

“ONTRACK”

WALTON-ON-NAZE, FRINTON-ON-SEA, KIRBY X & THORPE-LE-SOKEN RAIL USERS ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL REPORT 2013 – 14

GENERAL MATTERS

- **Refranchising:** The Department for Transport encountered problems with renewing, first the West Coast and then the Great Western franchises, both of which were abandoned. With a new Franchise Director in place, the re-franchising schedule for the whole country has been re-cast so that the Greater Anglia franchise is being extended until October 2016. What really happens next will depend on who wins the next General Election.
- **Once in a generation: A rail prospectus for East Anglia:** In 2012 a report was produced by an alliance of MPs, County Councils and other local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, businesses and rail user organisations across Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire. A series of high level summits championed by WITHAM MP Priti Patel have taken place over the last 18 months with aim of increasing the number of tracks (capacity) to separate fast and slow and average max increase speeds to above 100 MPH. Earlier in 2013 the then current Transport Minister, Patrick McLoughlin, visited Essex and was asked about the lack of any proposals for improvements to the Great Eastern main line, which would increase capacity and permit higher speeds. His not very encouraging reply was that there was no money available for the next five years and that we must be patient. A very real worry is that the proposed high-speed line, HS2 project, will divert funds needed for improving the existing our lines. Current policy seems very short-sighted, as approval has been granted for a new, four-platform station, Beaulieu Park, to the north-east of Chelmsford.
- **West Country Floods (Comment):** The recent regrettable flooding in the West Country has highlighted the fragility of railway infrastructure and the problems of limited capacity. Clearly it is unacceptable for a major city as well as a complete region of the UK to be totally cut off by rail from the rest of the country. At last this has been recognised officially and it seems that measures are to be taken to obviate reliance on the sole route through Dawlish by reconstructing the ex-Southern Railway line via Okehampton to Plymouth – in practice only about 12 miles of line needs to be relaid. In north Essex there can be similar problems when a serious incident occurs on the Great Eastern where there is only a single double-track line with no alternatives. Construction of additional tracks, as proposed in the GE Main Line Manifesto cannot come soon enough, while re-constructing the alternative route via Stansted would be ideal.
- **The concerns raised in respect of the Kirby Cross Station foot crossing resulted in meetings with local councillors and rail officials to review arrangements**

SUNSHINE COAST PASSENGER HEADCOUNT CENSUS:

- As part of the campaign to build the business case for an increase train service frequency to half-hourly at all stations in Essex, and accelerate journey times a rail Passenger Headcount was conducted at stations on the Walton line with a short pilot street based exercise at the start of Summer 2013 covering Walton On The Naze and Frinton Stations. Subsequently a comprehensive headcount census undertaken at Frinton station on the last Friday of November 2013 which covered all boarding and alighting from the first train of the day until the last train of the day. The results show that the Official ORR estimates understate actual usage by at least up to 25% - ignoring Sundays and/ or weekend or Public Holidays. Funding and resourcing of services follow the perceived official ORR usage data and it is clear that actual usage is understated by these official figures, which are based on deemed ticket sales. But many ticket offices are only open part of the day and exclude conductor guard ticket monies and season ticket sales processed through other locations. More headcounts are planned for Thorpe le Soken (the third busiest interchange outside of Norwich) and Clacton Stations to validate the previous exercise. Also a survey was undertaken which produced a diverse range of results. One of the issues in profiling usage and travel patterns is the sheer diversity and variability brought about the mix of tourist, London commuter, local commuter and local student and casual travel over the seasons.
- Association officials, assisted by local District and County councillors and members of other community stakeholder organisations, carried out a headcount of passengers boarding and alighting from all trains at Frinton-on-Sea station on Friday, 29th November 2013. On that day, it was found that 345 passengers boarded and 355 alighted from trains, a total footfall of 700 passengers. Subsequent analysis suggests that this could give an annual footfall of around 200,000 to 220,000 for the station, some 15-25% higher than the official figure from the Office of Rail Regulation. Our report has been widely circulated to the train operator Abellio, Department for Transport, local councillors, MPs, newspapers, etc, while in early March, Association officials are to meet with Ian Davidson, Chief Executive of Tendring District Council, to discuss the findings.

These results seem to be typical of passenger headcounts at similar railway stations and is significant because funding for rail projects is tied to passenger numbers; inevitably such investment will be skewed towards the major routes, e.g. Paddington to Bristol, where ticket checks are more thorough and passenger statistics more accurate, at the expense of secondary services. An Association letter highlighting these points was published in Rail magazine, and was supported by similar work by the Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association (Manchester to Chester via Stockport line) and on the Swansea to Pembroke Dock service.

The Association is very grateful to all those who assisted in this headcount which lasted from 05.30 until midnight in order to include the first and last trains of the day. Clearly further work is necessary to improve the accuracy of these observations and also to extend the work to other stations on the Sunshine Coast Line. If anyone would like a copy of the report please contact John Smock .

SUNSHINE COAST LINE TIMETABLE STUDY 2013: This report by ONTRACK studied and reported on options to improve the timetabled services to Clacton and Walton. Off-peak train service on the Sunshine Coast Line from Colchester to Clacton and Walton provide a very basic hourly pattern of service. These services are designed to operate at minimum cost and consequently do not provide a particularly attractive alternative to the private car, or even for those without access to any independent means of transport within a family.

- There is a serious employment problem in the Tendring District which is not helped by inadequate train services.
- Unemployment is high, the real unemployment for Tendring being estimated to be 9.6%, second only in Essex to Harlow and not significantly below the levels in many of the ex-industrial areas of the Midlands and the North.¹
- Furthermore, District Council statistics show that residents of working age have a lower level of educational qualification, and consequently of income, than for Eastern England and for the country as a whole. This is accompanied by a higher level of benefit claimants.² But the overall figures mask variations across the District, the situation deteriorating markedly towards the coastal fringe areas of Clacton, Walton and Harwich.

There are a number of deficiencies identified by residents in Tendring and east Colchester:

- Low frequency of service to/from Colchester Town from intermediate “Tendring line” stations.
- Lack of a direct service between Colchester Town and Clacton.
- Journey times from Walton-line stations to Colchester Town are excessive due to the waiting of trains at Thorpe-le-Soken (junction) station.
- Lack of a direct service to Colchester North station from Walton-line stations avoiding connections at Thorpe-le-Soken, preferably extended to Liverpool Street (see below).
- Lack of a direct service to Colchester North station from intermediate Tendring stations avoiding travel via Colchester Town which adds about 10-15 minutes to the overall journey.
- Generally services to Liverpool Street are slow: the Clacton – Liverpool Street journey time has increased significantly in recent years, most significantly for peak-hour services where the increase has been by circa 20%; for off-peak services the figure is nearer 10%.

FRINTON STATION TICKET OFFICE: Regrettably, the young lady who regularly staffed the ticket office at Frinton has transferred to a different department; we wish her well in her new post. After a period when the ticket office was open on an irregular basis, it now seems to be open on a daily basis and we trust that this arrangement will continue. Days when the office is to be closed are displayed near the main entrance. Use of the ticket machine by the unwary can easily result in purchasing a more expensive ticket than necessary – it is always safer to use the ticket office.

REFURBISHED/EXPERIMENTAL ELECTRIC MULTIPLE UNITS: The train leasing company, Eversholt, has refurbished a class 321 emu, the type which normally operates the local service from Walton to Colchester. Two coaches are in a possible “metro” style, with 2+2 seating and more standing room for short journeys, while the other two coaches are in a “suburban” style having 3+2 seating with some tables; it also has a disabled access toilet. This unit is operating a range of services; on 19th February it ran between Colchester and Walton. Passenger feedback may be made via the Greater Anglia website at www.greateranglia.co.uk. It is not clear where such units will eventually operate - at the launch at Liverpool Street representatives were present from a number of train operating companies; Association chairman, John Smock was also present.

A class. 379 Stansted Express unit is being experimentally fitted with batteries so that it could be used both on and off the electrified network, a significant local example being Colchester to Sudbury. After initial trials, it is to go into service on a purely electrified route in case of problems with the battery supply; reports indicate that this could be between Manningtree and Harwich later in the summer, although it could also appear on other services in the area, possibly

¹ Beatty et al, ‘The Real Level of Unemployment 2012’, Centre for Regional and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2012.

² Profile of Tendring, www.tendringdc.gov.uk

Colchester – Walton.

BRIGHTLINGSEA: A campaign has started to get Brightlingsea back on the rail map. The line was a Beeching era casualty with high costs due largely to maintaining and operating the swing bridge across Alresford creek. A modern electrified railway would have lower operational costs and higher ridership *and we also doubt if a swing bridge is now needed across the silted up Arlesford Creek now that the aggregates traffic is taken away by HGV trucks*

TIMETABLES

General: Again there have been only minor changes to the basic timetable; Abellio greater Anglia Railways have been constrained by the terms of their contract with the DfT from making any significant changes having inherited timetable plans from National Express East Anglia.

Other Short-Term Timetable Alterations:

- We are pleased that Abellio have continued the policy of operating Sunday trains to Colchester Town on Bank Holiday Mondays (and this has included the May Day Bank Holiday 2013, an innovation). But did not provide this options on the Sundays prior to Christmas 2013.
- Once again, through services were operated from Walton to Clacton in connection with the Clacton Airshow. This year (2014) like 2013 neither the Southend nor Lowestoft airshows will take place so that Clacton's will be the only major airshow in the east of England. The Association suggested to Abellio in 2013 that a more extensive range of additional trains should be provided, including from London and Norwich.

STUDIES & REPORTS

The Association has responded to the following and been thanked for contributions to the following: Tendring District Council: TDC Draft Development Plan, January 2013.

ASSOCIATION REPRESENTATION AT MEETINGS OF THE FOLLOWING

- Railfuture Meetings in Bury St. Edmunds / Colchester
- Tendring Rail Issues: meetings with Chief Executive and senior officers and Cabinet Member Councillors
- Abellio Rail User Group Forums, Liverpool Street
- Passenger Focus stakeholder forum
- Ontrack has been represented at meetings of the Essex Rail Users Forum and Essex Rail Users Federation.

ASSOCIATION LEADERSHIP: The Association's current committee have seen service in some cases for 20 to 30 years and new blood is urgently needed to contribute to the work, preferably by daily users of one of the local stations. If you can help, please contact David Bolton, David Payne or John Smock.

MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS

- **Website:** The Association's website has been found to help rail users contact officers with problems experienced with their rail journeys and has raised the profile of the Association. The URL is www.ontrackrailusers.org.uk.
- **Newspapers:** There has been regular coverage by the local, regional and national newspapers, in the railway press and in the Frinton Residents' Association newsletter (file copies available on table for inspection).
- **LIFE:** The Association is included in the Essex Library 'Local Information for Essex' databases.
- **Steam Days Magazine:** The September 2013 issue of this magazine included an article entitled "The Clacton Branch, The "Tendring Hundred Railway"". This 17-page article includes many interesting photographs. However, the Thorpe-le-Soken to Walton section was covered in much less detail and we provided the extra information to the magazine.

SPONSORSHIP AND SUPPORT

- **Frinton Property & Finance (FPC) and Chamber of Commerce and Trade have also printed copies of Newsletter in the past and provide reprographic facilities.** We are very grateful to David Foster of FPC for co-ordinating this and providing support.

A. C. Baxter, Acting Hon. Sec.