

*Wessex Branch : General Meeting 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021 via Zoom*

In lieu of our normal AGM, we will be hosting an online meeting for Wessex Branch members and guests on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> April from 7pm, lasting approximately 90 minutes (2 hours, maximum).

In fact, we are not obliged to hold a Branch AGM each year, but we normally do in order to elect officers, present accounts and enable members to participate in branch campaigning.

If we have your email address, we can send you a link to the online meeting, then all you have to do is click on the link to join. Because we're expecting a fairly large number of participants, the meeting will take the form of a "Webinar" rather than a round-table discussion. The main part of the meeting will consist of presentations from guest speakers on a number interesting topics...

Agenda – *subject to alteration*

- 1) Welcome, introduction and notices
- 2) Report on branch activities over the past year – *Mike Southgate, Wessex Branch Chair*  
Presentations:-
- 3) Getting Passengers Back on Rail – *Allison Cosgrove, Rf Passenger Group Director*
- 4) Electrification and Modal Shift – *Ian Brown CBE, Rf Policy Director*
- 5) Restoring our Railways / Campaign Priorities – *Roger Blake, Rf Infrastructure Director*

**IMPORTANT: If you've received this newsletter in the post but you now have an email address, please let us know by sending a message to the branch secretary – contact details on page 4.**

Please rest assured that we intend to resume normal meetings just as soon as we are able to do so, although interim online sessions may still be a useful way to keep in touch with the majority of our members.

**Ideally, we'd like a few more people to serve on the committee so that we have a wide cross-section of views from across our Branch area. For further information or to put your name forwards, please get in touch.**

*Chairman's Message*

My two years as Chair finishes shortly and the committee will need to select a replacement, so please come forward if you want to join the committee.

Due to pandemic restrictions the committee has not been able to meet but there has been a significant number of email exchanges - and more recently we have started having Zoom (online) committee meetings. The pandemic has created a number of challenges for the rail industry. We have supported but also on occasions challenged some of the operational decisions, such as skipping station stops on some services.

Rail will continue to have a vital economic and environmental benefit and we continue to push for a number of infrastructure improvements, new stations and rail re-openings. We have taken a strategic decision to concentrate on a number of key projects and to ensure we are pushing for rail improvements throughout the Wessex area. We are fortunate to have committee members who have geographical linkage with both local groups and the appropriate rail operators.

One of my frustrations with our lobbying is that we may not be fully utilising the writing power of our members to raise their personal comments which I suspect would be in line with our overall principles. Politicians, local and national, are more likely to be supportive if they receive comments from their local electorate. My usual common-sense ask is that any members writing in a personal capacity to the media or decision-makers should try to avoid embarrassment back to Railfuture.

Committee member David Brace has acted as Railfuture's point of contact with South Western Railway (and South West Trains before that) and we're very grateful for his expertise over a number of years. David decided to relinquish this role at the end of 2020, and I'm pleased to say that another committee member, Bruce Duncan, has taken up the batten as "TOC Liaison" for SWR.

*Chair, Mike Southgate.*

### Hampshire News

Hampshire County Council has embarked on its Local Transport Plan for the period up to 2050 (LTP4), and they initially invited comments on their overall vision and guiding principles. Roger Blake and Mike Southgate jointly submitted comments on behalf of Railfuture in February.

In our response, we thought the Council should place more emphasis on encouraging travel by the most sustainable modes, and should recognise that "sustainability" implies more than just "low carbon". With our campaign for a new station at Welborne in mind, we urged the Council to engage with developers at an earlier stage to avoid creating car-dependent housing developments.

HCC's draft LTP4 document will emerge in the summer, when there will be an opportunity for Hampshire residents and organisations such as ours to examine the plan in detail and submit further comments.

In December, we also had the opportunity to comment on rail aspects of Portsmouth City Council's Draft Transport Strategy. You can read our responses to both the Hampshire and Portsmouth transport strategies on the Consultations page of Railfuture's website. See also our new briefing paper entitled "Service Improvements in the South" which you can read by following the link on the Wessex Branch home page.

### Welborne Campaign

The Garden Village development at Welborne, north of Fareham, has now received formal planning approval, and passive provision for a new station on the line between Fareham and Botley is written into the development plans. This falls short of the commitment we had sought, namely: a new station built during the early phase of housing construction.

Alan Mayes, who lives in Fareham, has been keeping abreast of progress and suggests that we might now campaign for a new station under the Government's "Restoring Your Railways" scheme (which supports station reopenings). He points out that there was previously a station called Knowle Halt near the site of the proposed Welborne station – indeed, the Knowle Halt location is referred to as the "Option 2 site" in Network Rail's feasibility study.

### West of England Line

As in other parts of the UK, the service between Salisbury and Exeter has been reduced to a bare minimum in recent months. Bruce Duncan, Chairman of the line user group (SERUG), warns that campaigners cannot take it for granted that the Dept. for Transport will reinstate the full pre-Covid service let alone fund all the infrastructure improvements previously identified. The group has

revised its list of core objectives in line with reduced expectations, but top of the list is the need to encourage passengers back onto the railway.

On a more upbeat note, it's hoped that a station adoption group can be set up for Salisbury, and there are plans for major enhancements at the station. Improvements under consideration range from better interchange with buses to extensive track alterations which would improve operational performance.

An application for funding from the "Restoring Your Railways" Ideas Fund has been submitted by the newly-formed Wilton Junction Stakeholder Group. They propose a 4-platform station alongside the existing park-and-ride site in Wilton. SERUG is basically supportive of a new 2-platform station for Wilton enabling just the TransWilts services to call, but questions whether the extra expense of two further platforms for the longer-distance Salisbury-Exeter trains can be justified.

### Island Line

As previously reported, the Isle of Wight Council was successful in their bid for funding under the Government's Restoring Your Railways initiative, which has enabled them to embark on a study into possible extensions of the Island Line from Shanklin to Ventnor, and from Smallbrook Junction to Newport. The consortium developing the business case for the reopenings has been given until May 2021 to produce their report, and in the meantime has invited submissions from interested parties. We responded to the invitation by the due date of 12 March, and you can see our various comments and suggestions on the "consultation responses" page of Railfuture's website.

Renewed interest in the future of the Island Line gave us the opportunity to press home some of our related campaign aims. We want to see Ryde St John's Road station developed as a Park & Ride with the creation of extra parking spaces; this could involve building a deck over part of the existing car park. Direct access to Ryde Esplanade station for HoverTravel passengers is another objective, and it doesn't have to be a footbridge over to the beach – it's entirely possible to build out the disused platform on the seaward side of the station to allow passengers to board and alight from trains on both sides.

It's reported that Network Rail is due to start strengthening work on the railway pier in 2023, and we advocate bringing a second platform into use at Pierhead to give greater operational flexibility. If the extension to Newport goes ahead, a second platform would certainly be needed to accommodate services on the two routes.

### Freight Update

Robin Attwood reports: "there appears to be a new flow to Southampton Western Docks from Morris Cowley M.A.T. comprising two trains with 1400 tons trailing load run daily with two trains of 1000 tons returning to Cowley. These trains are in addition to the workings to/from the Eastern Docks. There are regular workings to/from Eastern Docks to Halewood (Jaguar) but I have not noticed any workings to/from Castle Bromwich (Jaguar) lately."

Track remodelling work and signalling upgrades between Southampton and Redbridge has now been completed. The improvements will enable longer (775m) freight trains to move quickly and more easily to and from the Freightliner Maritime Terminal, meaning fewer hold-ups for passenger trains. Network Rail say freight movement efficiency will be improved by as much as 30%.

Freight traffic may grow as a result of the recently-announced “freeport” status for Solent ports (encompassing both Southampton and Portsmouth), which suggests we may need to redouble our efforts to campaign for dockside-to-rail transfer facilities at Portsmouth International Port.

### Other News in Brief

Several of us wrote to our MPs in the hope of overturning the Government’s refusal to extend the validity of our **Railcards**, which we’ve been unable to use due to Lockdown. We’ve all received identical replies in which the Dept. for Transport justifies its intransigence. We think this position is short sighted as many Railcard holders will feel cheated and may decide not to renew.

The forever-delayed opening of the new station at **Reading Green Park** is now scheduled for completion in “summer 2021 at the earliest”.

Another much-delayed project is the reinstatement of lifts at **Pokesdown** (for Boscombe). It’s now seen as part of a wider neighbourhood regeneration scheme, which would include a new north entrance leading to AFC Bournemouth’s Vitality Stadium. Funding is assured after Boscombe was named as one of the 45 places to benefit from the “Towns Fund” announced in the budget.

Meanwhile, work to improve access to trains at **Liphook** station continues. Passengers will benefit from new boarding/alighting ramps and a new footbridge with lifts.

The old station building at **Shawford** is to be transformed into a community hub under an SWR scheme for bringing redundant buildings back into use. The building, with 5 rooms, kitchen and toilet, has been leased to the Three Rivers Community Rail Partnership for a peppercorn rent.

The **Heart of Wessex** line was closed for a period in February to allow strengthening work to be carried out on a cutting near Yeovil, and trackwork to be renewed through Pen Mill station. Recommendations for more substantive upgrades to the Heart of Wessex route may result from Network Rail’s “Dorset Connectivity CMSP” study, due to report this spring.

It’s the end of an era at **Weymouth**: the rail tracks along the quay were lifted during the winter and the ferry terminal has now been demolished. Channel Island ferries switched to Poole in 2015.

**Swanage Railway** plans to resume rail services between Norden, Corfe Castle and Swanage from Monday April 12. No date is given for the resumption of services to Wareham.

Claire Mann takes up her role as the new Managing Director of **South Western Railway** on 22 March.

### Dates for your Diary

**Thu 15 April 2021:** Railfuture Wessex Branch General Meeting via Zoom, from 7pm.

**Sat 17 July 2021:** Railfuture national AGM, provisionally booked for the Priory Rooms, Birmingham ... although if this isn’t possible the meeting will be held online.

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**If you received this newsletter by post and have since acquired an internet connection, please let us know your email address as this will help us to reduce the cost of sending out newsletters – thanks.**

### Branch contacts

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