

Long Stratton

- a new station for South Norfolk?



Summary

Railfuture believes there is a strong case for a new station on the Great Eastern Mainline between Norwich and Diss, sited near to the growing town of Long Stratton.

An additional 1,900 homes are projected for Long Stratton in the period to 2038 which will bring the population of the town to around 10,000.

Long Stratton lies midway between Norwich and Diss, and about 2 miles to the east of the Great Eastern Mainline. There are no stations on the line between Norwich and Diss, which at 20 miles is the longest interval between stations in the whole East of England region.

The provision of a station near to Long Stratton would not only serve the growing town but also act as a valuable new railhead for South Norfolk, much of which is poorly served by rail due to long journeys needed to reach existing railheads at Diss or Norwich.

A new station would bring the following benefits:

- Improved travel options for Long Stratton residents. A journey of 10 miles to the nearest railhead at Diss or Norwich would be cut to 2 miles and would encourage more rail based journeys.
- Improved rail access to a further 15,000 residents living within a 5 mile radius.
- A fast rail service to Norwich in as little as 10 minutes. This contrasts with an increasingly congested A140.
- Improved connectivity with towns and cities across the whole rail network
- Contribute to carbon reduction and local air quality targets.

Norwich in 90 need not be threatened. The station could be served by the additional third train per hour service committed under the most recent franchise without impacting existing services.



Figure 1: A template for Long Stratton? The new station at Kintore, Aberdeenshire, which opened in October 2020. Provided with good park and ride facilities, the station serves both Kintore itself (population 4,800) and the surrounding district

Introduction

This paper presents a case for the opening of a new station on the Great Eastern Main Line between Norwich and Diss. Its purpose would be to serve the growing town of Long Stratton, and also to act as a new railhead for South Norfolk generally, large parts of which are not well served by rail at present.

Until 1966 there were four intermediate stations between Norwich and Diss and these were served by around seven stopping trains per day in each direction. Efforts were then concentrated on improving the main line service from Norwich to London and the intermediate stations were all closed.

The line was electrified in the 1980's and upon privatisation in 1997 the frequency of the London service was increased from hourly to half hourly. Under the terms of the last franchise, Greater Anglia not only committed to run some Norwich to London trains in 90 minutes, but also undertook to increase the frequency of trains to three per hour.

While the main line service has improved dramatically over the last 50 years, the closure of the intermediate stations does mean that at 20 miles, the interval between the two 'neighbouring' stations of Norwich and Diss is the longest interval between any two stations in the East of England. As the population and economy of Norfolk grows, rail services can play an increasing role in local transport needs. However the development of rail services in South Norfolk is hampered by such a long interval between stations.

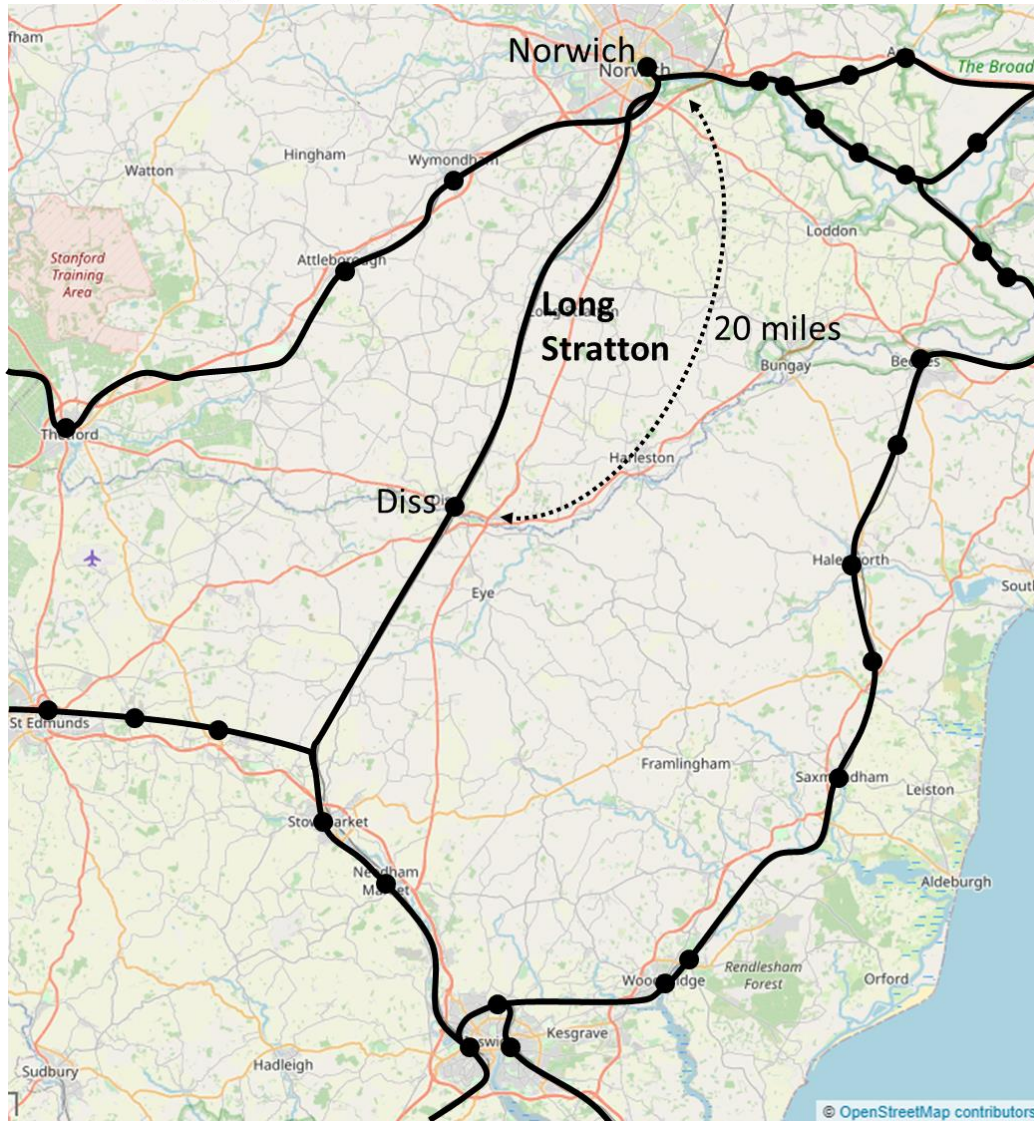
Current access to rail services in South Norfolk

There are four stations in the South Norfolk council area of which two are principal stations. Diss on the Great Eastern Main Line, and Wymondham on the Cambridge line in the north west of the district. The two minor stations are Haddiscoe on the Norwich to Lowestoft line, and Spooner Row also on the Cambridge line but with a very limited service.

Apart from those living in the Wymondham area most South Norfolk residents will look to Norwich or Diss as their railhead. While it may be expected that residents living in the Norwich fringe parishes would start their journey from Norwich station, residents living further south of the city would increasingly look to Diss as their main railhead. For southbound journeys, a journey back into Norwich would be seen as counterproductive and depending on traffic conditions, unacceptably time consuming.

A growing population, increased popularity of train travel and more frequent services over the last 20 years have all contributed to increasing the footfall at Diss station dramatically. Entries and exits in 2018/19 stood at 700,000, more than double the figure of 310,000 twenty years previously.

Impressive though the growth figures at Diss are however, many opportunities for rail travel are being missed. The distances that many South Norfolk residents have to make to reach their railhead at Diss means the greater likelihood of rail not being the preferred travel option in the first place. Travellers will instead choose to make their whole journey by car.



Map 1: At 20 miles, the distance between Norwich and Diss stations is the longest interval between any two stations in the East of England. The growing town of Long Stratton lies at the midpoint. However lack of an intermediate station means a 10 mile journey either south to Diss or north to Norwich to access the rail network.

The growth of Long Stratton

While the population of South Norfolk continues to grow in general, specific growth is focused on Long Stratton where an additional 1,900 homes over the period to 2038 would increase the town's population to around 10,000.

Even with the current population of around 5,000 the town has a substantial number of facilities including a high school, library, medical centre and leisure centre. It also has a high number of shops relative to its size. The town provided an estimated 1,900 jobs in 2011 and is home to South Norfolk Council and the Saffron Housing Trust.

The town's expansion is tied to the construction of a bypass to the east of the town. New housing will be built between the bypass and the old A140, and also to the north west of the town. At some point during the town's growth phase it will be of similar size to Diss.

The principal bus service is northbound to Norwich, which operates at half hourly intervals during the day. Evening and Sunday services are very restricted however. A direct southbound service to Diss runs some six times daily, but with only three services stopping near to the station. For travellers to London wholly reliant upon public transport a bus trip is required back into Norwich first for most connections, before boarding a train to London. The total journey time is almost three hours. As of October 2020 there were only two trains back from London after 15.30 with viable bus connections, one of these having a journey time of 3 hours 40 minutes. Sunday journeys are almost impossible.

Potential for new rail station in South Norfolk

The town lies about 2 miles east of the old Forncett station site on the Great Eastern Main Line. A new station at or near the Forncett site would offer significantly improved travel options for the town and for much of the surrounding area. By eliminating the 10 mile trip to Diss or back to Norwich, journeys would be transformed for prospective rail travellers.

The much shorter journey would allow for the whole range of travel options to the new station:

- Drop off and pick up – 5 minute car journey from the town centre
- Local bus connection
- Cycle
- Taxi
- Potentially walkable for fit and healthy

The road to the Forncett station site is of good width, and while unclassified is white lined throughout.

A bus connection to the station could be provided by a short extension to the route of the existing 38 service from Norwich, an additional 5 minute journey from its current end point.

A station would be a conveniently accessible by bike from the whole town, but a dedicated cycleway and footpath would be desirable.

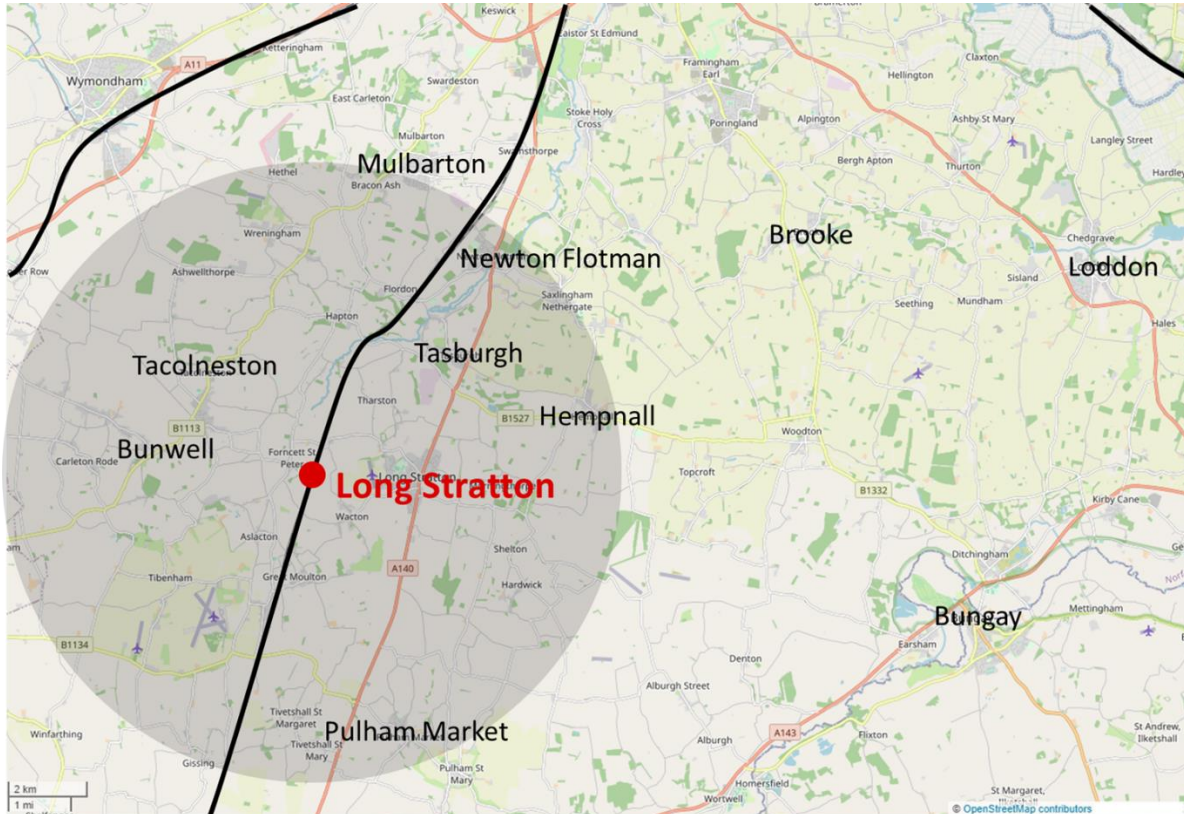
There is no doubt that a station can be successful even if it lies a little way from the town it serves. Within the East of England for example, Audley End station serving Saffron Walden, 2 miles away, is a very busy station with high footfall.

The provision of a good size car park would also improve rail access for communities lying to the north, west and east of Long Stratton. Residents in these villages can face a road trip to Diss of much more than 10 miles, unless doubling back to Norwich. Railfuture estimates that a new station could benefit a further 15,000 residents within a 5 mile radius, so including an expanded Long Stratton, some 25,000 residents in total.

Even this figure itself is likely to be exceeded, because for southbound journeys, some residents living in the eastern part of South Norfolk would find a road trip to Long Stratton shorter and more convenient compared with driving to Diss or a retrograde trip back to Norwich.

While some journeys from the new station would displace journeys previously starting from Norwich or Diss, station footfalls would be expected to increase overall because improved access would result in new journeys by rail not previously made.

Very significantly the station would offer opportunities for making northbound journeys which currently aren't possible. A rail journey to Norwich of as little as 10 minutes would offer an attractive alternative to the heavily congested A140 where a peak hour bus is currently scheduled to take 40 minutes. Given that Long Stratton is an employment centre in its own right, a modest level of commuting by rail to Long Stratton from Norwich and other stations may also be possible if there was an onward bus link.



Map 2: A new station at or near the old Forncett site could serve Long Stratton, which under local plan proposals, will have a population of some 10,000 by 2038. A new station would in addition provide better rail access for a further 15,000 residents living within 5 miles of the proposed site. The station could also provide better connectivity for residents living in the eastern part of South Norfolk.

Station to be served by services already committed

It would be very important for any new station not to compromise the Norwich in 90 objectives.

However the addition of a third train each hour between Norwich and London under the terms of the last franchise would allow these objectives to be met. The new third train could stop at the new station without any impact on the current two train stopping pattern and the move to Norwich in 90.

The station could therefore start with a basic hourly service, which could be extended to a half hourly stopping pattern during peak periods.

Importantly, with no additional trains required to serve the station over and above those committed by the franchise the station should be able to generate net revenue for the train operating company.

There is scope for additional revenue generation from:

- The creation of new local travel possibilities for journeys to Norwich and other local destinations
- Journeys to London, Cambridge and other longer distance destinations which otherwise wouldn't have been made by rail. With the higher fares available from such journeys, even a modest increase in journeys over those currently made from Diss would impact positively on revenue
- Car parking charges

Since operating costs would mostly be those limited to running the station itself, a net surplus would be expected and the station would not require revenue subsidy from local authorities or other bodies.

Capital cost

A new station was opened at Kintore, Aberdeenshire in October 2020, at a cost of £15 million (see photo page 2). We would envisage a new station for Long Stratton being of similar scale and facilities, except that longer platforms would probably be needed. However, subject to confirmation by feasibility study, we do not believe that changes to signalling would be required.

Funding for new stations usually come from a combination of sources:

- Local authority or Local Enterprise Partnership capital funding
- Developer Contributions
- Government support through new stations fund
- Contribution from rail industry where net revenue is expected

The new station should be seen as an investment in an asset with a useful lifetime of many decades. There are plenty of towns cut off from the rail network by the Beeching cuts which would like to be reconnected but find that the cost of relaying abandoned lines is prohibitively expensive. Since Long Stratton could be reconnected with a new station only, we believe there would be a good return on investment in terms of the economic, social and environmental benefits which would accrue.

Economic, social and environmental benefits

Key benefits would be:

- Better access to the rail network for many South Norfolk residents, offering connections for travel across the whole country
- Improved travel opportunities for non-drivers, especially increasing numbers of young people, for accessing work, educational and leisure opportunities.
- A step change in public transport for Long Stratton and the surrounding area which would help reduce car dependency
- Permit a fast journey time to Norwich in as little as 10 minutes, by contrast to the increasingly congested A140.
- Contribute to carbon reduction and local air quality objectives due to reduced traffic emissions.

It is important that if Long Stratton is to reach its full potential and develop as a prosperous new town, it needs to strike a good balance of population and skills, keep its young people and be attractive to key and skilled workers.

As the UK economy seeks to decarbonise over the next 30 years and new housing is increasingly concentrated in those locations with good transport links, a new station could offer scope for further development opportunities within the town in the long run.

By contrast if a new station is not provided, Long Stratton may well find itself as the most poorly located town in the East of England in terms of distance from a railway station compared to all other towns or built up areas which are on or close to a functioning railway.

As the Department for Transport's document 'Expanding the Railways', (co-authored by the Campaign for Better Transport and Railfuture) states in its introduction: 'Local access to rail services opens up brand new employment opportunities and encourages regeneration and investment, and reduces congestion. It can change lives by driving social mobility. It can also simply bring people closer together. Supporting a sustainable expansion of the railway network into local communities is vital to catalysing this socio-economic growth and potential'.

Next steps

It is acknowledged that delivering a new station is a long and complex process. The starting point would be for inclusion in the Greater Norwich Local Plan and Norfolk Rail Policy.

Railfuture would like to see that followed up by a feasibility study commissioned by Norfolk County Council or South Norfolk Council to assess demand for a new station and to carry out a cost benefit analysis.

Railfuture would like to see South Norfolk residents deriving the best possible advantages from the railway line that runs through the heart of their district and hopes that this paper can contribute to an appreciation of the benefits a new station can bring.

About Railfuture

Railfuture is the UK's leading independent organisation campaigning for better rail services for passengers and freight. **Railfuture** is a voluntary group representing rail users, with 20,000 affiliated and individual members.

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