

Report to: Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre Economic Prosperity Board

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FYLDE COAST RAIL LOOP

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To update members on developments during 2020 and recommend a way forward to improve rail connectivity on the Fylde Coast.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To reaffirm the Board's support for improving strategic transport connectivity on the Fylde Coast through a Fylde Coast rail loop

2.2 To recognise that the two successful Restoring Your Railway bids for Fleetwood to Poulton-le-Fylde and the South Fylde Line provide the opportunity for a Strategic Outline Business Cases to be prepared to establish the basis for further requests for funding to implement the preferred schemes in due course.

2.3 To note that a consultant for the Fleetwood to Poulton-le-Fylde study has now been appointed by Lancashire County Council and work should be completed by May 2021.

2.4 In respect of the South Fylde Line, to recommend that all key stakeholders are consulted in the development of the brief, namely Lancashire County Council and Blackpool Council, as the two local transport authorities for the South Fylde Line, Fylde Borough Council, the local MP's, the Department for Transport, Network Rail and Northern Trains, together with others including town/parish councils and user groups.

2.5 To ensure that adequate funding is earmarked to undertake a Strategic Outline Business Case study for the South Fylde Line, similar to the one that is currently being undertaken for the Fleetwood - Poulton-le-Fylde disused railway line.

2.6 To receive the outcome of the two studies in due course and then identifies the best route for securing funding for the implementation of the preferred options.

3.0 Background information:

3.1 The Fylde Coast authorities have longstanding ambitions to improve local and sub-regional connectivity by rail, be it heavy rail, light rail (tram) or tram-train.

3.2 Transforming Cities Bid

One of the first acts of the Economic Prosperity Board in May 2018 was to support the sub-regional Transforming Cities bid based on Preston which included a proposal for a passing loop on the South Fylde line to increase its capacity. This, however, was unsuccessful on value for money and deliverability grounds and whilst some parts of the bid were approved by Government the passing loop proposal was not included.

3.3 Future High Streets Fund Bids

A further opportunity was provided by Blackpool, Fleetwood and Kirkham all being invited in 2019 to submit bids for the Future High Streets Fund (FHSF) where connectivity was one of the main themes. The proposal was to share the cost (between the bids) of a Fylde Coast rail loop study to look at the viability of a series of options to determine which presented best value for money to deliver on the overall strategic objective of improving connectivity by rail on the Fylde Coast.

Whilst none of the Future High Streets Fund bids have yet been determined, as explained at the last meeting Fylde did not include the proposal in their bid owing to the potentially adverse impact it would have on their overall bid, and in the autumn the Government asked all bidders to reassess their bids and remove items deemed ineligible (including feasibility studies – notwithstanding the scheme’s connectivity priority). The opportunity of Future High Streets Fund funding for this work is therefore now closed.

As also noted at the last meeting, the Board agreed from the beginning of this exercise that even if the bids for the study were unsuccessful through the Future High Streets Fund, any work undertaken would stand all three authorities in good stead for future bids, and the issue of improving connectivity across the Fylde Coast remained critical. In addition, the importance the Government is placing on transport infrastructure was also seen as an important factor.

3.4 Restoring Your Railway Fund – Fleetwood to Poulton-le-Fylde

In January 2020, the Department for Transport announced that it was inviting MP’s, local councils and community groups across England and Wales to propose how they could use £500m of funding to reinstate axed local services and restore closed stations. This funding initiative, called Restoring Your Railway, is split in three ways to support different projects at different phases of development:

- Ideas Fund;
- Accelerating existing proposals; and
- Proposals for new or restored stations.

The announcement also confirmed that the Government would make available funding to undertake feasibility work on how reinstatement of passenger services over the Fleetwood to Poulton-le-Fylde line could stimulate growth and reconnect isolated communities. It is the Secretary of State for Transport's strong wish that a local lead promoter takes the study forward, but working closely with key partners, stakeholders and supporters. In February 2020, he therefore wrote to Lancashire County Council asking it to be the lead promoter in view of its existing role as the local transport authority, and the Leader accepted that offer.

The Restoring Your Railway initiative is being taken forward within the framework of the Government's new staged approach to the development and progression of rail enhancement projects requiring central Government funding set out in its 2018 Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP) publication. The feasibility study is anticipated to consider the costs, benefits and funding options for a range of potential heavy rail and light rail (as part of a wider Fylde Coast rail loop) options to improve transport and other socio-economic outcomes and how these compare with other strategic transport options to address those issues. It will also prepare a strategic outline business case in accordance with published Department for Transport guidance so that a scheme can be considered for further progression through the Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline process.

As a brief was agreed by Lancashire County Council, Wyre Borough Council and other key stakeholders, a Strategic Outline Business Case study is now underway which will determine whether light rail (tram), heavy rail or tram-train is the best option for the disused Fleetwood-Poulton line. Lancashire County Council, the local transport authority, is leading the study, which is estimated to cost £100,000. A consultant has been appointed and key stakeholders have been engaged.

3.5 Restoring Your Railway Fund – South Fylde Line

Following the Chancellor's Comprehensive Spending Review announcement in November confirmation was received that another Restoring Your Railway Ideas Fund bid, submitted by two local MP's, had been successful: titled 'Enhanced existing passenger services, Preston - Blackpool South (South Fylde Line Passing Loop)'.

At the time of writing specific details are not known, but clearly this presents an opportunity to progress matters. It is envisaged that there will be the need to prepare a Strategic Outline Business Case which will include consultation with Lancashire County Council as the transport authority for the majority of the South Fylde Line, which is an operational railway, and Blackpool Council as the transport authority for the section within Blackpool.

The South Fylde Line connects South Blackpool and Preston by a single track, which limits the train frequency to one per hour and reliability issues ensue. Capacity, frequency, journey time and reliability improvements are clearly needed. Furthermore, Lytham St Anne's is not connected to central Blackpool by rail; Blackpool South is the terminus, around 2 kms south of Blackpool Town Centre. The southern terminus of the Blackpool - Fleetwood Tramway is at Starr Gate, some 3.5 kms from St Anne's.

The Transforming Cities Fund bid only appraised heavy rail for the South Fylde Line and did not look at light rail (tram). However, earlier work undertaken for the European Union-funded SINTROPHER (Sustainable Integrated Transport Options for Peripheral European Regions) project looked at options/scenarios to improve connectivity in the sub-region and promote regeneration and growth. For the South Fylde Line, preferred options were heavy rail in the shorter term and tram/tram-train in the longer term.

3.6 Next Steps

With the support of local transport operators, Network Rail, Lancashire County Council and the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership, the Fylde Coast authorities remain committed to progressing rail improvement schemes in support of economic, environmental and social objectives. A heavy rail passing loop for the South Fylde Line featured prominently in the strategic case for Preston's Transforming Cities Fund bid and has political support from local MPs. There are also opportunities to extend the Blackpool Tramway in two directions which would complement heavy rail improvements in the area, which also has support from local MPs. The Blackpool Tramway has been extremely successful since its 2012 upgrade and carried around 5 million passengers per annum prior to the COVID pandemic and has potential to expand. Post-pandemic, the Fylde Coast authorities wish for substantial improvements to local rail networks and also see these as essential in support of the Climate Change agenda.

It is hoped that through the two Restoring Your Railway Fund bids that Strategic Outline Business Cases can be concluded which confirm the most effective strategy for improving Fylde Coast connectivity which then provide the basis of securing future funding for implementation of the preferred options.