

## Railfuture East Anglia

### Whittlesea station audit

#### Introduction

This report details the findings of a station audit carried out by members of Railfuture East Anglia Branch at Whittlesea Station on Thursday July 13th 2017. The audit provides a snapshot of the facilities provided at the station and the perception of rail travel given to passengers. Suggestions are made on ways to improve the passenger experience that can be taken forward by the train operator and local authorities.

Whittlesea station is located on the Peterborough to Ely route around 10 km east of Peterborough and about 16 km west of March within Fenland District Council (FDC) area. The station is on the southern edge of the Whittlesey with housing to the north and an industrial estate to the south. The station is around 1km from the main A605 March-Peterborough passing through Whittlesey. The road to Benwick passes the station. The centre of the town is about 10 mins walk to the north.



**Picture 1: Whittlesea station approach from the town centre – without the station sign would people be aware of the station?**

The station serves principally the large town Whittlesey population of around 16,300. The FDC Local Plan (2014) indicates an allocation of 1000 new homes for the town. These houses will be to the east of the existing town and many would be within easy walking distance of the station.

The station has a relatively poor train service with 1 train every 2 hours off-peak in each direction. Westbound trains (down direction in railway terminology) travel to Peterborough 8 minutes away where the majority terminate. Eastbound services (Up trains) go to March, Manea, Ely, Bury St Edmunds, Stowmarket and Ipswich. Services are provided by Greater Anglia using 2 coach diesel trains. Greater Anglia has a franchise commitment to provide an hourly service on the Peterborough to Ipswich route and new rolling stock is due in 2019/2020.

In the early morning additional services to Peterborough are provided by East Midlands Trains and Cross Country trains. There is also a direct train service to Cambridge in the morning taking only 45 minutes but no direct return service in the evening.

Two other services run non-stop through the station each hour: Stansted Airport and Cambridge to Peterborough and Birmingham; Norwich, Ely to Peterborough and Nottingham, Liverpool. There are also many freight trains running through the station.

The annual footfall for the year 2015/16 was 28,456, an 8% increase over the previous year.

## Station Description

### Access and Parking

There are up and down platforms which have been cut back to approximately 2 car lengths, about 50/60 metres. They are staggered, that is, not opposite each other. Each platform has separate access from the road. They are not linked by footbridge. It takes about 4 mins to walk from one to the other via a traditionally manually operated gated level crossing operated by Network Rail personnel.

Although the station is unstaffed, the level crossing personnel provide a degree of supervision to the station and could provide information in times of disruption to services.

### North side

The main road access to the station car park and to the up platform from the town is immediately before the level crossing (on the north side of the railway). It is well signed for road traffic off the A605 all the way through Whittlesey town. There is pavement on both sides of the road but the path on the west side stops short of the station. The road is lit and there is a sign by the station entrance showing the direction to the town centre.

The pavement on the east side of the approach road from the town is overgrown and is starting to obstruct the route. There is also an electrical cupboard in a poor state or repair adjacent to the entrance. We understand that this area is part of the railway owned land. The area requires urgent attention.



**Picture 2: Overgrown vegetation on the pavement adjacent to the station entrance**



**Picture 3: The road from the town centre. The pavement on the west side stops short of the station**

There are frequent passenger and freight trains that mean the level crossing is closed for long periods causing a build-up of vehicles that can make access to the car park a slow process. Timing of journeys to the station is therefore fraught on occasion.





**Picture 4: The level crossing is frequently closed to road traffic creating uncertainty in journey time to the station. Town direction sign by entrance**



**Picture 5: There is a station information board adjacent to the road entrance**

The car park is informal and appears to "free". Nine cars were parked along the road leading to the up platform. There is no lining on the road indicating parking places. Many more spaces could be provided along-side the road and in a larger space opposite the up platform. Cars are parked close to the road entrance rather than adjacent to the platform. This could be for security reasons but also to minimise the walking distance to and from the platforms.

The road leading to the up platform takes at least 3 minutes to walk from the entrance gate. The north side of this road is unkempt with untended scrub trees growing alongside what appears to be an unguarded drop down into a lower level.

There is no protected walkway along the road even though HGVs visit the warehouse at the eastern extremity of the site. This untended and unmarked boundary continues all the way to a large space opposite the up platform entrance. The edge of this space is covered in many one tonne bags of spent ballast. These have been dumped, presumably by NR and are now being overgrown by the scrub.

There is no lighting alongside this overgrown 'lane'. The lack of both footpath and lighting combine to create a significant risk to passengers that needs to be addressed.

There is no signage off the main road indicating the distance to the platform nor its position. The platform cannot be seen from the road entrance so an unfamiliar user may not be aware of the platform location.



**Picture 6: Access to the up platform from the road is via an unlit shared route with no pavement. Unused ballast bags by the up platform**

## The South Side

The down side platform is immediately over the level crossing, accessed by a wooden wicket gate. This is straight off the road that leads to the former south (down) side freight terminal. A play school is situated immediately beyond the station entrance. This road is well cared for. There is no pavement for passengers to stand on as they enter the station.

Three cars were parked at the entrance to the downside platform.



**Picture 7: The entrance to the down platform showing steep ramp and direct access onto the road**

## Station facilities

The station has a pair of 2 coach length platforms staggered so that they are separated by some distance. Platform height is of a reasonable standard. The platforms have yellow lines close to the platform edge but no tactile paving. They are fairly narrow.

There are no ticket machines nor instructions of how to legally access the network. We understand that Greater Anglia intend to install ticket machines in 2018. The number and location of these machines is not known, although given the distance between platforms, this issue needs some careful thought and consultation with passengers.

Both platforms have old style help points to ask about train information.

There are no public address system, customer information screens or CCTV at the station.

## Up platform facilities

The original station building was on the up platform and its position is indicated by a fenced off grassy rectangle that currently has a signalling cabin built on it.

Access to the platform is by a footpath from the overgrown 'square' just before the warehouse entrance. The ramp to the platform does not meet DDA requirements as it is too steep.





Picture 8: Access to the up platform. The wall around the waiting shelter is in a poor state of repair

The only passenger shelter is provided by a tiny box-like structure that has a low two seater bench inside, naturally lit through a perplex wall. There is no electric light inside. The wall around the shelter is in a poor condition and needs urgent attention. Three tall columns provide lighting along the platform.

One low bench provides additional seating on the platform.

The platform was clean apart from some litter in the shelter.

A new covered bicycle shed with space for 10 cycles secured to 5 Sheffield stands has been provided. There were no cycles in it though one was secured to the information boards at the station entrance. This reflects the walking distance between the platforms.



**Picture 9: Up platform facilities: the unused cycle shelter, information board.**

There is a well presented framed map poster board showing local details.

All other maps, timetables, are displayed neatly at the exit onto the main road.

Given that there is no lighting along the access road, along which users will take at least three minutes to walk, this platform has little feeling of security. There is a strong sense of isolation.

### Down Platform Facilities

The down platform has a slightly more positive feel to it. It is located at the level crossing. As the level crossing is worked by a crossing keeper 24/7, there is always a human presence nearby. The ramp to the platform is also too steep to meet Equality Act compliance and is partially obstructed by signage posts. The gate at the end of the ramp leads directly onto the road.





**Picture 10: The down platform and information board**

This platform has a similar shelter to the upside and one low platform seat. Again, no lighting within the shelter. The platform is adequately lit by three tall columns. Information is neatly presented/concentrated at the platform entrance opposite the wicket gate and on the platform. The right-angled bend at the foot of the ramp provides an additional hazard for wheelchair and passengers with buggies.

## During the visit...

During our visit the station adopter arrived by a train from Manea. He rapidly cleaned the litter way very efficiently. He said that on three occasions recently he has had to deal with used needles and other paraphernalia of drug use in the isolated waiting shelter on the up platform.

Also, two separate maintenance teams were visible. One was cutting back vegetation along the approach road to the up platform and was making the site look much better even as we walked around. The other team was repairing fencing at the level crossing and cutting back vegetation to reveal signage giving foot and cycle directions to the town.

## Recommendations for further work

Proposals for a major upgrade to the station including longer platforms and a possible footbridge have been developed by Fenland District Council and the local Community Rail Partnership. Details were on display at the station and are available on the FDC web-site.

<http://www.fenland.gov.uk/article/7346/Whittlesea-Station-Masterplan>

The time scale for these plans is unclear. The following list suggests areas where short term improvements could be made to the station to improve the passenger experience whilst minimising any abortive work for the longer term proposals.

### Station Access and Parking

- Review signage on approaches to station to help promote the presence of the station and to provide better notice of the road junctions.
- Improve station visibility from the approach roads. Provide covered entrance facility to the station where local and train information, ticket machines etc. can be concentrated in one place.
- Provide better signage and maps for arriving passengers towards the town, pubs, restaurants, local specialities.
- Ensure that the road and footpath linking the station to the town centre is maintained and well lit.
- Provide additional secure and covered cycle parking on each side of the station.
- Add CCTV to the car park and platforms.
- Line out the car park spaces.
- Provide a new and well lit footpath from the up platform to the main road.

### Station facilities

- Remove cycle racks from the up platform and relocate near station entrance near main road. Unsurprisingly they are not used as whichever direction the user is going to, there will be 3 to 4 minute long unproductive walk to collect or place the bike on the up platform.
- Provide larger and lit platform shelters on each platform with seating
- Review signage to provide a clear way marked route to and from the town centre.
- Provide platform customer information screens on both platforms.
- The TOC should consult closely with the CRP as to the location of ticket vending machines when these are installed.

## Overall view

This is one of the strangest and most unwelcoming stations in East Anglia. It has obviously been given little tender loving care over many years and has been degraded by neglect into a rather shocking state. It is amazing so many passengers use it. They are obviously not valued.

We were heartened by the dedicated work of the volunteer station adopter whose work and enthusiasm is clearly visible.

We noted the imaginative work of the relatively new Hereward Community Rail Partnership. It has clearly recognised the problem and has taken on the distant authorities with some very exciting plans that are displayed on the station notice boards. We noted from those plans that it wishes to lengthen both platforms to 4 coaches long and at the same times bring them closer together in way that will unify the station and make the most of the large site. The park and ride possibilities of the site are enormous.

At first sight the idea of a footbridge linking them is strange but on visiting the station we can see it will be essential. There are many very heavy and long freight trains already. Passenger train users clearly know the timings of their trains but will have no way of knowing the timings of freight trains. The passage of a freight train will be a fairly protracted procedure at fairly random times. Many a passenger train will be missed by being on the "wrong side" of the crossing. A footbridge is essential to make it always possible to get the train a user wants to take. A journey must have certainty and be ended before it starts!

Note that given the nature of the road layout on either side of the crossing, even when modernised with barriers, will be a monitored crossing by CCTV and protected by signals; a safety procedure slower than the automatic barrier crossing.

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