

## Railfuture East Anglia - Thorpe-Le-Soken Station Audit

### Introduction and summary of findings

This report details the findings of a station audit carried out by members of Railfuture East Anglia Branch at Thorpe-le-Soken Station on Friday 24 July 2017. The audit gives a snapshot of the facilities provided at the station and the perception of rail travel given to the passengers.

Suggestions are made on the ways to improve the passenger experience at the station that can be taken forward by the train operator, Greater Anglia, and local authorities, Tendring District Council as the local planning authority and Essex County Council as the highway and transport authority.

The Local Plan indicates the need for substantial new housing developments along the Clacton-on-Sea Branch line. Rail travel will have to make a significant contribution to both commuting and leisure travel if the local road system is not to become severely congested.

### The Rail Service

Thorpe-le-Soken (TLS) is the junction for the Walton-on-Naze Branch on the Clacton-on-Sea Main line or the "Sunshine Line", as it is known locally.

The station has two trains per hour in each direction. The timetable allows passengers from the hourly fast London-Clacton-on-Sea trains to connect with a train stopping at all intermediate stations to Colchester Town or Walton-on-Naze. Passengers travelling from the Walton-on-Naze branch to Clacton-on-Sea or vice versa have a 25-minute wait.

The station had a recorded footfall of 137,476 in 2015/6, a 2% increase on the previous year. This figure indicates a 10% increase on the 2010/11 figure of 124,146. In addition to the number of journeys beginning or ending at TLS station there is a high volume of cross platform transfer of passengers between fast and slow services. ORR has estimated 260,367 interchanges for 2015/6.

### The Village

Thorpe-le-Soken (TLS) lies in the heart of the Tendring Peninsular in North East Essex. The station lies a mile outside the village on the road to the village of Little Clacton. A bus service between Clacton and Harwich serves the station.

The 2011 Census gave the population of TLS as 1,394 with some 4,590 people living in the nearby parish of Little Clacton and Weeley Heath. TLS provides a convenient railhead station for the fast commuter trains, saving the drive into Clacton itself.

The village is to see a further 500 dwellings built over the next ten years based on current approved plans. Further development of the adjacent Maltings site and former Station Hotel will be subject to local planning considerations, and could have a positive impact on regenerating the station area as well as increasing traffic demand.

## Station Description

The station was remodelled in the 1960's in connection with the electrification of the Clacton line. The Station entrance (Photo 1) houses a ticket machine, timetable and other notices and limited cycle storage and gives access to the former down main platform<sup>1</sup>. This platform now serves only to provide uncovered walking access between the street, car park, ticket machines, cycle rack storage and the footbridge to the island platform (Photo 2).



*Photo 1: Station Entrance*



*Photo 2: Platform and Footbridge*

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<sup>1</sup> In railway terminology, the down platform is for trains from London. The up platform is for trains to London.

The running line was taken out of use and the track lifted. The former Station Building and the eastern end of the platform have been fenced off. The building is well maintained and is in private ownership (Photo 3).



*Photo 3: Restricted access*

There is now a single island platform, which can only be reached via the footbridge. This makes the station difficult for elderly people and parents with young children and buggies or prams.

There is no provision for a lift and therefore there is no level access to trains from the street. Abellio Greater Anglia offer Passengers with Reduced Mobility (PRM) a taxi service from home to Clacton if they book in advance to make their train journey. Question: Is this facility widely known or promoted?

The island platform (Photo 4) to the east of the footbridge houses a ticket office, currently staffed from 05.15 – 22.45. The platform also contains staff accommodation, the former signal box, a passenger waiting room and toilets accessible with a key from the ticket office, and a privately run café area. The café has not been open for some time (Photo 5) and during our visit, the waiting room was locked out of use because of previous incidents of vandalism. Similarly the Gents toilets were also accessible only with a key from the Ticket Office due to vandalism. (Photo 6)





*Photo 4: Island Platform*



*Photo 5: Notice of shop closure*



*Photo 6: Access arrangements to Gents Toilet*

Beyond the limited older station building canopies, providing one carriage worth of cover there were no shelters provided for the bulk of the platform length. The 1960's footbridge is uncovered.

The departure screens are located above the door of the Ticket Office opposite the foot of the over-bridge. This is intended to give an obvious and easy view to people coming down onto the platform area. Regrettably because it faces west into the afternoon sun visibility was an issue on both occasions the audit team visited.

The island platform is signalled for bi-directional running and capable of handling 12-car long trains. Passengers need to be aware that trains depart in opposite directions from the same platform each hour.

Platform 1 is curved at the eastern end and the station buildings obscure visibility. Platform 2 is straight with good visibility along its entire length (Photo 7).





*Photo 7: Platform 2*

The platforms have no yellow strip and there is no raised pimple strip to indicate the platform edge for people with reduced sight. The platform height is low and on the curved edge presents difficulties in boarding and alighting from trains. A wheelchair ramp is available on the platform and is used to facilitate train-to-train transfers.

The island platform is very narrow either side of the ticket office and waiting room blocks. It means that a PRM using a wheelchair cannot be helped onto or off their train under the sheltered part of the platform canopy.

There is lighting on the platforms, stairs and station entrance area but not in the Car Park, which does not make for a safe and friendly environment.

## **Station Access and Signage**

Approaching the station from the Clacton direction there is a faded road sign (Photo 8), intended to direct traffic to the station. The presence of the railway is obvious because of the rail over bridge but the station would not be obvious to any traveller not already familiar with the area.





*Photo 8: Station sign*

Informal, off-street parking obscured the village sign (Photo 9) on the day of the audit visit.



*Photo 9: Village sign*



Approaching the station from the village, i.e. the opposite direction there was no signage or warning of a junction on a curve for people wishing to access the station car park and trains (Photo 10). The sign was knocked over in November 2012 and is still awaiting replacement. The first obvious railway sign is opposite the Station Entrance but is invisible from the main road (Photo 11).



*Photo 10: Approach to station*



*Photo 11: Station sign*



There are new industrial units on the station access road but the overall impression is one of the area being overgrown and rundown (Photo 12). Nobody is considering the railway or making it attractive.



*Photo 12: Overgrown area*

The bus stops were sited on the main road as conveniently as possible for the station. The service caters reasonably well for early morning and early evening commuters. There is an hourly daytime service but no buses after 6.30 pm. More limited services are run on Saturday and Sunday.

There is no Taxi rank and limited mobile phone signal so that passengers unfamiliar with the area and arriving without pre-booking need the assistance of local staff to make their onward journey to their final destination.

There is limited information given on the platform noticeboards about onward travel arrangements and the local map of the area did not extend to cover the village after which the station is named (Photo 13).



Photo 13: Onward travel arrangements

The very clear impression is that this is a commuter station primarily used by people already familiar with the area. There is little or no information for any discretionary traveller seeking to explore what the area may have to offer.

## Car Parking

There are some 20 car parking slots near to the station entrance and drop off point with a further 70 spaces provided in the main car park situated on the former goods yard (Photo 14). There are reserved spaces close to the station entrance for 2 Blue Badge holders and one member of staff.





Photo 14: Main car park

Car park lighting and safety at night were not observed but have been commented upon, as local youth tend to gather at the end of the car park in the evenings.

The Car Park machine did not accept the new £1 coin and we were told that it would be some time before NCP can convert the machine (Photo 15).

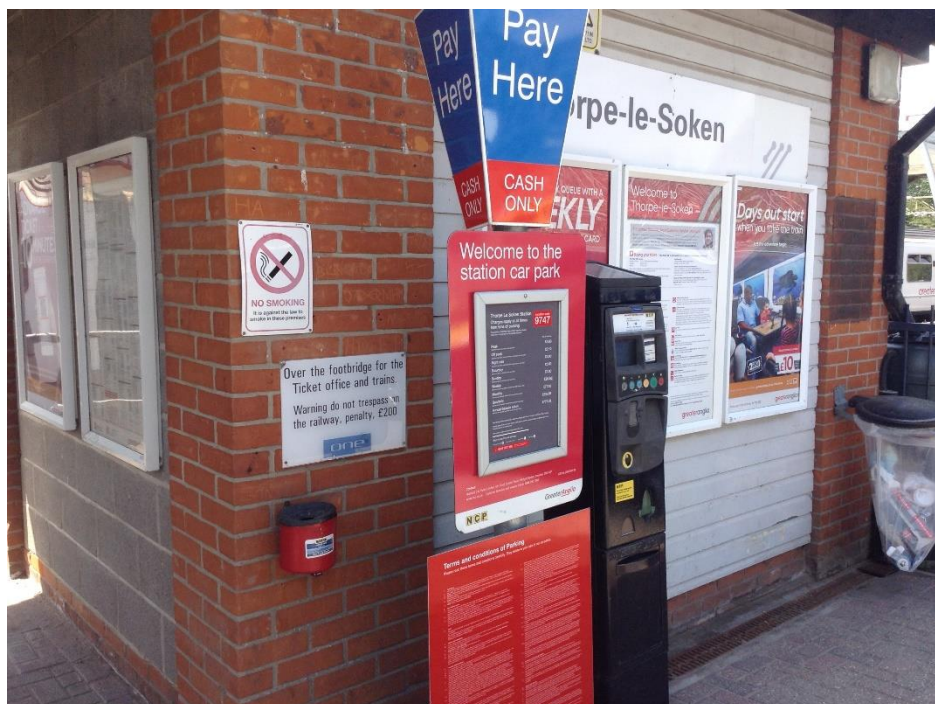


Photo 15: Car Park payment machine

## Cycle Parking

This has recently been extended by provision of a new rack system next to the Station entrance with its limited cycle storage. Provision appeared to be adequate at present and there is room for further expansion if necessary (Photo 16).



Photo 16: Cycle parking

## CCTV and Help Point

There are signs indicating the presence of CCTV cameras and these were sited to give views along the length of the platforms, the station entrance and cycle storage area.

The audit team was not aware of coverage of the main area of the car park away from the station entrance and turning area.

A help point offering connection to staff at the Colchester call centre for people in need of assistance is provided immediately outside the Ticket Office.

Wi-Fi is provided at the station but was not tried at the time of the visit.



## Recommendations for further work

The following list suggests areas where improvements could be made to the station to improve the passenger experience.

### *Station Access, Parking, Safety and Security*

Review signage on the approaches to the station including new signage to help promote the presence of the station. Signs to the station should be provided in neighbouring villages to develop its role as a railhead.

Provide better signage and maps for arriving passengers towards local villages and amenities. Consult the Parish Council and District Council Tourist Information service to identify any key features of the area.

Add CCTV to the Car Park and improve lighting to enhance the safety of the station late at night.

(Residential redevelopment in the immediate area may be the best route to securing an end to the vandalism and speed racing in the car park.)

Consider extending the bus service hours to support people returning from Colchester or London later in the evening.

### *Station Facilities*

Additional platform shelters at the Colchester end of the island platform

Lifts up to the footbridge (modern replacement being planned) are essential to offer access to mobility-impaired passengers.

Review signage to provide a clear set of information and to promote the railway and the local area

Provide modern information screens with antiglare protection to improve afternoon visibility.

Retain staff to assist travellers changing trains at this busy interchange station and to provide access to toilet and waiting facilities during a period of up to a 25-30 minute wait between trains.

## Overall Conclusion

Thorpe-le-Soken station, its environs and facilities appears to be stuck in the era of “managed decline and neglect”. This is completely at odds with its important and growing role as a railhead and interchange station.

The regeneration of the station area and adjacent sites will provide a good opportunity for bringing the whole wider site back to life and in keeping with the continued renaissance of rail passenger growth.

Railfuture advocate that a development plan be drawn up to enable the station buildings/facilities and its road approaches to be gradually redeveloped to be a modern fit for purpose interchange station at the heart of a growing area. Possible funding could come from the train operator’ station funding scheme and Community Infrastructure Levy from new local development.

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