

Severnside

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■ ■ Corsham

The branch has welcomed a statement by Defence Secretary Des Browne in favour of reopening Corsham station. The *Western Daily Press* published a letter on this subject from the branch secretary, who asked also for some of the new rolling stock promised by the Government to be used in the Bristol area.

■ ■ Bristol reverse

Following a vigorous campaign by our corporate member Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (www.fosbr.org.uk), Bristol City Council agreed in February to reverse its earlier decision to withdraw funding from the Severn Beach line. The council has now budgeted to support extra services between Temple Meads and Avonmouth for a trial period from December 2007.

The Severn Beach Line Development Plan was discussed by speaker Andrew Griffiths of First Great Western at the branch AGM in Bristol on 7 April. He said the city council's decision in favour of the line had unlocked aspirations in the plan such as a 40-minute frequency service to Avonmouth and Sunday services, which First Great Western could not provide without subsidy. The plan is available on the FGW website (www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk).

■ ■ Trains on move

Members at the AGM expressed concern that 12 ex-First Transpennine Class 158s, currently on loan to FGW, were to transfer to Northern Rail in December. Andrew Griffiths replied that these had allowed FGW to ease the availability of sets for its West of England local services pending the resolution of maintenance problems at St Philip's Marsh depot. It was anticipated that four or five replacement sets would enable all 51 local diagrams to run because refurbishment of FGW's Sprinter fleet was expected to improve reliability by the autumn. He added that railways had risen high on the political agenda in the Bristol area.

■ ■ Melksham

Graham Ellis gave an update on the campaign to restore services on the Melksham line (www.savethetrain.org.uk). Talks with the Department for Transport and Wiltshire County Council were continuing in an effort to improve the shortage of trains.

■ ■ Growing the railways

The AGM passed a motion welcoming Transport 2000's manifesto for Growing the Railways in the South West and congratulating Bristol City Council on its support for the Severn Beach line. This motion also called on the West of England Partnership, the Government Office for the South West and local MPs to raise the demand for a half-hourly service for stations in the Greater Bristol area.

■ ■ Promotion work

Work is continuing jointly with Devon and Cornwall branch on a leaflet to promote Railfuture's proposals for expanding rail services in the West of England. One location in need of capacity improvements is Cheltenham, where the lack of bi-directional platform lines has aggravated delays.

Railway goes west



'CLEARING' THE LINE: Near Histon in April Picture: Steve Wilkinson

The diggers were at work in Cambridgeshire in April and May ripping up the former Cambridge to St Ives rail line.

The line should have been reopened years ago but the planners ignored public opinion and common sense. Now money from the Labour Government is being used by the Conservative-controlled county council to turn the line into a busway.

But at least there is hope that a more sensible decision will be made at the other end of the Oxford-Cambridge axis.

Railfuture and the Oxon and Bucks Rail Action Committee are delighted that the latest East West Rail Consortium study has confirmed a strong case exists for services between Oxford and Milton Keynes, while further work is needed on the Aylesbury link, writes Chris Wright.

The £300,000 study by Steer Davies Gleave, Laing Rail, Llewellyn Davies Young and Frank Knight was published in March.

Funding was provided by the East West Rail Consortium, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Milton Keynes Councils, the South East Regional Assembly, the Economic Development Agency, Milton Keynes Partnerships, Aylesbury Vale Advantage and the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Two trains per hour are suggested between Oxford and Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. A cost of £100-£135million is likely for 20 miles of mainly double-track line for speeds of 75 to 90 mph.

This compares to the £40million per mile cost of adding a lane to the M1 motorway.

The report also identified potential for long-distance and freight services. Oxford to Milton Keynes would take 40 minutes and cover the operating costs with 946,000 users in the first year with 6-10% from cars.

New stations would be needed at Bletchley High Level, Winslow and Newton Longville with Bicester

Town subject to a major upgrade. Potential funding has been identified from property developers in the area served.

The project now moves to the next stage of development (GRIP4 in Network Rail terms) with a £1m study due to report in mid 2008.

This will work up the business case further (including the Aylesbury link and other links like Reading and the West), identify delivery mechanisms and the promoter, and take work up to the tender stage by 2009 for construction in 2010-11.

Meanwhile, related projects will support the scheme. Work at Milton Keynes Central to increase capacity and provide a bay platform for EWRL services is under way, work on the Oxford-Bicester line is under consideration for 2008, and planning for Aylesbury Parkway is progressing.

The EWRC continues to support and is reviewing the potential for further planning work on the Bedford-Cambridge link.

Chris Grayling, the Tory shadow transport minister, visited Swanbourne in April to launch their policy to protect disused rail routes for potential re-use. We were there to reinforce the point!

The tenacity of rail campaigners has seen the authorities continue to progress the EWRL, and the case confirmed that the EWRL will provide a time-saving alternative to the roads, contribute to economic growth and sustainability.



Who pays for traffic pollution?

OILY DEALINGS

Tax on petrol can be seen as sales commission that oil companies pay the Government to market their products. Perhaps this is why Government ministers keep on fighting for the "rights" of car drivers and motorcyclists. A cynic's view.