

Tram-train potential in Cambridgeshire?

Reinstatement of passenger services to Wisbech and Haverhill could form the start of a burgeoning network, suggest **PAUL HOLLINGHURST** and **PETER WAKEFIELD** of Railfuture East Anglia

Cambridgeshire is an area of strong economic and population growth, particularly around the city of Cambridge. However, nearby Wisbech and Haverhill, with growing populations of 35,000 and 27,000 respectively, both lost out from sharing this growth through poor connectivity with the city as a result of losing their rail services in the 1960s. Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) have commissioned a series of studies looking into their reopening. Subsequently, Network Rail's light rail team has linked the two projects, suggesting tram-train could be an ideal technology to use for the re-openings.

WISBECH

The Wisbech line is currently mothballed, with most of the track in place. The trackbed is unobstructed over its seven-mile length to March, where it joins the main line linking Peterborough and Ely.

Over 10 years a series of studies has produced a business case which shows the best benefit to cost ratio (BCR) of 4.4:1 is for a half-hourly through service from Wisbech to Cambridge. Recently Network Rail has objected to a planning application which would have partially obstructed the line, stating it 'intends to reopen the line in the near future'.

While the reopening would seem straightforward, obstacles include the large number of rights of way crossing the line, in particular farm crossings, which may require expensive measures. More fundamentally, paths have to be found through Ely to accommodate the half-hourly service, relying on the Ely Area Capacity Enhancement (EACE), which is currently unfunded, despite having a good business case. Even if EACE does proceed, whether the extra capacity it would create would be allocated to Wisbech services is unclear.

In December 2019 Network Rail's light rail team issued its 'Wisbech

TRAM-TRAIN ROUTES WHICH COULD BOTH LINK AND RUN OVER THE EXISTING CAMBRIDGESHIRE RAIL NETWORK



to March: Potential for Light Rail' report, which concluded tram, tram-train or Very Light Rail could all be used, but when the short- and long-term aspirations were taken into account 'a tram-train solution appeared the best credible light rail option', facilitating both operation onto the national rail network or on-street into Wisbech town centre or to a planned garden town, which would double the size of Wisbech. There is considerable potential for freight traffic too, though, so the track would need to be re-laid to heavy rail standards.

Network Rail is currently carrying out an options assessment, which will look at a wide range of options, including tram-train and introducing a shuttle between Wisbech and March until such time as paths are available through Ely.

HAVERHILL

During the 1950s Haverhill expanded as a London overspill town, but this did not protect the railway line from closure in 1967. Fortunately, the trackbed is still relatively unobstructed from its

junction with the West Anglia main line at Shelford through to Haverhill.

In 2015 CCC commissioned a 'Cambridge to Haverhill Corridor Study', which was used as the basis for Railfuture East Anglia's bid to the Department for Transport's Restoring your Railway (RYR) fund. It envisaged stations serving substantial settlements and businesses in Sawston, Linton, Granta Park and Haverhill, linking housing to jobs, education, healthcare and leisure in Cambridge.

The RYR result was announced in the autumn 2021 budget statement. The Haverhill proposal was found to be 'suitable for RYR funding in principle' and 'a good case for future development' and the DfT team was asked to 'keep the scheme under review for a future point' - but there was insufficient funding to cover the study.

Haverhill itself is just over the border in Suffolk, where Transport East, the recently created sub-national transport body, has identified the town in its 'State of Rail in the East' report as a 'growing place not served at all [by rail]' and will build Haverhill into an integrated rail plan over the next 12 months, working with government and industry.

Network Rail's light rail team noted the Railfuture RYR bid had potential as a tram-train scheme, stating this would reduce capital infrastructure costs and potentially tie in with other opportunities such as the Wisbech scheme. It would also give the opportunity to serve new housing developments in Haverhill as well as research parks south east of Cambridge, including Babraham and Granta Park.

NETWORK POTENTIAL

Network Rail's vision of a common tram-train fleet and depot could be the start of a flourishing tram-train network in the region and could link into future expansion, including a light rail network for Cambridge city. It needs the local authorities and the strategic transport bodies Transport East and England's Economic Heartland to embrace this vision. Restored railways to Wisbech and Haverhill provide the only sustainable, long-term, high quality public transport answer the region needs to support its rapidly growing economy and population.

Railfuture is Britain's leading independent organisation campaigning for a bigger, better railway. It is a voluntary group representing rail users, with 20,000 affiliated and individual members.