

Lewes to Uckfield Railway Line – Briefing Note

Current situation

It has been a long-standing aspiration of Lewes District Council, Wealden District Council and East Sussex County Council to re-instate the railway line linking Lewes and Uckfield that was closed in 1969.

In terms of land-use planning policy, this aspiration currently finds expression in 'saved' Policies T4 of the Lewes District Local Plan 2003 and TR17 of the Wealden District Local Plan 1998. These planning policies continue to protect the former route (north of the junction of the Hamsey Loop) from development which would prejudice the reinstatement of the line.

In terms of transport policy, East Sussex County Council's commitment to support and lobby for the re-instatement of the line is set out in the East Sussex Rail Strategy 2013 and its Local Transport Plan 3, which covers the period 2011 to 2026. The County Council's priorities for rail passenger improvements are the Ashford - Hastings line (dual tracking, electrification, and the extension of High Speed 1 services to Hastings, Bexhill and Rye) and the Uckfield line (dual tracking, electrification, and the reinstatement of the Lewes to Uckfield line).

The relevant documents are available to download at:

<http://www.lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk/planning-policy/2003-lewes-local-plan-saved-policies/>

http://www.wealden.gov.uk/Wealden/Residents/Planning_and_Building_Control/Planning_Policy/Former_Local_Plan/Planning_Adopted_Wealden_Local_Plan_1998.aspx

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/localtransportplan/ltp3/downloadltp3/>

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/media/2384/railstrategyandactionplan.pdf>

Feasibility Studies

A number of publicly funded studies into the feasibility of re-opening the Lewes-Uckfield line have been carried out over recent years, as follows:

Lewes-Uckfield Railway Line Reinstatement Study 2008

A Central Rail Corridor Board was formed in 2004 to investigate the potential for re-instating both the Lewes-Uckfield line and the Eridge-Tunbridge Wells line. The Board comprised representatives from Lewes District Council, Wealden District Council, East Sussex County Council, the South East

England Development Agency, and the South East England Regional Assembly, and Charles Hendry MP and Norman Baker MP.

In 2007, £160,000 was raised by the partner organisation (with additional contributions from Lewes, Uckfield and Crowborough Town Councils) in order to commission Network Rail to study the technical feasibility and economic viability of re-instating the Lewes-Uckfield railway line. Lewes District Council's contribution towards this study was £25,000.

Network Rail was chosen to undertake the study because:

- it owns the national rail infrastructure and has the necessary expertise and experience in project managing and undertaking study work for railway line reinstatement projects;
- it knows the specific information required to identify the feasibility of reinstating the line, and could prioritise the project deliverables and outputs of the study in order to adhere to the budgetary constraints; and,
- it is Network Rail that has to be convinced of the feasibility of reinstating the line, and if it undertakes the study, it will not require further work to test any assumptions on completion.

The Central Rail Corridor Board received the final report of the Network Rail study in July 2008. It is available to download at:

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/roads/roadschemes/rail/>

The study concluded that, although it is technically feasible in engineering terms, there was no economic case for rebuilding the Lewes-Uckfield railway line. The key points were:

- The cost of reinstatement exceed the benefits of all the options tested
- the resilience and regeneration benefits were considered e negligible.

The Central Rail Corridor Board agreed with the study conclusions, whilst expressing concern that current Government criteria on investment decisions for transport infrastructure made it very difficult to justify a positive business case for the reinstatement of the line. The Board decided that no further detailed work on the Lewes-Uckfield railway line reinstatement should be undertaken unless project assessment rules and policy change significantly.

At its meeting on 9 September 2008, Lewes District Council's Cabinet endorsed the Board's decision (Minute 95.1).

The Central Rail Corridor Board subsequently disbanded, although local political representatives continued to actively lobby the Government for changes to project assessment rules and policies which could help to support the reinstatement of the line. This included meetings with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Railways and the Minister of State for Transport.

Brighton Main Line Capacity Study 2014

In 2013, the Department for Transport commissioned Network Rail to carry out an initial capacity strategy for the Brighton Main Line (BML) over the period 2014-2024. Network Rail's report was published in 2014 and is available to download here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/brighton-main-line-emerging-capacity-strategy-for-control-period-6>

A key finding of the report is that capacity interventions up to 2024 should be focussed on improving bottle necks along the existing route, rather than large scale investment in alternative routes, such as the Lewes to Uckfield line, in the outer area of the BML. It was concluded that alternative routes were likely to be of very limited value in the short to medium term, although the route of the Lewes-Uckfield line should continue to be safeguarded. The Department for Transport accepted this recommendation.

London and South Coast Rail Corridor Study 2016

In 2015, the Government appointed consultants WSP to examine the strategic case for investment in existing and new rail capacity along the south coast rail corridor. This study was targeted at the BML corridor, upgrades to existing routes and the BML2 proposal. WSP were also asked to re-assess proposals for re-instating Lewes-Uckfield railway.

The WSP study was published by the Department for Transport in 2017 and is available to download here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/london-and-south-coast-rail-corridor-study>

The study concludes that the key strategic priority is to pursue Network Rail's upgrade proposals for the existing Brighton Main Line. No other proposals would deliver a similar level of improvements in similar timescales.

WSP's high level cost estimates for the Lewes-Uckfield reinstatement are:

- £150-250m for basic Lewes-Uckfield reopening. This comprises a single unelectrified track on former alignment with potential turnback siding at Lewes, excluding intermediate stations. Increases to more than £250m if turnback loop at Lewes is required.
- £500m-£1bn for Lewes-Uckfield reopening plus Ashcombe Tunnel. This comprises a double-tracked reinstated Lewes-Uckfield line, new Ashcombe Tunnel, grade separation with Lewes branch and skewed viaduct over the

A27. Increases to more than £1bn if AC electrification and redoubling of existing Uckfield branch are included.

- £250-500m for new unelectrified Lewes-Uckfield alignment via Ringmer and Glynde. As this route is longer than and does not follow the former alignment, the civil engineering works required to maintain an acceptable vertical alignment while crossing existing features such as roads and rivers will be significant.

The study concludes that demand would be relatively low for a re-opened Lewes-Uckfield line and that the transport case for the scheme is likely to be relatively poor due to benefit to cost ratios (BCR) well below a viable level, i.e. a similar conclusion to the 2008 Network Rail study. The benefits of the scheme would need to be at least double and preferably three times that forecast to meet the minimum BCR required.

However, the study argues that a stronger case could potentially be built by harnessing the economic growth agenda, rather than just traditional transport benefits. The growth and devolution agendas mean that not only are the wider economic impacts of transport investment now accepted, but that local authorities and local economic partnerships are increasingly tasked with leading the agenda.

It concludes that a rail investment scheme which is justified by wider economic benefits, as opposed to traditional transport benefits, would be most successfully promoted by the local transport authority (i.e. East Sussex and Kent County Councils) and the relevant Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). The way that this potential new approach may work is set out at Section 6.6 of the study (pages 38-43).