

Tracks to prosperity



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Fifty years on from the Beeching report, Britain's railways look very different. The relentless rise in passenger numbers creates a huge challenge to operators and decision makers. Railfuture's role is very different too; having moved on from fighting closures, our job is to push for much-needed improvements and investment.

Undoubtedly some line closures were mistakes, and many of the reopenings that Railfuture supported have been hugely successful. The Robin Hood line, Ebbw Valley line and Stirling-Alloa all exceeded forecasts. Since 1960, over 350 stations and 300km of track have reopened, and whilst Railfuture can rightly claim credit for many of these, much more needs to be done to make a railway fit for the 21st century.

Current government investment plans such as Crossrail and mainline electrification are hugely welcome, and will go some way towards increasing capacity and reducing overcrowding. We also welcome the new capacity that HS2 will bring, although we will continue to shout about its weaknesses such as the poor

connectivity and inadequate out-of-town stations. With a project as large as this it's important to get it right.

But the railway is still being held back by the lack of a level playing field: Network Rail has to borrow money at commercial rates whilst road schemes are paid for directly by the treasury, airlines enjoy tax-free fuel unlike the railways, and road fuel duty remains frozen whilst rail fares increase above inflation. Money spent on rail is too often described as a "subsidy", while roads receive "investment".

Despite these handicaps, rail investment still pays dividends - a study for Invensys Rail in 2008 found that £ for £, rail investment hugely outperformed road *and* created more jobs.

There are still plenty of bottlenecks in the network that need relieving, and with increasing fuel prices, rail investment looks increasingly like the best bet to achieve economic growth.

With passenger numbers now at record levels since the 1920s and rail freight doubling since privatisation, Railfuture can now feel our efforts have been vindicated.

Railfuture is Britain's leading independent rail campaign group. Follow us at twitter.com/railfuture and at railfuture.org.uk

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