

At last, a battle won!

By Brian Hart

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Massive local support for the Lewes-Uckfield rail reinstatement has prompted the Government to revise its new regional transport strategy.

In March, the Government Office for the South East effectively proposed that the Lewes-Uckfield reopening be dropped.

However, during this spring's public consultation on the document, officials were deluged by responses in support of the scheme.

In a letter announcing the new strategy, David Cooper, GOSE's

Government U-turn on Lewes-Uckfield

deputy transport officer, disclosed that of 718 individual comments, no fewer than 244 were in support of the Lewes-Uckfield rail link – more than eight times the 30 responses achieved by the next most popular topic.

Mr Cooper went on to note that as a result of this:

The Secretary of State has concluded that a reference to this proposal be included in the supporting text relating to the project to the development of the South East Plan.

On page 32 of the strategy docu-

ment itself, there is the following reference to the Lewes-Uckfield project:

Other public transport proposals that promote mode shift from private cars to public transport and which can facilitate delivery of the spatial strategy, such as reinstating the Lewes to Uckfield line, should be considered for inclusion in the South East Plan.

"Bearing in mind that GOSE made it clear from the start of the consultation that it didn't envisage policy revisions," said Brian Hart, Campaign Director of the Wealden Line

Campaign, "this change of heart by Government must be seen as a major achievement for the campaign and all those who want better rail services in Kent and East Sussex. It goes without saying that we are very grateful to all those individuals and organisations who made their views known."

"And while we don't expect government funding for the project at this point," he added, "the minister's decision is very significant, not only because it's an acknowledgement that this issue isn't going to go away, but because it clears the way for East Sussex County Council to drive the scheme forward."

Fighting on for Etruria

By Peter Cousins

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A formal public hearing into the proposed closure of Etruria station was held at Stoke-on-Trent on 25 and 26 June. The closure is opposed by 66 objectors including Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and Staffordshire County Council.

It was soon apparent that the Strategic Rail Authority's real reason for proposing this closure was not the low patronage but its desire to remove the 60 mph restriction going south and raise the line speed to 110 mph in both directions.

Network Rail claims the higher line speed would save half a minute for every inter-city service and this equals a "benefit" of £3million per annum. There are also future plans for some Virgin West Coast Manchester-London trains to pass through Stoke-on-Trent non-stop.

Unfortunately, because of the need to retain access to the nearby freight sidings, Network Rail claims the required re-alignment of the south-bound line can be achieved only by demolishing Etruria station!

There is an unusual aspect of the present situation. During the replacement of the track in the summer of 2003 the stepping distance to the platform was increased by four inches. As a result both First North West and Central Trains banned diesel multiple unit trains from stopping at Etruria. This restriction also applies to several other stations on the line to Manchester.

The Central Trains service – normally class 153, 156 or 158 units – was replaced by a bus but the FNW class 323 electric units were allowed to call as they have a lower step. Surprisingly FNW's class 142 Pacer diesels can also call at all stations between Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester – possibly because they have a bus-style grab rail?

The seeds of local decline were

probably sewn over 10 years ago when British Rail split the former through service from Stafford into two separate local services terminating at Stoke.

On privatisation the Stafford-Stoke route was allocated to Central Trains (now reduced to seven trains per day) and the Stoke-Manchester route was allocated to First North West – and is now reduced to peak hours only. This has left the hourly Crewe-Derby shuttle as the only off-peak service to Etruria, Longport and Kidsgrove.

Even on the SRA's figures the current usage of Etruria is split almost equally between those travelling north (predominantly to Manchester) and those going south, with about 20% making local journeys.

The case against closure was led by the city council and Newcastle Borough Council who, with other objectors, pointed out that the joint North Staffs Integrated Transport Study had only just started and should be allowed time to develop a proper strategy for the region.

Local groups pointed out that Etruria is better placed than Stoke-on-Trent station for both Hanley and Newcastle city centres and is also adjacent to attractions such as the Festival Gardens area.

The individual objectors, nine of whom appeared in person, were most impressive.

Several commute to Manchester, others to Etruria from Alsager or Stone. All complained of difficulties when the train service – particularly the off-peak service provided by Central Trains – was so irregular and unreliable. One particularly comprehensive objection was made by the North Staffordshire Public Services Alliance.

Developers St Modwen, who now own the former Corus steelworks site at Shelton Bar, have suggested that a new park and ride station – provisionally named Festival

Waters – should be built between Etruria and Longport opposite the former Wolstanton colliery site. They suggest this station should be linked to the A500 by a new bridge over the railway.

A planning application has been submitted but both St Modwen and Newcastle council made the point that, even if the development is approved, Etruria should remain open until the new station was operational.

This enquiry has also raised some complex legal issues as to who can propose closure when more than one operator serves a station; and whether Central Trains, which is currently operating a replacement bus service, even qualifies!

Significantly, First North West – which still provides peak-hour services in excess of their passenger service requirement – has not applied to withdraw its service, and it is the SRA which has proposed this closure.

To his credit, Tony Francis from the SRA's West Coast Team, stayed throughout the enquiry and listened to all the objectors.

The hearing was conducted in an informal manner, without aggressive questioning, which helped to put many individual objectors at ease. The panel comprised Phillip Davis, John Balmforth and Michael Hughes from the Rail Passengers Committee for the Midlands, supported by RPC regional director Paul Fullwood.

The proceedings were observed by between 15 and 25 members of the public and objectors, together with a reporter from the local press.

The Government subsequently agreed that the RPC panel can delay submitting its report until the North Staffs Integrated Transport Study is complete.

It will then be up to the Department for Transport to give its verdict on the closure proposal.



Klaus Meyer

A stalwart rail campaigner for more than 50 years died on 4 July.

Klaus Meyer, pictured above, was one of a small group who as long ago as the 1950s and 1960s foresaw the serious social and environmental consequences of the uncontrolled use of the motor car and the rundown of public transport.

Born in Hamburg, he fled from Nazi persecution and ended up working on the railways in India. Later he came to London and was known to many students of transport for the courses he ran for London University.

For many years, he was chairman and president of the National Council of Inland Transport, a body formed in 1962 to oppose the Beeching rail closures.

The NCIT later concentrated on all means of land transport and championed transport integration.

He was a leading member of the former Railway Development Association and was influential when it merged with the Railway Invigoration Society to form RDS (now Railfuture) in October 1978.

He was also closely involved with Transport 2000 for more than 20 years. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of transport matters, boundless energy and, even in his late eighties, worked tirelessly for long hours for the cause in which he passionately believed.