

A third way to Sussex

After years of campaigning, there is now a real prospect of another main line to the Sussex coast, thanks to the re-franchising process started by the shadow strategic rail authority.

Connex is offering to reopen Uckfield-Lewes and to electrify from Oxted to Lewes.

The main advantage of the scheme would be to relieve the overcrowded Brighton line by allowing Eastbourne, Seaford and Newhaven trains to run via Oxted and Uckfield.

But it would also improve access for many people in Kent and Sussex, particularly when stage two of the scheme is implemented, putting back the link to Tunbridge Wells.

That would allow trains to Eastbourne to travel to Charing Cross in addition to Victoria.

Connex says its plan would create an alternative 100mph main line to London.

Although Connex has pledged to upgrade the Brighton line, it is unlikely to be making the change which freeing up capacity could herald.

It is high time speeds on the line were lifted to get the 50-mile Brighton-Victoria time nearer half an hour instead of the current best time of 50 minutes.

Connex has also pledged to upgrade the line to Littlehampton via Sutton, Dorking and Horsham which amazingly still sports semaphore signals.

The Coastway service to Ashford is also earmarked for improvement with electrification of Ashford-Hastings.

The West Coastway route from Brighton to Portsmouth Harbour will also be upgraded.

Dedicated buses would provide an integrated service to Tenterden, Kent, and Midhurst, Sussex.

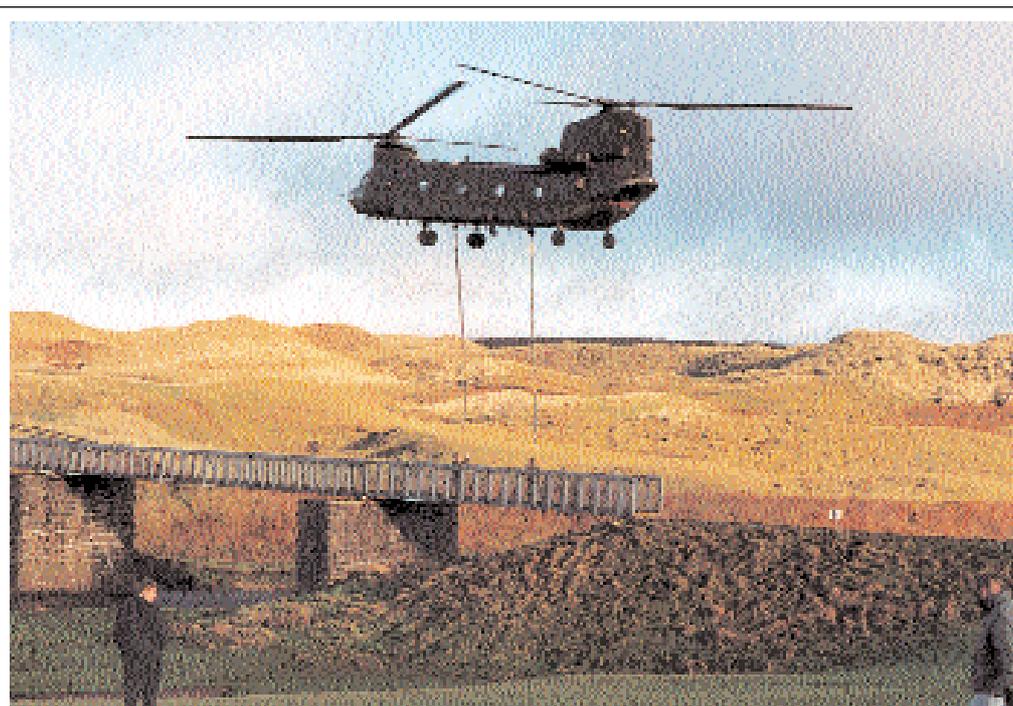
The whole package of improvement measures – including new air-conditioned trains to replace the current slam-door units – has been estimated by Connex to be worth £1 billion.

“Our expertise and commitment would revolutionise travel and customer service in south-east England,” said Connex chief executive Antoine Hurel.

The announcement has been enthusiastically welcomed by the Wealden Line Campaign which has argued for Uckfield-Lewes reopening for years.

The business case for the regeneration of the Uckfield Line has involved East Sussex County Council and is now at its final stage. The business plan will be submitted to the Government in July and talks between Railtrack, train operators and the county council are continuing.

In a letter to the campaign, Wealden MP Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith has said: “The long-term future of the whole route rests



The Army and the RAF came to the rescue when a bridge needed replacing on the Giant's Causeway and Bushmills Railway being built on the route of an old tramway in Northern Ireland. This twin-rotor Chinook helicopter lifted out the existing bridge as a crowd of 200 people from the nearby village of Portballintrae watched. The new bridge goes in in April and the railway begins operations in June. Visitors should head for Coleraine (by bus or train from Belfast) where an open-top bus will take them to the railway. The holiday resorts of Port Rush and Ballycastle are nearby. Details: 012657 41157

within the reconnection to the surrounding network.”

Lewes MP and Lib Dem transport spokesman Norman Baker was guest speaker at the Wealden Line Campaign's recent annual meeting.

He spoke of a window of opportunity to secure the reopening of a “ridiculous gap in the network” through the current franchise renegotiations and gave his assurances to work hard in a partnership with everyone involved.

The old Uckfield station is among sites currently being sold off by the old BR Property Board. Although BR has identified it as being of potential transport use, it will be up to the strategic rail authority to decide its future.

A hostile planning application from a developer is on hold, pending the outcome. The station will likely have to be reopened when the line is restored southwards to Lewes so the Wealden Line Campaign is particularly anxious that this strategic land is not

lost at this eleventh hour. Representations are being made to the SRA.

Unfortunately the SRA is reported to be unhappy with Connex's performance.

Junior education minister Malcolm Wicks who represents Croydon North has called on the SRA to remove Connex's franchise. Whether another bidder for the franchise would offer a similar package is a matter for conjecture.

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