

Future looks good for Blackfriars



SHINY FACE: The northern entrance to the new Blackfriars station which will span the River Thames

Picture: NETWORK RAIL

Despite fears of a Government axe hanging over rail projects, transport minister Theresa Villiers inspected the £5.5 billion Thameslink scheme in August and said: "I look forward to seeing the future benefits that this significant programme will deliver to passengers."

Long called for by Railfuture, the scheme will upgrade the crucial artery running through London from St Pancras to Blackfriars and London Bridge.

It will increase the number of rail services on the 140-mile route between Brighton and Bedford, delivering benefits for both passengers and the economy.

There is major reconstruction at three key stations, Blackfriars, Farringdon and London Bridge.

But 12 other stations are being expanded to cope with 12-car trains, including St Albans.

The first of the longer 12-carriage trains will enter service next year.

Ms Villiers added: "The station being built across the Thames at Blackfriars will allow millions of passengers each year to reach the centre of London's business district. Today I've seen that progress is being made."

Network Rail's Jim Crawford, said: "London relies on rail to get more than three million people to and from work every day, which is why projects like the Thames-

link upgrade are so vital to the capital's economy." In August, Network Rail awarded a £32 million contract to Invensys Rail to upgrade the signalling in the "core section" to allow 24 trains per hour to run through central London.

When finished, the Thameslink project will also allow people to travel direct to more destinations, for instance Cambridge to Gatwick Airport.

Railfuture is also pleased that the Government has committed itself to London's Crossrail. The Government is also reviewing the way it calculates the benefits of rail reopening schemes (the

New Approach to Appraisal) after schemes in Wales and Scotland were vastly under-rated.

With demand underestimated, only three miles of double track were provided in Ebbw Vale – not the nine miles originally planned – to save a relatively small sum of money on the £30 million project. Taxpayers will now have to pay about £25 million for that extra capacity before the Ebbw Vale-Newport service can operate.

Railfuture is worried that a similar penny-pinching attitude might prevail if the Government targets other parts of the rail system for cuts. Railfuture

is opposed to "savings" in the guise of maintenance "holidays" or other measures which lead to more delays, unreliability, overcrowding or less safety.

Railfuture is concerned that the station improvement programme has already been scrapped, and hopes that station projects which cannot be funded under other programmes will be revived as soon as possible.

Railfuture is in favour of new high-speed routes but believes the present network must come first. We place great store by electrification, which from an environmental viewpoint scores more highly than high-speed lines. We therefore urge that electrification of the existing system is given much higher priority.

The British Chambers of Commerce also warned the Government in August against "hasty and ill-conceived cuts".

The BCC warned that without investment in vital rail projects, the private sector will not be able to deliver the economic growth the Government is hoping for. Rail transport is essential for supporting the future of the UK economy.

The BCC said three schemes in particular should be protected from the cuts: The Northern Hub rail project, electrification, and additional rail carriages to increase capacity on the network.



PROGRESS: Ms Villiers with, from left, Network Rail's Andy Duffin, St Albans deputy mayor Beric Read, First Capital Connect's David Statham at St Albans

Picture: NETWORK RAIL