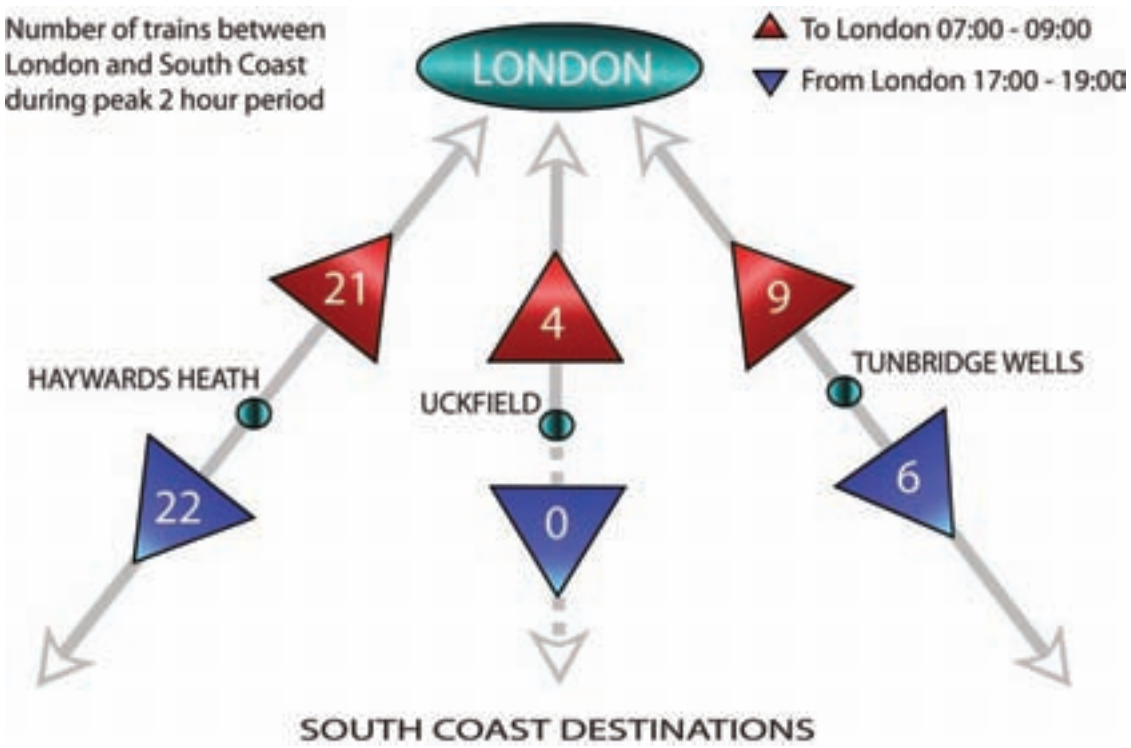
LEWES-UCKFIELD: NO ECONOMIC CASE

It was said to have the best case of any scheme to reinstate disused track, yet Network Rail found there was no business case. Paul Clifton **asks whether it means the end of the line for other re-opening schemes**



There is no economic case for re-opening the Lewes-Uckfield railway line through East Sussex, according to a report prepared by Network Rail. The route, which would serve as an alternative to the congested Brighton main line, was widely seen as having the strongest case of any disused line in the region. Seven and a half miles of track between the end of the current branch line at Uckfield would reconnect it with the railway at Lewes. The route closed in 1969. Network Rail concludes that reinstating it is technically feasible, with no particularly demanding engineering solutions, and that it would more than cover its running costs.

The work was commissioned by the Central Rail Corridor Board, which included representatives from local councils, MPs and the South East England Development Agency. A business case, evaluated by consultants Mott MacDonald, identifies a benefit to cost ratio (BCR) of between 0.70 and 0.78. The minimum BCR required for rail schemes generally is 1.5. The study concludes that 'the benefits would have to at least double, compared with current forecasts, in order for there to be a case for reinstatement'.

Network Rail found that the main reason for the poor business case was a low-level of demand for the service, due to the rural location of the route and the small size of settlements it would serve directly, with demand principally being southwards to Lewes and Brighton. The study had assumed there would be no electrification and no dualling of single track north of Uckfield towards East Croydon.

The well-organised Wealden Line Campaign, which has argued the case for reinstatement for more than 20 years, concluded that 'the report has gone exactly as we anticipated it would, carefully managed to come to the conclusion desired by East Sussex County Council. Get the rail scheme out of the way once and for all, then press on with building a new...road across the trackbed at Uckfield'. The campaign points to the minutes of an ESCC committee meeting in 2005, which pre-empted the study by concluding: '...the proposed reinstatement of a railway link between Lewes and Uckfield is considered to be unrealistic, should therefore not be a priority and should not receive resources.'

Brian Hart, the campaign's director, describes Network Rail's original draft report as 'superb'. It showed a 90mph line speed and a journey time

The trackbed at Uckfield at the start of the disused line to Lewes.

of 10 minutes on the restored line – a broken link between the south coast and London. It estimated that £115m would be required to create a single track railway with passing points at either end, without intermediate stations.

A previous draft of the report stated that the scheme 'could be seen as another building block in the development of the Lewes, Uckfield, Oxted and London corridor. Later development could include shorter journey time, re-doubling any single line sections, connecting to Tunbridge Wells and electrification'.

This paragraph was removed from the final report. Hart claims that it was re-focused to reflect only local traffic south of Crowborough, instead of counting it as a main line linking south coast towns to London, changing the line's prospects completely. 'Claiming the route is rural and wouldn't generate traffic is absurd!' he says. 'Why, then, is Southern running three trains per hour between Lewes and Newhaven – the same distance as Lewes to Uckfield and populated only by sheep?'

Hart points out that a principal benefit of the route would be to relieve congestion on the Brighton line, providing a diversionary route and reducing the number of commuters from East Sussex who drive westwards to use the Brighton line from Haywards Heath or even from Gatwick.

'It is the simplest and most practicable re-opening scheme in all England – 7.5 miles of flat, protected trackbed which could join two busy commuter stations to create a new main line. How easy does a project have to be? If Network Rail cannot re-open a short gap in the busiest, most congested and overcrowded corner of the UK, what hope is there for anything else in England?'

The Liberal Democrat transport spokesman Norman Baker, a local MP, sits on the Central Corridor Rail Board. A long-term supporter of the Wealden line, he says the battle will continue.

'The board decided... to cost a scheme that was as cheap as possible. What was being considered was a line from Lewes to East Croydon that was limited, because of the constraints of the existing line, to two trains an hour on unimproved track, much of it single track only. That meant that the benefits of providing an alternative line to London were limited. It would have been interesting to have costed a much improved, doubled, electrified line with extra capacity at the East Croydon bottleneck. That

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would obviously have been much more expensive, but the benefits would have been considerably greater too.'

The Central Rail Corridor Board expresses concern that current government criteria on investment decisions make it 'extremely difficult to justify a positive business case for the reinstatement of former railway lines, such as Lewes to Uckfield'. Members of the Central Rail Corridor Board will lobby the rail minister, Tom Harris, for changes to the investment criteria. But other than that, no further work is proposed.

Lord Bassam, who speaks for the Government on transport matters in the House of Lords, also hopes the Wealden line will eventually be reinstated. A former leader of Brighton and Hove Council, he told Rail Professional: 'East Sussex County Council has always been ambivalent about it. They are the ones who have to push it through, and it's something they could perfectly well achieve if they wanted to. Another south-coast rail link would not just be for the benefit of local villages, and therefore the cost-benefit study has been slightly misconceived.

'I am keen to see that this is not necessarily the end of the matter.'

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