services, the Railfuture Board stated its position: "We support this, because planned reductions with a defined timetable and regular service frequencies are much better than random cancellations without notice". The measure is necessary because of growing numbers of staff self-isolating and a fall in demand.

The Railfuture Board later reacted to the Secretary of State's announcement that franchises would be terminated and replaced by management contracts under an Emergency Measures Agreement. The Board's view is that there cannot be "business as usual" after the current emergency. The fares structure is in desperate need of reform and it's commonly recognised that the franchise system was already falling apart. Working from home is likely to prove popular with certain businesses, therefore it will be difficult to predict future levels of commuting in any refranchising exercise. Railfuture will be urging the rail industry to set in motion a wholesale restructuring of fares in readiness for a return to normality.

Our Wessex representative on the Board, Stewart Palmer, has been looking at concerns that operators are using the current emergency to scale back operations to a far higher degree than is necessary. Later first and earlier last trains will particularly inconvenience hospital staff who work shifts. In our area, SWR's service via Chandler's Ford has been suspended once again, and the company has closed booking offices at all but their principal stations. With operations back under public control, we should expect a public service ethos!

Network Rail Southern Region appealed for former signallers to return to work to help out as a result of the coronavirus crisis. Our IoW committee member and retired signaller, Stuart George, offered to work Ryde St John's Rd signal box if required. His offer was acknowledged by NRSR and he may yet be asked to help.

Restoring Your Railways fund

Since our last newsletter, we've been actively promoting the restoration of a passenger service over the freight branch from Totton to Marchwood and Hythe. Renewed interest in the Waterside Line project resulted from the announcement of the Government's £500m "Restoring Your Railways" fund. We were pleased that Railfuture's Board included the scheme in their shortlist of a dozen eligible projects across England & Wales in advance of their meeting with the Dept. for Transport, where discussions centred on the steps needed to build a case for successful funding.

Following lobbying of Hampshire Council Council by ourselves and our colleagues in the Three Rivers Community Rail Partnership, the Council decided to act as the Lead Sponsor, effectively reversing their decision in 2014 to place the project on the back burner. We also wrote to Waterside MP Julian Lewis (as did one of our branch members in the constituency) to enlist his support. What all parties recognise is the impending traffic gridlock which will result from the major development at Fawley Waterside unless steps are taken to reduce car use.

You can read more about the Waterside Line campaign on the "Wessex Railfuture" Facebook page and on the Railfuture website www.railfuture.org.uk/Missing+Links under the heading "Isolated towns".

Next up is a further round of New Stations funding. Clearly Welborne is front runner in our Branch area, but we will also be pressing the case for a parkway station at Wilton, which has strong local backing.

West of England Line news

The latest newsletter from the Salisbury-Exeter Rail Users' Group tells us that performance continues to deteriorate. There was not a single day in February when the performance target of 89% was reached, although this was partly due to flooding caused by successive winter storms. Station facilities have also deteriorated recently: the toilets at Yeovil Junction and Sherborne have been closed for some months and the waiting room at Crewkerne has again flooded.

SERUG continues to work with Network Rail on improvements in resilience and capacity that could be delivered via the CMSP process (Continuous Modular Strategic Planning). The draft plan is nearing completion and will define exactly what track doubling and signalling additions will be needed to make a step-change in service reliability.

Portsmouth Area News

Portsmouth International Port's little used freight siding at Fratton has been lifted by Network Rail as part of a plan to increase carriage storage with three new sidings being laid now with the proviso that freight facilities could be reconsidered if a case is made in the future.

During the 2019 General Election campaign, Portsmouth North MP Penny Mordaunt spoke about opening new stations at Paulsgrove and Copnor, and the idea was mentioned during a recent City Council climate crisis debate. *We wonder how these new stations could be funded but we'll be looking to ensure that greater use of rail for local travel is included in the forthcoming City and Local Transport plan reviews.*

After protracted discussions with the City Council about releasing the disused signal cabin at Portsmouth Harbour for community use, Network Rail have advised they need to retain the building for operational use. However, they would be prepared to allow other uses for the signal box at Havant ...*any ideas?*

Other News

Good news from Network Rail: Successful emergency work to reopen the section of line between Salisbury and Romsey affected by a landslip in mid February has now been completed three days ahead of schedule. Above average rainfall and flooding caused the embankment to slip, leaving the track unsupported over a length of about 20 metres.

Robin's Freight Roundup: There have been a few noticeable cancellations due to the Corona pandemic, the car trains to/from Southampton Eastern docks being a casualty. Ludgershall MoD sprung into life at the beginning of March when there were some movements to/from Dollands Moor and to Dereham (Norfolk) - the latter workings can be viewed on You Tube.

GWR franchise extended: The Dept. for Transport has directly awarded incumbent FirstGroup a new three-year contract to continue to operate Great Western services from the expiry of the current direct award on April 1 2020 until March 31 2023, with a possible extension of up to one year at the DfT's discretion.

Looking Ahead

We hope to arrange a Wessex Branch meeting that all members can attend later in the year, otherwise rest assured we'll keep you abreast of news. The Railfuture Board is planning a Webinar for later in the year.

Branch contacts

Chairman mike.southgate@railfuture.org.uk or **Secretary** tony.smale@railfuture.org.uk

Secretary's address: 63 Church Lane, Wool, Wareham BH20 6DD tel 01929 462116

Follow Railfuture Wessex on Facebook. We're also on Twitter @RailfutureWessx

You can see our Facebook and Twitter feeds via your PC – there's no need to be a regular user

Railfuture Ltd is a (not for profit) Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales No. 05011634.
Registered Office: Edinburgh House, 1-5 Bellevue Road, Clevedon, North Somerset, BS21 7NP (for legal correspondence only).