



**Reopening Railways:**  
the case for growing the rail network  
and how it can be achieved

## Reopening Railways: the case for growing the rail network and how it can be achieved

### Executive Summary

Next year will be the 50th anniversary of the Beeching Report, *Reshaping British Railways*, which led to the closure of many rail lines. Fifty years on, there is a case for new or reopened connections on the railway network, including:

- Lines to serve communities not on the network
- Reopened or new stations on existing lines
- Missing links to improve the reliability of the network or increase capacity

The case for new or reopened connections is increasingly strong, with demand for rail now at its highest level since before the Second World War, despite the network being considerably smaller than then.

Despite the growing case for these connections, there is no clear process in the rail industry for this to happen and many local authorities lack the capacity or skills to progress schemes themselves. Some new lines and stations have been built, however, and demand on these new lines and stations has usually been higher than forecast.

We therefore propose that Government uses the next round of investment in the rail industry to take forward an approach based on four themes:

- Community Connections Fund to support rail reopenings
- Support for private-sector led reopenings
- Reopenings support unit in the rail industry, led by Network Rail
- Safeguarding of alignments

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1. 'Reopenings' is used throughout this paper as a shorthand term for additions to the national rail network. Most of the proposed additions are in practice based on former lines, but options for wholly new alignments are also being explored (for example for East-West rail between Bedford and Cambridge). In some cases light rail/tram or tram-train options are being investigated.

### Background: the case for reopenings

For much of the second half of the last century, the railways were seen as a static or declining form of transport, being inevitably superseded by road and air travel as the railways themselves had superseded the canals. Closures and 'rationalisation' were the focus of rail policy, and even when the railways were privatised in the 1990s, it was assumed that the rail market would be at best static.

This has not been the case. Demand for rail travel has steadily increased since the 1990s, and is now at its highest since the 1920s, on a smaller network. Growth has continued through the recession (in freight as well as passenger travel) and there is now overcrowding on many lines, even on local services in rural areas. This growth is leading to and justifying continued investment in rail lines and services – not just the big projects such as Crossrail and high speed rail, but for smaller projects such as electrification and extra tracks or passing loops to allow for more and better services on existing lines. There is a concern about the cost of running the railways, but even the recent review for the Government led by Sir Roy McNulty on improving value for money in the railways took the current rail network as a given and did not raise the issue of closures, though it did look at ways to cut costs of regional railways.

In the light of this strong growth, attention has turned to the question of reopening lines and extending the rail network. It is now accepted by many within and outside the rail industry that the rail closures following the 1963 Beeching report (which included some lines that the report had recommended keeping) removed lines and stations that would now be valuable in economic, social and environmental terms.

In fact, some of these closures have over time been reversed; there are plans for further reopenings<sup>1</sup> and some continuing campaigns for more. These tend to

fall into three categories:

- Lines serving communities that are not on the rail network (for example Tavistock in Devon)
- Reopened (and sometimes new) stations on existing lines (for example Ilkeston in Derbyshire)
- Missing links (for example Skipton–Colne or Lewes–Uckfield)

There are good reasons why reopenings are being pursued. At the most basic, the argument is that time has moved on: the places to be served have grown, sometimes significantly, since the lines/stations were closed<sup>2</sup>. In many cases, there is now significant road traffic and congestion on the parallel roads, which hurts the economy of the area and makes it unattractive to visitors and investors. Large-scale road building will not deal with this – in many cases it will even make things worse – and is anyway unaffordable, environmentally damaging and difficult to deliver. New stations are also being proposed on existing lines to serve new developments that have sprung up next to these lines but away from existing stations<sup>3</sup>. Existing public transport services (mainly local buses) do not give the necessary capacity, speed and service quality in these cases (this point is developed further below).

It is also the case that some of the lines proposed for closure in the Beeching Report but revived have subsequently become very well used. In fact, as noted above, some of the fastest growth in usage in recent years on the entire national rail network has



*Rail passenger use is at its highest since the 1920s*

been on regional branch lines, to the point where overcrowding is a serious problem, especially in tourist areas in summer. Community Rail Partnerships have shown that such lines can be marketed effectively and gain significant patronage, and small enhancements such as passing loops have allowed increased frequencies which have helped attract users. Communities on lines or next to stations that were closed can point to these successes as patterns that reopened lines/stations could follow.

These reasons for pursuing reopenings are mainly local, but reopenings may have broader benefits for the rail network, as a diversion route or as a route for longer distance traffic, freight or passengers. For example, it has been suggested that the Skipton–Colne line could allow more traffic from the quarries at Grassington to use rail. The reopening of the East–West rail line from Oxford to Milton Keynes has been justified partly on the basis of its potential for longer distance freight and passenger travel.

There are in any case wider arguments for growing the rail network. The need to decarbonise the transport sector means that, even with the most optimistic of predictions for low emission vehicles, a switch from road transport to public transport is needed, and providing people with more choices about how they choose to travel will aid this. Reopened or new connections can provide a low carbon and reliable choice for many journeys and could have significant advantages in switching people's travel over medium-distance trips, such as journeys to and from work. Reopenings can also promote greener economic development through support for less car-based development plans. The certainty provided by rail lines makes it easier to

2. For example, the closed Croxley Green line in Watford now has the area's main hospital and the town's football club stadium next to it.

3. For example, the James Cook Memorial Hospital in Middlesbrough, one of the largest in the North East, is next to the Esk Valley railway line between Middlesbrough and Whitby but has no station on it. Funding for a station was agreed in May 2012 as part of the Government's Local Sustainable Transport Fund.



plan development around them rather than roads: the Tavistock scheme being promoted by Kilbride Community Railways is a bold attempt to link a reopening with a housing development.

New/reopened railway lines and stations therefore have many benefits. They can support local economic development by improving access and enlarging labour markets. They can support new housing or business developments or access to public services. They can also help tackle traffic problems and reduce carbon emissions by providing good alternatives to car use.

These wider benefits are not always examined by the rail industry and the Department for Transport; there is a tendency, as noted below, to see reopenings as marginal or even negative when viewed from a national rail perspective. But reopenings can have a high value in a local context – in relieving local roads, serving or enabling new development, or simply providing an alternative to the car with proper links into the rest of the rail network. It is therefore unsurprising that the impetus for reopenings has mostly come from local authorities and devolved administrations.

## Progress so far

Since the rail closures of the 1960s and 1970s, a number of lines and stations have been reopened (and, in some cases, new ones constructed). Since devolution, the Scottish and Welsh Governments have both presided over or promoted reopenings, and the Scottish Government is still proceeding with reopening of part of the Waverley route into the Borders, one of the single biggest post-Beeching closures. The devolved administration in London has also arranged reopenings, such as the East London Line, and the Docklands Light Railway has also reused closed lines. In the big cities outside London, the Integrated Transport Authorities and the Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) which they oversee have promoted significant rail reopenings, or in some cases conversion of former rail lines to light rail.

However, these are all authorities with the size, powers and funding to develop and implement rail projects. The PTEs were until 2005 co-signatories to rail franchises and have developed their own rail strategies for their city regions. Outside these – in the rest of England – the picture is less clear. The transport authorities – county and unitary councils – are primarily highway authorities and have no statutory responsibilities or powers over railways. Most have little in-house rail expertise.

Despite this lack of a statutory basis, some counties and city authorities have developed a clear vision for railways in their area and pursued it vigorously:

- Devon has promoted a Devon Metro with higher frequency branch line services, and has been instrumental in running services on a freight line to Okehampton and supporting reopening of the Tavistock line
- Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire promoted the reopening to passengers of the Robin Hood line from Nottingham to Mansfield and Worksop
- Lancashire has been able to promote new and upgraded stations and has been pursuing vigorously the reopening of the Todmorden curve to reduce journey times from Burnley to Manchester
- Hertfordshire has (with TfL) promoted the reopening of the Croxley Link in Watford as an extension of the Metropolitan Line and is discussing the possibility of taking over the



St Albans Abbey line and converting it to light rail

- A Greater Bristol Metro is being promoted by the West of England Partnership authorities, including reopening the line to Portishead for passengers and adding new stations in areas with recent or planned growth

## Overcoming barriers to reopenings

So there is support for reopenings in a number of places. The policy and funding framework for reopenings is however unclear. The Government can ask for priced options for new or reopened lines or services when inviting bids for franchises, and has sometimes exercised these options, for example in reopening the line to Corby as part of the East Midlands franchise. It can also commit to including new lines or stations in future franchises, as it has recently done with Chesterton Station in Cambridge. However, it has used these approaches sparingly, preferring to focus on upgrading and electrifying the existing network and on big enhancement projects such as Thameslink where returns are assured. The rail industry has also not in general focused on reopenings, for the same reasons.

If at all, reopenings have therefore been largely promoted by local authorities, and as we have seen, many of these have taken the initiative. However, all of this activity is non-statutory and the smaller unitary authorities in particular are less able to pursue reopenings or to build the capacity internally to do so. The future position could be even more complex – on the one hand, the Government is offering support in principle for devolution to local authorities of responsibility for commissioning local rail services, which should make reopenings simpler. On the other hand, the growth of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), and the use of these areas as the proposed basis for devolving funding for major schemes, adds other decision-makers, again with limited capacity beyond the existing transport authorities.

There is also a more technical problem that the general demand modelling tools used in the railway, such as the Passenger Demand Forecasting Handbook, are designed for assessing enhancements to existing services – they are not good at modelling projected use on new lines or stations, where many of the potential users would be current non-users. The report by the Association of Train Operating Companies (see p5) suggests that all reopenings since 1995 have exceeded forecasts, some by significant amounts. This has in fact been acknowledged by the Department for Transport, which has recently published guidelines on forecasting demand for new stations and services<sup>4</sup>, but it has yet to be seen how these work in practice. In addition, there are potential conflicts in some cases between existing traffic on the existing rail network and the new flows from reopenings, which might in some cases take up scarce capacity.

Capacity and capability matter because the rail industry itself is complex and can be difficult to deal with, and can be hard to engage on projects which are important locally but matter less nationally. Advice for councils on reopenings is hard to come by – there is no centre of expertise that councils can call on dedicated to working with and helping those wishing to pursue enhancement projects. Network Rail can through its Route Utilisation Strategies identify demands for reopenings and will undertake feasibility studies, but there is no one there or elsewhere in the industry with a brief to provide local authorities the technical support on reopening projects or put together business cases that look at likely demand for new/reopened lines and stations. When it does look at schemes, the costs quoted can be very high if they follow group standards, but many councils do not have the expertise to challenge this (a recent Network Rail draft strategy on alternative solutions may help here<sup>5</sup>). Only where

4. <http://assets.dft.gov.uk/publications/passenger-demand-forecasting/guidance-note.pdf>

5. Alternative Guidance notes listed at: <http://www.networkrail.co.uk/asp/4449.aspx>

authorities work together, as on the East-West Rail Link, and pool resources does it become possible to commission the detailed work that is needed to make the case for reopenings.

Some of the groundwork on possible reopenings has been done by the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC), whose 2009 *Connecting Communities* report<sup>6</sup> looked at settlements of 15,000 population not currently on the rail network where freight or disused lines existed. It identified 14 cases where there was at first sight a positive case for reopening, and a further six where wider benefits might make the case for reopening. It also looked at possible stations on existing lines and (in less detail) at missing links. However, the report left it to national government to take proposals forward, though it did recommend that the routes of the most promising candidates should be safeguarded from future development.

## Alternatives to reopenings

Any proposal for new/reopened rail lines and stations will need to show that it is value for money against alternative options. We have already noted that large-scale road building is not an alternative – in some cases, reopenings or rail upgrades are proposed because previous road building has not solved local traffic problems. We also noted that reopenings are increasingly being supported because the existing public transport is not an attractive alternative to the car.



*Rail reopenings can be better than upgraded buses in some places*

However, it is argued that for the cost of reopenings much improved bus services could be provided. In principle, this is a reasonable argument – and there are certainly many places where the case for rail reopenings is not strong but improved bus services would be justified. However, communities not currently on the rail network are entitled to be sceptical about this. The replacement bus services promised in the Beeching Report – and in subsequent reports proposing closures – have in many cases themselves been cut back or have disappeared entirely. In addition, recent cuts in Government funding have seen a number of services disappear, and we have separately highlighted this through our Save our Buses campaign<sup>7</sup>. In order to provide some longer term guaranteed services, there have been attempts to create separate categories of bus services run as part of the rail network and subject to the same more comprehensive closure procedures, but these have not been successfully applied.

There are other arguments for pursuing rail options over buses in selected cases:

- **Certainty:** the presence of rail lines gives a greater guarantee of future services than a bus stop does, for reasons already noted. This allows investors and developers certainty in future investment decisions
- **Congestion:** without the reserved tracks that railways have available to them, often into town centres, buses will be subject to traffic congestion and hence will tend to have longer journey times – few places have even attempted to provide the comprehensive and rigorously enforced priority over other traffic that would be required to reduce journey times to rail levels
- **Capacity:** rail can in principle offer high capacity compared with buses, and this is attractive where there are large populations or traffic flows
- **Connections:** railways form part of a national

6. [http://www.atoc.org/clientfiles/File/publicationsdocuments/ConnectingCommunitiesReport\\_S10.pdf](http://www.atoc.org/clientfiles/File/publicationsdocuments/ConnectingCommunitiesReport_S10.pdf)

7. <http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/campaigns/save-our-buses>

network, and new stations and new/reopened lines can form part of this network, with connections and through ticketing. These are much more difficult to provide on buses, though there are examples of good practice

- Customers: there is some evidence that many of those currently driving will consider using rail services but will not transfer to buses
- This is not to say that buses can't provide a good alternative to cars, merely that in some cases rail may be the best option. In some cases, guided busways have been or are being created, some using old rail lines. Campaign for Better Transport has supported busway projects in principle as improvements to the public transport network, but most projects have only recently opened or are under construction so it is too early to tell how they will perform; it will be interesting to see how far these match rail's capabilities and attractiveness

It is also worth noting that there is a lot of discussion about bringing down the costs of running local rail services, through new and cheaper vehicles and different standards for infrastructure. The Network Rail document referred to above covers many of these. Reopenings as light rail or tram-train rather than standard 'heavy rail' services could significantly reduce costs, and there has been exploration of lower cost electrification for branch lines which could be relevant here too.

A context for any discussion about alternatives is the framework for appraising the costs and benefits of transport schemes. Known as webTAG, this sets out how all transport schemes are to be assessed and, even with devolution of funding to local authorities, the Department for Transport is expecting authorities to use this. Rail reopenings score variously in this, but it is argued by some that alternatives such as buses or roads will score better<sup>8</sup>. There has been a lot of debate about this framework and whether it gives too high a score to road schemes and too low a

score to alternatives. Campaign for Better Transport and others have argued that a number of the factors mentioned above – notably network benefits and environmental impacts – are not represented well in webTAG, but in any case this economic appraisal is supposed to form only one part of a five part business case. As important is an assessment of 'strategic fit', the extent to which a scheme supports transport, planning and economic development strategies. Many reopening schemes score well in this, because as noted already they will support local economic development.

In summary, new/reopened lines and stations can be the best value for money in meeting various local and national objectives. The benefits and patronage can be higher, and recent work suggests that costs can be lower, than forecasts and feasibility studies sometimes suggest.

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8. Indeed some of those making this point continue old arguments that most rural railways should be closed and buses substituted – ignoring the fact that if rural roads (or indeed rural energy, telecoms and water networks) were assessed on the same basis as these people assess rural railways, most of them would be closed too.



## Taking reopenings forward

As has already been noted, the benefits of most reopenings are primarily local or at most regional, though some may have extra national benefits (for example, as diversionary routes or to relieve other lines). It is therefore right in principle that the impetus for reopenings should in most cases come from local authorities.

However, as has been noted, there are a number of obstacles facing local authorities in pursuing reopenings – notably lack of expertise and any clear process within the rail industry for assessing, pursuing and sponsoring reopening projects. Financing is also an issue. While some of the larger local authorities may be able to afford to support reopenings, smaller ones cannot on their own. Geography may also play a part – reopenings may benefit some authorities more than others, so making it difficult to create groupings to take forward proposals.

This suggests that if reopenings are to be pursued, a number of complementary measures need to be introduced.

### A fund to support rail reopenings

This fund, which we have termed the Community Connections Fund, could be bid for by local authorities, like the very successful Rail Passenger Partnership Fund, run briefly by the former Strategic Rail Authority, or more recently the Government's Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF). The fund could contribute to:

- Feasibility studies and the preparation of business cases
- Substantive infrastructure work needed for reopenings if the feasibility studies show there is a case
- Initial operating costs while patronage builds up

The fund could be introduced within the High Level Output Specification, due this summer. It would fit with the proposals made by the railway industry in

the Initial Industry Plan, which include a number of funds to pay for groups of outputs such as a station improvement fund, a journey time fund and a strategic freight network fund. A Community Connections Fund could follow this pattern.

A dedicated fund would have several advantages:

- It would allow for local enhancements of railways which are outside the High Level Output Specification (HLOS) or franchise specifications by the Government but will have regional or local benefits
- It would allow the integration of rail upgrades into local transport plans – current planning largely excludes rail schemes because so much planning and funding for rail is national, and the benefits of many upgrades (new/improved services or new stations) do not fall to the rail industry but to the wider community in terms of economic development or reduced congestion and pollution
- It would ensure that local ambitions for improvements can be planned and integrated with national objectives. As with the LSTF, bidders could be required to show that their projects will contribute to helping the economy and cutting carbon, as well as to other broader objectives
- It would help develop coherent business cases for reopenings that can give both the rail industry and local decision-makers





confidence that schemes should get funding and are worth investment

- It can supplement, or be supplemented by, other local funding (Community Infrastructure Levy etc) or major scheme funding

The fund could also be used for enhancements of local services on existing lines, as was the case with the previous Rail Passenger Partnership fund.

As has been the case with the LSTF, bids for the fund could be assessed by an advisory panel, drawn from both within and outside the rail industry.

### Support for private sector-led reopenings

The proposal to reopen the line to Tavistock, referred to above, is being promoted by a private sector consortium led by Kilbride Community Railways. The reopening plan is linked to and would be funded by a housing development at Tavistock. Kilbride has suggested that there are other lines where such a model would be practical. However, the authorisation of reopenings through the Transport & Works Act can be complex, time-consuming and costly. Government support, through instruments such as tax-incremental finance or through funding such as the Growing Places Fund, could pay for these initial costs of preparation and ensure that reopenings happen in advance of development. There are also proposals for community-led reopenings,



*Supplementary planning guidance could safeguard lines for reopening*

some building on heritage lines; the Government has already given Regional Growth Fund money towards the reopening of the line to Caldon Low and potentially Alton Towers in Staffordshire.

This suggests that the Government should therefore look at mechanisms to support reopenings projects led by the private sector and social enterprises.

### Rail industry support

As noted already, those involved in promoting reopenings and enhancements find the rail industry complex to deal with. To provide a single point of contact, a central unit, led by Network Rail but with participation from the rest of the rail industry, could be set up to co-ordinate work on reopenings, and maybe other enhancements being promoted by local authorities, LEPs and others with expertise. This unit could help with business cases, Transport and Works Orders and operational issues that reopenings involve. It could also allow assessment of impacts of reopenings on the existing network, to identify and resolve possible conflicts with existing traffic and users. The industry also has a role in bringing down costs of potential reopenings, by assessing alternative and cheaper ways of providing both infrastructure and trains (ultra-light rail etc) as in the Network Rail document referred earlier.

### Safeguarding alignments

Some reopening projects have been rejected in the past because alignments have been built on and no alternatives are available. A recent example is the East West Rail Link, where the eastern section between Bedford and Sandy was built over by a boating lake because the alignment had no protection in the local plan.

The Government could provide a level of safeguarding of alignments of possible reopenings through the planning system. Supplementary guidance to the recent National Planning Policy Framework could be issued by the Department for Transport, encouraging

alignments to be protected and possibly given some interim use, for example as footpaths or cycleways (as has already happened in many cases, under the auspices of Sustrans and local authorities). The initial focus of any safeguarding should be the lines listed in the ATOC report. It is worth noting that the Conservative Party made a commitment to introducing such safeguarding when in opposition.

### Schemes that could be funded

We have in the past drawn up a list of possible reopenings<sup>9</sup>, drawn from public suggestions and local campaigners, but we are not being prescriptive about the schemes that could be funded nor have we put together a comprehensive list of schemes. What we are proposing is that local authorities, rail user groups and the industry work together with the Department for Transport to develop proposals that have the best strategic and business case.

However, there are some examples of schemes that have already been proposed:

- Lewes–Uckfield line: the reinstatement of two short links (Lewes–Uckfield and Eridge–Tunbridge Wells) would transform rail travel in the South East and introduce two new main lines between London and the South Coast. It would relieve congestion, increase capacity and open up new rail journeys
- Skipton–Colne: the 11.5 mile link between

Skipton (North Yorkshire) and Colne (Lancashire) would link the Aire Valley and Yorkshire to East Lancashire, Manchester, Preston and beyond. Although under increasing threat, the trackbed is essentially intact and the railway could be restored at a relatively low cost

- Portishead–Bristol: the railway line still exists from Bristol to Portishead, and has been refurbished for freight use at a cost of £21 million, but it is only open as far as Royal Portbury Docks. The remaining 3.25 miles would need to be reinstated but would enable a number of expanding communities to be able to use rail to travel into Bristol and would reduce traffic congestion in a growing part of the country



9. Lines that could be reopened (list): [www.bettertransport.org.uk/suggested-lines-to-reopen](http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/suggested-lines-to-reopen)

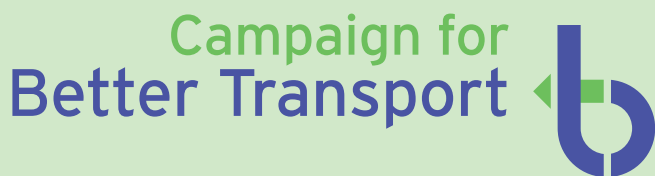
## Conclusion

Retaining many of the lines and stations closed in the wake of the Beeching Report could not have been justified on any criteria. However, some of the closures did remove places and links from the rail network that would now be worth having, and there is a case for considering extensions to the national rail network, largely but not exclusively as reopenings of former lines.

The case for reopenings or new connections is not based on nostalgia for some imagined golden age of the rail but on meeting the need to provide congestion free and low carbon transport choices. Many local authorities, business groups and communities recognise this and are pursuing reopenings, but there is no process for considering these systematically or taking them forward, especially in England.

This paper has suggested ways of taking forward reopening proposals, with a dedicated fund, a dedicated unit led by Network Rail, and safeguarding in the planning system for alignments of possible reopenings. These proposals are for discussion: we hope that the Government, local authorities and the rail industry will respond positively.

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Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

[info@bettertransport.org.uk](mailto:info@bettertransport.org.uk)

Phone: 020 7566 6480

Fax: 020 7566 6493

[www.bettertransport.org.uk](http://www.bettertransport.org.uk)

[www.facebook.com/bettertransport](https://www.facebook.com/bettertransport)

16 Waterside, 44-48 Wharf Road, London N1 7UX

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