

GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS  
Transition Team

CALL FOR EVIDENCE  
Whole Industry Strategic Plan



A Response from the Wealden Line Campaign  
February 2022



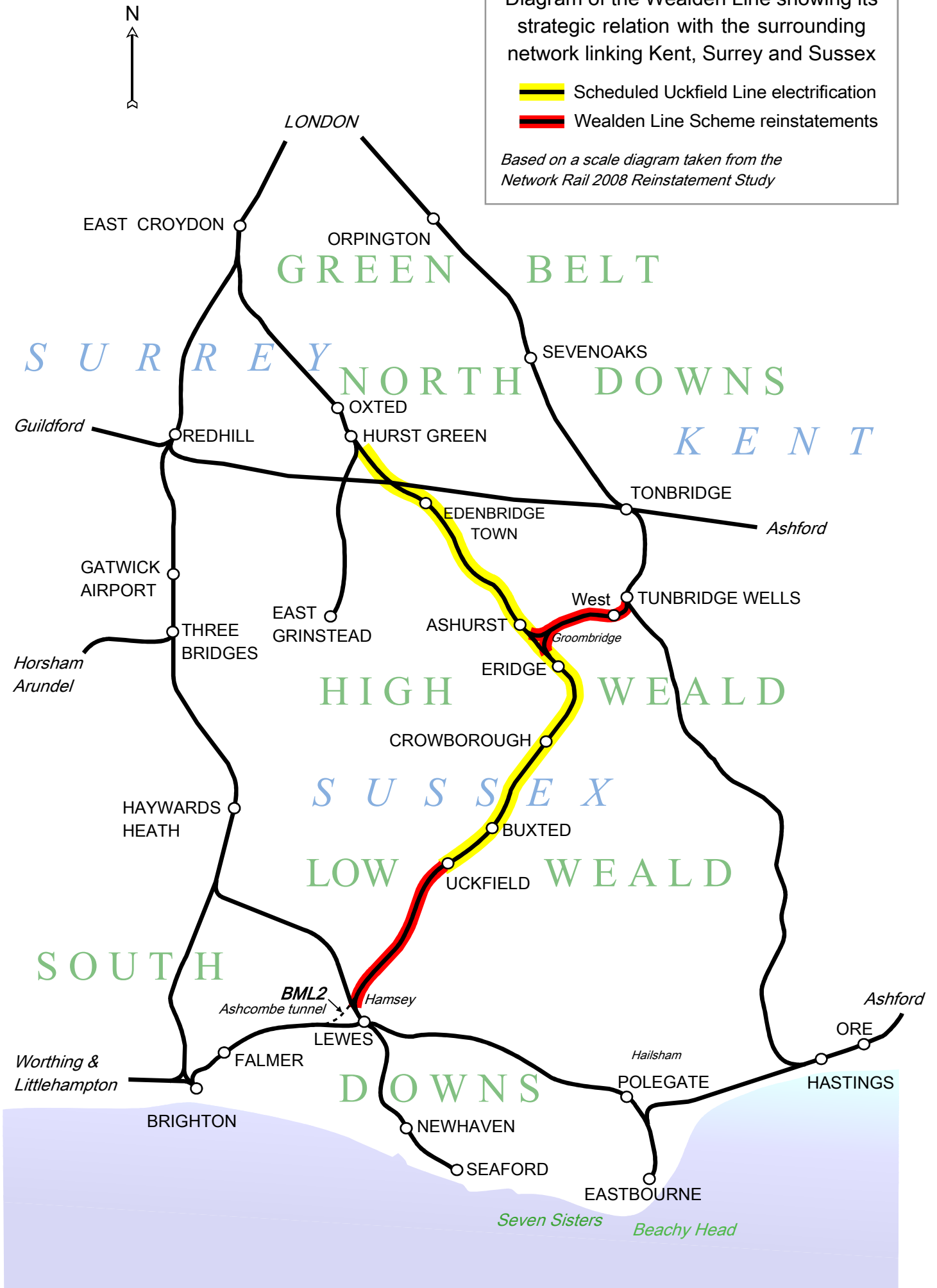
*"We know that continuing to cater for ever-rising car use in the South East is simply not an option if we are to deliver the future we want.... A better rail network can reduce congestion on our roads, improve air quality....and boost connectivity and drive substantial economic growth for people and businesses."*

Leader of East Sussex County Council, Cllr Keith Glazier speaking on behalf of Transport for the South East, May 2021

Diagram of the Wealden Line showing its strategic relation with the surrounding network linking Kent, Surrey and Sussex

-  Scheduled Uckfield Line electrification
-  Wealden Line Scheme reinstatements

*Based on a scale diagram taken from the Network Rail 2008 Reinstatement Study*



## GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS TRANSITION TEAM

### Call for evidence – Whole Industry Strategic Plan

Response from the Wealden Line Campaign/BML2 Project Group

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Call for Evidence because we feel able to state with complete confidence that no other rail development in the UK can match the multiplicity of benefits of the Wealden Line Scheme (WLS) and its associated project – Brighton Main Line 2 (BML2).

If the Government is truly serious in its intention to *“Growing the network and getting more people travelling”* and changing the culture of Network Rail to putting passengers first, then it can no longer afford to shelve this particular assignment. GBR’s objective of having a *“can-do”* attitude rather than a *“can’t do culture”* is most refreshing. We would welcome any opportunity to outline all facets of the project, explain the solutions and answers which have come forth from numerous engineers over the years. This includes driving down costs and achieving best value for money. Sensible, practical and cost-effective solutions exist for the delivery of the entire project, with definable benefits for everyone involved. We can also help harness the best of the private sector which clearly has an appetite to ‘invest in the best’ as we look towards bolstering faltering economies, improving people’s lives and shifting to net-zero. As both owner and operator, GBR *has* to be a long-term investor in the industry – not least because railways are long-term investments and have a very bright future.

Not only must it be recognised that *“rail needs to be joined up with the wider transport system in order to achieve the strategic objectives”* – it must also be joined up with itself – where there are obvious strategic gaps, especially those which prevent cohesive operation and thereby usefulness to the public.

We hope that Great British Railways will be everything to which it aspires; standing up for the interests of the industry and the people it ultimately serves. Nobody wants to see a return to the worst days of British Railways where good intentions and far-sighted modernisation plans were ruthlessly binned as funding was squeezed or withdrawn, whilst managers were compliant in kowtowing to their political paymasters. Neither must it be a non-accountable black hole where not even the private sector would dare to tread. Above all, we hope to see an enterprising, visionary and entrepreneurial mindset which can effectively work with the private sector to improve the lives of everyone today and in the decades ahead.

The scheme in various forms has been around for a long time and will be familiar to many in the rail industry as well as Government departments. Nevertheless, we think it is necessary to explain in some detail why certain sections were severed in the first place. Why were these particular links closed? Why haven’t they been reinstated? Why have so many investigations taken place? Why have we ended up in this invidious situation? Even now, there exists misunderstanding that these cuts were necessary; were due to the Beeching Report; they came about through lack of use; because of flood-damaged infrastructure, etc. None of these has any truthful base whatsoever.

The Wealden Line Scheme was devised in the early 1980s, taking up long-standing calls in the community to reinstate a 'missing link' between Uckfield and Lewes in East Sussex. This was removed in 1969 – unequivocally to facilitate a minor road scheme in the County Town of Lewes.

Prior to this, British Railways had scheduled the Oxted Line Electrification Scheme (1958) for completion in 1964, to follow on from the hugely-successful Kent Coast Electrification delivered in June 1961. The Oxted scheme was designed to retain a much-needed secondary/relief main line between Brighton and London via Uckfield. Incorporated was the electrification into Tunbridge Wells (West) – as this was the principal main line connection between Sussex and Kent where rail traffic was growing. Additionally, this would similarly provide a useful secondary/relief route for the increasingly busy Tonbridge main line through Sevenoaks.

The closure south of Uckfield in 1969 turned a once-busy and growing main line into a long branch terminating in the middle of East Sussex – just seven miles short of the whole coastal network. The Oxted mainline services between Tunbridge Wells West and London Victoria via Croydon were also withdrawn in that year, whereby the Uckfield branch, no longer an asset, became a liability and required grant aid.

It was for good reason that the WLS (which proposed reinstatement and electrification to both Lewes and Tunbridge Wells) attracted serious interest from British Rail's 'Network SouthEast' in 1986. Its Director, Chris Green, declared: *"No one would be happier than I to reopen the Uckfield–Lewes line"* (1). BR looked at the capital costs of restoring Lewes–Uckfield comparing this with estimated revenue and concluded the route would make an operating profit.

Accordingly, and despite its stringent funding constraints of the 1980s, BR met local councils and pledged £1.5m (25%) of the cost of re-establishing the 7-mile Lewes–Uckfield link if local authorities funded the remaining £4.5m. (2) The offer was declined and East Sussex County Council (ESCC) was criticised for instead spending £4.5m (coincidentally the exact same amount) on a 1¼ mile-long stretch of new road between Lewes and Uckfield to eliminate some bends.

Chris Green appreciated the strategic advantages and potential benefits of the WLS and said: *"If either the Uckfield–Lewes and/or Eridge–Tunbridge Wells sections were reopened this would obviously strengthen rather than weaken the Hurst Green–Uckfield service. Railways thrive on volume."* (3)

Calls for the line to be reopened continued as strongly as ever throughout the ensuing years, whilst local authorities came under pressure to ensure no development took place on the former trackbed and alignments which could hinder or even preclude reinstatement. (4) This policy had the strong support of Network SouthEast which declared: *"The route from Uckfield to Lewes is in many places no longer in BR ownership. There is no change in our position that we consider the land presently in our ownership should not be disposed of in a way that precludes future re-opening of the line"*. (5) Plainly, if the WLS had no merit, then long-term protection for reinstatement would never have been entertained, let alone pursued for 50 years.

A number of further investigations and consultancy reports occurred during the 1990s sponsored by ESCC which engaged Mott MacDonald on what the council termed 'The East Sussex Central Rail Corridor'. In hindsight, the objective appears to have been to 'prove' there was neither justification for re-opening nor retaining the trackbed protection policy, as well as ensuring the railway to Lewes never again crossed the High Street by making Uckfield a reversible terminus. (6)

Easily the most significant development occurred in 2000 when Connex UK intended introducing the 'Wealden Main Line' by reinstating the short lost links with full electrification for services from the Sussex Coast, principally Eastbourne and Lewes, to London via Uckfield. The New Labour Government's Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) welcomed the proposition and in one of many letters to the Wealden MP declared: *"I see the route as a major opportunity towards delivering a fit-for-purpose network for the future. I agree with you that this scheme is not a pipe-dream"* (7)

Despite direct services to Brighton from the Uckfield line no longer being possible, Connex nevertheless perceived a sufficiently robust business case in operating main line services between London, Uckfield and Seaford/Eastbourne. A major factor was the adjacent Brighton Line being seriously overcrowded and under rising strain. Furthermore, any incident, especially between Balcombe and Brighton, caused widespread disruption to manifold services to the Sussex Coast. Connex's bid was far-sighted, not least in dealing with the inexorable problems ahead on the Brighton Line which consequently affected all of Sussex. (8)

An exceptionally outstanding and beneficial intention from Connex UK was to establish new services between London Charing Cross and Seaford via Tonbridge, Uckfield and Lewes. This would have the distinct advantage of not only recreating the important cross-county connection lost in the 1980s, but link together large towns and therefore benefit enormous numbers of people who live, work and travel between all these places.

The Government eventually awarded the South Central franchise to GoVia, who promptly dropped the undertaking to investigate reinstating Lewes–Uckfield, whilst electrification of the remaining Hurst Green–Uckfield branch was similarly shelved in favour of class 171 Turbostars.

With Connex still retaining the South Eastern franchise, we submitted a proposal to which the SRA Chief Executive responded: *"The possibility of the route between Lewes–Uckfield–Tonbridge Wells being introduced onto the Connex South Eastern franchise is something that we will consider discussing with Connex."* (9)

Meanwhile, Connex responded: *"As you are aware our original plan was to run services from Charing Cross to Seaford via Tonbridge and Uckfield. It is unclear whether GoVia have any plans to restore the rail link between Lewes and Uckfield and obviously the potential for Connex South eastern to run services through to Lewes and the Sussex Coast over a shared line will depend on this."* (10)

In 2002 Connex's Income Analyst further expressed the operator's fiscal confidence in the Wealden route's strategic value for the South East: *"You are aware that Connex considers it would be worthwhile to rebuild the line from Uckfield to Lewes"*

*as part of a new electric main line from London to the Sussex Coast and our rejected proposal for the South Central 20 year franchise included this scheme. If the two links were to be rebuilt we would certainly consider running trains over them.” (11)*

It is important to state here that growth along the Sevenoaks–Tonbridge–Lewes–Sussex Coast route still continues at a rapid, unabated pace and this strategic corridor remains in urgent need of sustainable rail-based transport. The road system across this sensitive area is congested and inadequate, whereby the railway has a vital role to play in the future. Even so, no one needs to take our word for it because this fact is fully acknowledged by Network Rail: *“Railway journeys between the west Kent area (Sevenoaks/Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells) and the relatively close Sussex Coast (Brighton/Lewes/Eastbourne) are poor, requiring a detour via Hastings.” (12)*

In 2004, fresh proposals came from the private sector (Kilbride Group) to create ‘WealdenWay’ which sought to achieve a reopened Lewes–Uckfield link funded by housing development, principally along the Seaford–Oxted corridor. The engineers from Norwest Holst Vinci inspected the entire route and found no obstacles which could prevent reinstatement. In fact, it was declared to be one of the most straightforward rail engineering exercises anywhere. (13)

Other events took over with the next development emerging at that time and involving nationalised Network Rail, which superseded Railtrack. This commenced in late 2006 and lasted around two years. During this period the Brighton Line was experiencing overwhelming capacity problems, so much so in fact, that Network Rail looked seriously at introducing double-deck trains and constructing a total of seven new tunnels between Coulsdon (Croydon) and Brighton. At the same time, an alternative of running trains of 16-car length, which would incur major track alterations and lengthened platforms, was also considered. (14) Hence their serious interest in re-establishing the moribund adjacent Uckfield route as an electrified and fully-rejuvenated main line as originally scheduled back in the early 1960s.

*“If this scheme was to be taken forward then it 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 into Tunbridge Wells and electrification.” (15)*

It was added: *“These have not been addressed in this report”* – simply because the remit given to Network Rail was to investigate nothing outside the Lewes–Uckfield section. Although it is probably stating the obvious, it is important to make plain that such sections can never be accurately investigated in isolation, as this leads to erroneous calculations and therefore skewed conclusions; instead, an all-encompassing investigation is paramount to ensuring complete accuracy.

To its enduring credit, Network Rail did however undertake a thorough engineering examination and completed a comprehensive survey which, unsurprisingly, came to the same conclusions as Norwest Holst Vinci, in being entirely feasible: *“There are no physical obstructions which would preclude the rebuilding of the railway between Lewes and Uckfield, although significant infrastructure works would be required at some locations.” (16)* Most involved the replacement of Victorian iron girder bridges with concrete spans. Parliamentary (T&WA) and legal procedures, land repurchase,

etc, would take most of the time, whereas actual *“Construction, testing and commissioning”* could be achieved within 27 months. (17)

One of the *“significant infrastructure works”* involves elevating the A22/A26 bypass over the reinstated railway at Uckfield. In the original exhibited plans in 1978, a bridge over the trackbed was included to satisfy public concerns, but this was later dispensed with and the road built at grade, thereby incurring less cost. However, this expenditure need not be borne by the railway because, following complaints and insistence from councillors, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) during the latter planning stages of the bypass gave a formal written undertaking to fund this: *“The Committee agree to pay the cost of a new bridge and other works over the Uckfield By-pass should the Lewes -Uckfield Railway Line ever be re-opened”* (18)

ESCC moved to gain overall control of the 2008 Study and engaged Mott MacDonald to produce evidence as to whether there was – or was not – a business case to re-open. From its inception, controversy surrounded the study and there was dissatisfaction around its narrow focus, its direction and notably its steering by ESCC. Later on, this ‘evidence’, which ‘proved’ a poor Benefit to Cost Ratio (BCR) of between 0.70 and 0.78, was discovered to have used passenger loadings dating from the winter of 1966; copies of which we obtained from the National Archives. Significantly this was not only the nadir of annual travel, but equally pertinent the Wealden populations were substantially lower: Uckfield was just 4,300 (reaching 14,493 in 2011) and Crowborough 10,100 (20,607 by 2011). These figures will have risen yet further with the imminent next census to be published – ‘late spring 2022’.

*“We’re not spending much time on Lewes–Uckfield at the moment. It is very clear that ESCC is trying to stop the project”* - Peter Frost, Kilbride Properties. (19)

Prior to the 2008 Study, ESCC’s Highways Dept (now ‘Transport & Environment’) had plans well in hand to construct its gyratory road system on the former Uckfield station site. Although this was thinly veiled as ‘Uckfield Travel Plan’ the road would not only sever the safeguarded trackbed in two places, but present a serious obstacle to reinstatement. This was only stopped when the site, thanks to the timely intervention of the House of Lords and being disposed of by the former British Railways Property Board, was mercifully secured by Network Rail.

It needs to be explained that the primary reason for the Department for Transport and Railtrack (as it was then) remaining cool towards re-opening the Uckfield branch to the Sussex Coast was the irrevocable loss of the ability to operate direct services into Brighton through Lewes. As a result, all reopening studies from 1969 onwards were obliged to include reinstatement of the original (1858-1868) connection via Hamsey. Because ESCC would not countenance bridging the Uckfield railway at a cost of £134,000 (Lewes Inner Relief Road, phase 1) the British Railways Board obtained an Act of Parliament in 1965-6 to reopen the Hamsey link at a cost of £120,000. This less-costly alternative to the bridge would save the main line between London and Lewes, despite trains facing towards Eastbourne rather than Brighton. Even though a reversal at Lewes (or change of trains) for Brighton would be necessary, it would at least retain the strategic connection. However, because the Hamsey link stemmed from a road programme, the cost would fall upon the local highway authority (ESCC) but would have attracted a Ministry of Transport grant of 75%. (20) Nothing was forthcoming during this stalemate, whereby British Rail

promptly retaliated by applying for the closure of all main lines between Hurst Green–Tunbridge Wells and Lewes rather than being encumbered with maintaining a 25 mile-long branch line terminating at Uckfield.

Because of this DfT/Railtrack objection over no direct link between Uckfield and Brighton, coupled with Network Rail's recent serious proposals to construct seven new tunnels between London–Brighton, the Wealden Line Campaign felt it was credible to seriously launch BML2, a concept which had been evolving for some time. Alongside the Hamsey connection into Lewes, this would incur just one tunnel (estimated at £52m *pro rata* with HS1 North Downs tunnel cost) through the South Downs at Ashcombe to create the desired fast direct route into the City of Brighton & Hove. The chief benefit of Ashcombe is the capability of delivering the shortest, fastest and most viable alternative/relief route between London and Brighton. Furthermore, it would also enable the city's educational establishments and universities at Falmer and Moulsecoomb, as well as the AMEX stadium, to be served by *direct* trains from London, Surrey, Kent and East Sussex.

Further political manoeuvres were evident in the following years to have the line reopened, culminating in 2015 when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced a fresh investigation, authorising £100m for a new study. This was carried out by WSP Parsons Brinckerhoff which regrettably looked at too wide a range of options. This ended up woefully inconclusive and, much to everyone's dismay, failed to take into account so many important factors. Insufficient attention was paid to BML2's critical Kent Phase involving Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells, whilst BML2's London Phase was similarly inconclusive – perhaps through limited study funding. Even so, with Stratford now overtaking Waterloo as the UK's busiest station, this might be viewed as short-sighted.

However, the overwhelming weakness in the Osborne-funded report was WSP's 'guesstimate' of usage, which completely undermines its credibility. Unfortunately, WSP relied on Mott MacDonald's previous 2008 projection, which was simply lifted from passenger loadings dated 28 Nov to 2 Dec 1966. These 1966 figures record 270 passenger trips from Uckfield to Lewes on the five morning peak hour train services. (21) WSP said: *'Our low-end estimate [150 trips] aligns closely with the flow estimates in the 2008 study, using similar assumptions.'* No explanation was given as to why they thought 120 fewer people (viz: 270–120 = 150) would use the line than had done so in 1966. WSP also 'guesstimated': *'The high-end estimate [270] reflects the much improved General Journey Times offered by the most complex scheme which includes 4tph direct to Brighton via the Ashcombe Tunnel and an electrified and redoubled Uckfield line.'* Again, no explanation was offered why no more than 270 passengers – as in 1966 – could be expected to use what would be an extremely attractive 20-minute train journey between Uckfield and Brighton via BML2's Ashcombe tunnel.

This is clearly a gross misrepresentation. (22) It is a major error, especially as even in 1987 Network SouthEast had taken into account the 43% rise in Wealden's population since 1965 producing at least 600 passengers per day over the reinstated line. (23)



The primary criticisms aimed at the WSP report's failings centred on:

- 1) The sharp rise in population figures, particularly along the busy Uckfield line corridor, was not taken into account and should have been included.
- 2) No allowance was made for the phenomenal increase in rail usage over recent decades, especially in London and the South East.
- 3) No consideration was given to why the two parallel routes to the Uckfield line – the Brighton and Tonbridge main lines were now at 'breaking point' (due to railheading).

We need to look back at the 2008 study, which is the very nub of the matter, where Mott MacDonald attempted to justify the conclusions of its 'business case', viz: *"The level of demand, and resultant revenue for the reopened route, would be relatively low. This is the result of the rural location of the route, the small size of the settlements it could serve directly, and the short distances involved."*

These wholly specious assumptions do not stand up to scrutiny. It is a plain fact that all railways traverse 'rural locations' in joining communities, some at greater distances station-to-station. Consider HS1 for a moment. This should have no bearing whatsoever on the business case. Furthermore, the Wealden towns are not small; in fact they are much larger than anything between say, Tunbridge Wells–Hastings, Horsham–Arundel, both of which routes are electrified and double-track. Quite clearly, it is not an exaggeration or wild assumption to predict that the Wealden route would be substantially busier. As for the *"short distances involved"* this is neither here nor there, because 'Uckfield–Lewes' is purely one link in a long chain. To elaborate, it is certainly not what revenue could be derived from Uckfield–Lewes, but what traffic flows and income would consequently be generated by London–Tonbridge–Seaford, as well as London–Oxted–Eastbourne services and vice versa. Had the investigative work been carried out in a far more professional and business-like fashion, then the outcome would have been very different indeed.

The most recent of all these investigations (the submission to the 'Restoring Your Railway' programme) was ill-suited to this low-funded attempt to re-open lines, totalling £500m across the UK, to 'Reverse Beeching'.

Having explained just some of the reasons why progress on this important project has hitherto stalled, we will now turn to the five strategic objectives for the Strategic Plan which the UK Government has set out. Because these objectives are intended to be at the very heart of the Strategic Plan, we prefer to answer these directly and in the order they are set. This is because we firmly believe a much greater clarity of understanding and appreciation is possible with this approach. Rather than submitting generalisations in answer to the set questions, we prefer to focus on specifics, simply because these not only indirectly answer the questions, but show how a tangible difference with GBR can be forthcoming.

Dealing first then with the UK Government's five 'Strategic objectives' for the Strategic Plan as set out in its 'Ambition for rail'

### **I - Meeting Customers' needs**

**a:** A comprehensive and robust network with a multitude of destinations will attract custom by meeting passengers' needs in travelling by rail. This is especially the case

where other means of public transport is poor, whilst travel by car is difficult, expensive (parking/congestion charges) often arduous and time-consuming. Train travel is generally swift, reliable and convenient and is considered overall to be good value for money. This is borne out by the phenomenal rise in patronage during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the substantial drop during the last two years as people were obliged to work from home, there are already reports of a strong recovery in peak travel. We only have to ask ourselves – could the South function without its rail system? The answer is clearly no and therefore its contribution both overt and covert to the economy, the environment and people's lives, should be properly recognised.

**b:** Alongside the need to have a multi-destination network, the Wealden Line Scheme (WLS) stands out as a prime example worthy of our investment because it has the ability to connect a number of continually expanding towns with major rail hubs. The investment required for this is relatively small compared to the very substantial payback that will result. This is not just the financial return on investment, which any competent analyst will immediately recognise, but the environmental and social benefit-to-cost ratio. An example is end-to-end journey times which could be significantly reduced with WLS, for example Tonbridge to Lewes in 43 minutes. (24)

**c:** The WLS would provide an extremely safe and unrivalled transport system because travel by road (private car, and especially bus travel) cannot compete with train travel times. The road system throughout the area which would be served by WLS is notoriously poor, with many narrow roads and lanes, incurring bends, mandatory speed restrictions, as well as all manner of hazards, e.g. deer on Ashdown Forest, all of which contribute to frequent accidents. One example of road-v-rail is a Network Rail engineer who just missed his train at Uckfield (to East Croydon) and jumped in his car, anticipating catching it at Eridge, but despite an early-morning clear road, he failed. It is very well-known that the poor access across the Weald, with long bus journeys as the only means of public transport, many young people are forced to learn to drive to reach educational establishments, or for social recreation. The same applies to working people, as well as the elderly retired who would prefer not to drive but are left with little choice. The return of an accessible, speedy and safe rail network in the Wealden area has remained a forlorn but steadfast hope for decades.

## **II – Delivering financial sustainability**

**a.** The WLS is financially sustainable by opening up rail to new markets which are currently totally inaccessible. The initial outlay would very quickly pay a return in the investment. This is borne out by the interest and confidence expressed in the scheme by the private sector (e.g. WealdenWay) and even Network SouthEast which fully recognised the value of a through line into Lewes, rather than a truncated branch to Uckfield. Even in the cash-strapped 1980s with falling revenue, usage, and decreasing government support through PSO grants, the vision existed within British Rail to restore this particular gap. Notably, Network SouthEast produced figures to show a reinstated Lewes–Uckfield would make an operating profit. (25) However, the principal investor was probably Connex UK who were serious and dedicated in their business plan for the Wealden Main Line with investment at the ready to create a 100mph railway:

*“Let me personally assure you that Connex is both capable of and genuine in its desire to regenerate the Wealden route” (26)*

If the company had won the franchise then the available investment would have created a magnificent joined-up network for the South East region.

**b.** The payback on the WLS will be very rewarding because, as previously eluded to, it is neither a ‘Beeching Reversal’ of a previously ‘unremunerative’ route, nor is it a branch line reinstatement. Firstly, British Railways had no prior intention whatsoever of relinquishing any part of the Uckfield line – *“In the plans for an inner relief road, to by-pass Lewes High Street (A27) with its Ouse bridge bottleneck, an expensive obstacle was encountered, the Lewes–Eridge railway line. British Railways indicated that there was no intention of abandoning the line and it was planned that the road should be tunnelled through the embankment. The local road authority objected to a bridge on grounds of “design and amenity” whereby BR has put forward an alternative plan to reopen the original junction with the London line at Hamsey.” (27)*

The Uckfield or Wealden Line was the primary route to relieve the London–Brighton main line. It was used for this purpose throughout its existence and even during 1968 just prior to closure whenever blockages occurred on the Brighton line. Otherwise, BR would not have applied (successfully) to Parliament for its 1965 Act to retain the line, whilst its 1958 Oxted Line Electrification Scheme was thoroughly justified and intended for completion in 1964. BR clearly appreciated the value of the route and its growth potential along the corridor where towns were already expanding with new housing estates springing up as the drift outwards from London gathered pace.

WLS is not extending to one destination as has recently happened with the recent reinstatement of rail services along the newly-installed track along the 11-mile route from Exeter to Okehampton terminus. Instead, it is a targeted investment in very short links, comprising 5 miles Tunbridge Wells–Eridge/Ashurst and 7 miles Uckfield–Lewes (Hamsey).

Immediately, we link the rail hubs at Tonbridge and Lewes, anyone glancing at a map will have no difficulty in appreciating the multitude of journey opportunities which present themselves. It would be up to the rail industry to consider what through services over WLS would be most lucrative to the operator and, not least, most beneficial to the public.

There is now on the horizon a most important development involving not only the creation of ‘Great British Railways’ but the forthcoming electrification (750vDC) of the 25-mile Hurst Green (Oxted) – Uckfield branch. If we unthinkingly plough ahead, the result will be an electrified Southern Region with a glaring hole in the middle. For the cost of extending the route to Lewes (so 32 miles instead of 25 miles) the upsurge in usefulness and usage needs neither explanation nor evidence. It should be plainly apparent that this is the most prudent route to take. The same applies to the Tunbridge Wells section. Electrification of the Uckfield branch on its own will not increase usage, just because Turbostar trains are replaced by electric units. The public care nothing about what makes trains go, whereas what is important is the range of destinations, the usefulness and the improvements to their daily lives whether for work or wide-ranging social reasons. Consequently, the re-conversion from branch to main line makes logical sense in all respects.

c. Any competent operations manager will have no difficulty whatsoever in appreciating the superior operational efficiency which the WLS would deliver. The capital investment which has to be made in electrification would be substantially recouped incorporating the WLS. An example is the welcome proposal set out in the rail industry's Gibb Report of 2016 to build a maintenance/stabling and traincrew depot at Crowborough capable of 24 vehicles, viz: 3 x 8-car electric units. (28) Similarly, Gibb's proposed depot at Newhaven for 20 vehicles would be especially useful for Wealden services, albeit his proposal was to dispense with empty rolling stock operations. The current arrangement of running services from Selhurst down to Uckfield, a trip of 37 miles to commence the morning peak is wasteful, as is the evening operation which incurs returning to Selhurst depot.

The WLS can be delivered on time and on budget because it is, most probably, the easiest and most straightforward reinstatement anywhere in the country. Not only that, there are no alternatives to equal what rail can deliver in terms of economic progress and development. This is summarised in statements from Uckfield Rural District Council and British Rail soon after the closure of Lewes–Uckfield:

*“The current structure of train services is acting as a limiting factor; people are seeking other modes, employment or places of residence. The implications for a revised train service are that without an increase in train capacity, it will not be possible to accommodate the predicted additional demands which growth will place on it. There is no doubt that the better rail facilities you have, the better development you get. It is very plain that rail services are needed more than ever in this crowded corner of Britain, with land urgently needed for other purposes, there just isn't room for more roads.”* (29)

This paraphrase might date from fifty years ago, yet it remains wholly apposite, whereas now in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are confronted by an impending climate crisis which adds increasing urgency towards modal shift.

There are no hidden costs; it is all straightforward and uncomplicated engineering where there is little chance of over-run or unforeseen obstacles because it is basically reconstructing a railway that previously existed. The 2008 Engineering Study was thorough and certainly optimistic and confident about the scale of the 'challenge'. Precisely the same was true when Norwest Holst Vinci engineers inspected the route for WealdenWay in 2005, as well as representatives from the China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREEC) during 2015.

### **III - Contributing to long-term economic growth**

a. The WLS is clearly imperative for sustained long-term economic growth across a very wide expanse of South East England, but principally West Kent, South Surrey and both East and West Sussex. There would also be undeniable benefits appertaining to London.

WLS is not in the same league as BML2, which is a much greater and more far-reaching project designed to not only bolster the economic and social prospects of the growing City of Brighton & Hove, but more importantly boost the financial

investments and developments around Docklands, Stratford and beyond. It was for good reason that BML2's London Phase captured the imagination and interest of the private sector. This may yet come to pass as the economy recovers, the same constraints within central London resurface, as well as the need for far superior rail connections across the eastern Thames through Canary Wharf re-emerge. Reducing total journey times was a key element with BML2, for example radically speeding-up journeys between Gatwick Airport and Docklands, as well as operating Gatwick and Stansted as one dedicated combined rail service through Stratford. Hence the subsequent interest of CREEC to deliver a 'showcase project' at an agreed fixed cost, on time and entirely on budget.

WLS is nevertheless a building block in BML2 with the Kent Phase easily achievable within a comparatively short period and BML2's Sussex Phase split into two stages. The first stage would be the reconnection of Uckfield–Lewes (as per Network Rail's engineered design laid out in 2008); the second stage, deemed to take place whenever appropriate, would be the construction of Ashcombe tunnel for the direct route into Falmer and Brighton.

Long-term economic growth can only be achieved by the things we instigate today. There is nothing to gain by further prevarication, whilst there is nothing to lose but everything to gain by proceeding with WLS as soon as practically possible. The sooner the political decision is made, the better, whilst the deployment of an entrepreneurial mindset in the rail industry is indeed a welcome prospect and long overdue. Furthermore, its construction in itself will create job opportunities and the new line will engender economic growth and prosperity along its corridors. Its benefits will not be confined to the immediate "*short distances*" (as previous myopic studies considered) but stretch far and beyond the counties. The times may have changed but the principal ethic of the Victorian industrialists who first built the railways endures. This belief seems to be prevalent in Government circles; otherwise, why bother constructing £multi-billion HS2?

It is a fact that WLS cannot be beaten in journey times compared with road travel. Rail undeniably has the advantage in South East England and particularly in the many places with rural roads and no dual carriageways or motorways. The cost of rail transport to users is significantly less than owning and running a car and for this reason alone, not to mention the many environmental factors, the availability and option of rail should be pursued with the utmost verve.

**b.** Development along the Wealden Line corridors has continued, despite highly-regrettable 1960s decisions which led to aborting the intended electric main line. This is plainly apparent looking at a population grid showing large-scale housing growth along the outer London suburbs of Surrey down to Oxted and Edenbridge. Similarly, the Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells areas have seen a surge, especially in recent years, of people moving out of London to live hereabouts and commute. This is verified by Network Rail stating in 2017 that five new pathways would be needed on the Tonbridge main line via Sevenoaks, yet having no answers how these could possibly be accommodated: "*The capacity for any additional services into London from Kent is extremely limited. When train lengthening opportunities have been exhausted, there are no clear or simple options to provide additional capacity into London.*" (30)

Growth along the Sussex Coast has been phenomenal in places such as Eastbourne and nearby towns in the Polegate/Hailsham areas, whilst the popularity of the City of Brighton & Hove (judging by its property prices) shows no sign of slowing. Added to this, the population growth and ever-continuing housing development across Low Weald and High Weald towns, such as Uckfield and Crowborough, demand a substantial improvement in rail development. Many people work in neighbouring towns and have to commute by car, or at the very worst rely on long bus journeys to reach employment. Only rail can satisfy the need for such an agglomeration of movement because trains are, and always will be, the unrivalled mass-mover of people on land. A train journey from Uckfield to Eastbourne would take 34 minutes whereas the equivalent bus trip takes 84 minutes (1 hour 24 minutes). *N.B. These figures are based on the 2008 Study timings compared with 2022 Stagecoach bus timings.*

**c.** Growth in the City of Brighton & Hove continues at an accelerating pace and likely exceeds all expectation of its planners, civic bodies and even residents of 30 or 40 years ago. The educational and technological establishments, such as the University of Sussex and Brighton University are expanding all the time. They are recognised leaders in innovation and widely-acknowledged as centres of digitally-led development and skill bases linked to other universities, notably Cambridge and other pioneering UK academia. It is imperative that the railway plays a major role in providing superior access for the up-and-coming generations. This is especially the case if these centres are to compete as world-class establishments attracting overseas students and, not least, foreign investment into the British Isles.

Otherwise, the City of Brighton & Hove is well-renowned for all its attractions and unique 'buzz' which show no sign of abating, whilst there is a responsibility to ensure its success continues. It therefore hardly needs emphasising that best-possible access is critical and that BML2 remains unrivalled in all that it can do, not only for Brighton, but indeed the whole extent of the Sussex Coast in opening up to new markets.

#### **IV – Levelling up and connectivity**

**a:** The WLS is unmistakably a foundation stone in the confidence we must not fail to express in contributing to long-term economic growth in the South. The perception of the division between the North and South is not only misguided but wholly inaccurate. Deprivation and lack of opportunity exist across the whole country and it is not confined to any one region, despite what some might have us believe.

Levelling up is just as necessary in the South because the local economies of Sussex and Kent, despite their close proximity to London (which has its own problems) face an equal struggle. For example the GDP of East Sussex has been compared to that of Cumbria by ESCC. The rural nature of many areas places constraints on economic expansion, especially where it is difficult to strike a balance between conservation and wealth creation. Wages for the average office or shop-worker, manual employee or whatever, are the same across the board and are no higher than in the North. However, housing costs are substantially far, far higher, as well as the cost of renting accommodation. The cost of living (e.g. petrol prices) is also higher in terms of everyday expenses, socialising with friends for mental well-

being, and everyday things like parking charges are within the context of this Call for Evidence.

Deprivation pervades where boarded-up empty shops and 'For Sale/To Let' signs signify the depreciation of towns which can lead to a domino effect. This is not just confined to notoriously struggling towns such as Newhaven, but even the Royal Borough of Tunbridge Wells and its Victoria Place Shopping Centre with its concerning whitewashed shop windows.

This is why WLS will have a very direct and positive influence in contributing to levelling up because nothing generates more investment and confidence-building than railways. Consider why estate agents place so much emphasis on accessibility to fast, efficient services and proximity to a railway station in their sales information. Railways really are the lifeblood of a thriving nation which is why the entrepreneurs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were so moved to invest.

**b.** The improved connectivity of WLS is beyond denial. We need to press the point because this is not a minor re-establishment of rail services on a 'Beeching Reversal' from, say, 'Big Town' to 'Little Hamlet'. Instead, it comprises short-link reconnections which deliver a very great remuneration, as well as strengthening the overall network as hitherto quoted by Chris Green. The social benefits hardly require explanation. Network Rail confidently calculated a 10-minute journey between Uckfield and Lewes. With BML2 (Ashcombe tunnel) we would see trains between Uckfield and Brighton accomplish the journey in 20 minutes. However, even with WLS involving a change of trains at Lewes, a reasonable projection is 25–30 minutes. The equivalent peak hour journeys by bus range from 68 to 81 minutes (current 2022 timetable).

The whole of the Sussex Coast would be accessible by rail from Surrey stations on the Oxted line, whilst Tunbridge Wells would be opened up for rail access too, as well as from East Sussex. The upsurge in patronage is well-known where investment occurs, as demonstrated even by comparatively minor reopenings in Scotland. It is a perfectly reasonable assumption to conclude that the Uckfield branch would likewise far exceed expectation if it is extended and electrified – melded into the network it once was – and improved upon as planned in 1958 by the British Railways Board.

It is probably impossible to 'prove' that its usage would surge. Occasionally pessimists and those with a covert agenda have asserted there is 'no evidence for demand'. Yet they do not explain how this could ever be expressed? What do they expect, people queueing to buy tickets for services which do not exist?

*"I work for British Rail in the Brighton Telephone Enquiry Bureau and it is amazing how many requests we still have for information about travel from the Brighton area to Uckfield and points north there-of. The public can hardly believe it when we tell them they have to go all the way up to Croydon before coming south again. Quite apart from the time, the expense of the ticket seems outrageous" (31)*

Sufficient 'evidence for demand' exists. Why else would significant calls to reinstate the route as a main line have remained consistent and prolonged throughout more than half a century now? These show no sign of abating and it is because the need still exists. It is not an issue that can ever go away, or be resolved by any other

means. It is equally pertinent that no other stretch or railway line in the whole of the UK has been subjected to so many investigations and seen so many false dawns. It is for this reason that we have had to touch upon the machinations deployed by certain authorities with a hidden agenda to 'prove' a project unworthy in order to pursue different transport objectives.

In all of this there has to come a point where a pragmatic assessment needs to be made in respect of WLS. In the light of the challenges we are now facing (climate emergency/modal shift), further irresolution and prevarication is no longer tenable. To use an analogy, those who claim the time is not yet right have reached the end of the line. If Great British Railways is to truly live up to what the public anticipate, as owner, operator **and investor**, then there has to be associated investment which is both prudent and perceptive in what it aspires to deliver. Similarly, if GBR is to be a credible, nationalised body, it needs to display vision and fiscal management in all its speculative ventures funded by the taxpayer. Accordingly, we think it can be stated with all confidence that no private business or corporation could ever tolerate the situation that will arise whereby the Uckfield branch is electrified, but leaves a glaring gap in the network for the sake of seven miles (as well as an equally nonsensical breach between Sussex/Surrey and Kent near Tunbridge Wells).

We are confident that if a properly-conducted and comprehensive assessment had been made in previous studies, then the ratio of investment compared with return would have proved extremely favourable. As we face new challenges ahead, the value of WLS can only increase in regard to issues such as climate change. A robust business case unquestionably exists – it merely depends how we go about it. As former Transport Minister Norman Baker MP declared following publication of the 2008 Study: *"It was a case of putting rubbish in and getting rubbish out."* (32)

WLS also presents an opportunity for funding streams to come from the private sector. An example is Legal & General whose chief executive expressed interest in investing as much as £150bn in worthwhile infrastructure projects (but not HS2). Additionally, the author of the industry's Gibb Report on Uckfield Line Electrification revealed: *"There is no doubt that there is currently an appetite for such private sector investments amongst infrastructure investment specialists; several have contacted me in recent weeks to see if there were any opportunities arising from the work I have been asked to undertake."* (33) This was in connection with the electrification of the Uckfield branch, but clearly the impetus would be significantly greater with WLS and all the revenue and marketing opportunities it unlocks.

**c.** By far the greatest opportunities with WLS lie within the expansion and growth in the passenger market. This is not surprising considering that the Southern Railway (1923-47) developed principally as a passenger-carrying railway. The role of freight has not been investigated for that very reason and is best left to the industry to ascertain whether there would be any opportunities arising in the future. However, the author of the 2008 Network Rail Study stated: *"There is currently a great deal of interest in encouraging more freight traffic to make use of the rail network. Whilst at present there are no existing freight services that could use the Lewes–Uckfield route, future developments at Newhaven could present an opportunity"* (34)



The sectorisation of the South's railway system has in many respects proved a problem, originating from the pre-grouping era when the competing SE&CR, LB&SCR and L&SWR companies owned and operated their respective systems. Whereas the grouping in 1923 saw them becoming Southern Railway Eastern, Central and Western Divisions respectively – this mould continued beyond their nationalisation in 1948. To a large extent and with only a few exceptions, this continues even today with the sectors seemingly unable to 'break the mould' venturing into 'foreign territory'. So we still have 'South Eastern', 'Southern' and 'South Western' fundamentally still operating as separate systems and franchises.

With South Eastern recently being taken back in state control and GBR on the horizon, there has to be more fluidity because the public will expect a marked difference to the fragmented model of the last 25 years. There was some limited movement towards this during the time of the Southern Railway and Southern Region in regards to services where, for example, Chatham to Brighton services existed.

Undoubtedly a key element in considering WLS remains the far-sighted Connex application to operate services via Uckfield between London and Eastbourne as well as London Charing Cross and Seaford. To an extent, such journeys already have a precedent in Southern's London Victoria–Ore services via Lewes and Eastbourne, as well as along the coast to Littlehampton via Hove, etc. However the limitations of previous and overtly rigid franchise model need to be overhauled. Fundamentally a London–Seaford (or Eastbourne) service would immeasurably improve rail connections between the key rail axes, or hubs, of Lewes and Tonbridge, thereby opening up greatly-needed communication between Sussex and Kent. Accordingly, Orpington, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells would have the Sussex Coast and all the places between within easy reach. Even without WLS Stage 2 (Ashcombe tunnel) at this point in time, the initial Stage 1 phase would allow inestimably improved access to Brighton (either change of or reversal of trains) and all the aforementioned reasons for travelling there. This is something we have to do if we are ever going to make a difference with GBR.

Another equally important and hugely advantageous improvement in connectivity materialising with WLS would be a radical development in train operations on the Tonbridge and Oxted lines. With GBR we have a choice, we can either just stick with the present *modus operandi* by just re-branding everything, or we can make a real difference by introducing fundamental improvements in how rail serves the South in a more business-like manner.

With the half-mile Ashurst–Groombridge mainline link restored to the network, services would be able to operate in a loop from London in both directions. For example: Charing Cross–Sevenoaks–Tonbridge–Tunbridge Wells (West station too) –Oxted–East Croydon–London. This should work vice versa. Tunbridge Wells then becomes easily accessible to the growing towns on the Oxted line; Croydon is within easy reach from Tunbridge Wells, whilst service patterns can be more effectively – and lucratively – introduced. So rather than empty-running into the present turnback siding just south of Tunbridge Wells, these trains should usefully serve Tunbridge Wells West, setting down and picking up passengers for the onward trip running back to London via Croydon.

This service, as well as those towards Lewes, would be overwhelmingly beneficial to Tunbridge Wells where the location around the West station is designated 'an area of change', by the borough council and is already seeing significant redevelopment, with more in the pipeline, just a few minutes' walk from the Pantiles. Confidence-building in both the immediate and wider locality is necessary and cannot be out-matched in what rail has to offer and WLS can deliver. Without such a radical approach to revolutionising rail services, we might as well retain the status quo.

## V – Delivering environmental sustainability

**a:** This is one of the most important reasons why the WLS must be taken forward as soon as possible. The Plan for Rail rightly commits itself to putting railways at the very centre of a cleaner future transport system. This 'backbone' aimed at creating a clean, efficient and well-used transport system, could not be better illustrated in protecting and enhancing the biodiversity throughout the rich natural environment of the many AONB's contained within this region.

It should be abundantly apparent to everyone involved in this Call for Evidence that we simply cannot provide sufficient road space to accommodate more and more vehicles even if, as we have said, their engines could operate on fresh air. Journey times by road will continue to take increasingly longer, road-rage incidents and accidents will still remain high or occur more often, lives will be lost and we have to provide truly realistic alternatives – which only rail can deliver. This can only be done by addressing the fundamental problems confronting us and especially so in the already over-crowded and congested South East.

Modal shift can only occur when and where there exists a viable and suitable alternative. Habits will only change when something better is on offer. At the moment that attractive substitute is non-existent in many places and especially across a very large swathe embracing Sussex, Kent and Surrey. Towns developed along the ribbon-like pathways of the railways and chiefly for that reason alone, simply because of their superior means of communication and transit of goods and people – as any map will show. Remove that ribbon in its entirety, or cut out a section, as in the case of the Uckfield line, and immediately the snarl-ups occur on roads, whilst other railway lines suffer – as in the case of the Brighton Line. The consequential pressure then increases to build more roads to manage the congestion, which then encourage more traffic ad infinitum.

The attractiveness of rail across, plus all the many service possibilities on a reinstated WLS, should not have to be spelled out. It should be apparent to anyone with only a modicum of strategic comprehension. This point applies equally to the more ambitious BML2: *“Quite apart from the immense local benefits, on any realistic analysis of capacity requirements over the next generation it is stark staring obvious that the second mainline to London is needed.”* (35)

**b:** It is absolutely within our power and technical capability to deliver a supreme mode of transport, meeting the Government's net-zero ambitions and commitments, whilst at the same time protecting all the precious landscapes. It is a fact that virtually the entire area in which the WLS will operate includes immense tracts of

outstandingly beautiful countryside and therefore these acknowledged fragile landscapes should continue to be thoroughly protected.

Just for a moment, let us imagine that the railway line from Hurst Green (Oxted) to Uckfield had been closed and torn up in the 1960s by British Railways (following the Government's refusal to fund the Hamsey diversion). The prospects would now be very different and we would be looking at an infinitely more challenging scheme, perhaps one that was insurmountable. Instead, we already have a 25-mile former mainline terminating short of the Sussex Coast network for want of seven miles, as well as another wholly nonsensical gap into Tunbridge Wells. Furthermore, we are going to see commensurate electrification extended from Hurst Green down to Uckfield. This really provides the opportunity so powerfully expressed by Network Rail in 2008 (please refer to quote 15) which was mysteriously removed from the 'Final' report approved for publication by ESCC.

**c:** If we are to realistically invest in climate adaptation by helping everyone to change habits and ways of getting around for work, leisure, or whatever, then we cannot expect this to happen without the kind of investment required for WLS. After fifty years, we cannot afford to walk away from it any longer, or imagine we can just leave it to the next generation. What is the point of "protecting transport links" if we are never going to regenerate them and use them to their full potential, whereby we can reap the rewards? Somehow WLS has to be financed in the same manner as other 'imperative' transport schemes, be it taxation, levies, congestion charging offsets, private investment, or whatever, because it really matters now as environmental issues (including climate concerns) are becoming steadily more urgent.

This couldn't be more relevant than in this region, but you don't have to take our word for it. With the Oxted (Wealden) line traversing the North Downs chalk downlands and Green Belt locations in Surrey, the route then enters the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is worth reading what the authority has said:

*"Further road building or traffic generation will inevitably bring more congestion, pollution and damage to the special landscape character of the High Weald. An integrated transport strategy is needed at a regional level to consider ways of reducing demand for car travel in particular. Global and local impacts include increasing congestion, noise and pollution, destruction of valued landscapes and habitats occurring both as a result of quarrying for road building materials and construction. Roads contribute to nearly one quarter of the UK's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, as well as being a major contributor to ground level concentration of carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxides. Even if/when cars become cleaner, the rise in traffic will cancel any benefits and problems of congestion and landscape destruction will remain."* (36)

The full impact of misguided policies adopted in the 1960s and pursued in the ensuing fifty years are increasingly being acutely felt – as we are now beginning to discover to our cost – and especially to those generations that follow. Sussex once had a truly superior and extensive rail network which was systematically being electrified and modernised. Virtually all the county's north-south and east-west routes were pencilled-in for this programme, whilst the implementation of regular intensive services in 1958 brought sharp rises in passenger numbers as temporary

diesel services replaced steam prior to this planned electrification. But Sussex suffered more than most in the 1960s cuts that followed and despite sharply-rising usage.

The High Weald Authority knows this only too well:

*“The High Weald is no longer well-served by public transport. Railways remain the most efficient and environmentally acceptable method of transport for the movement of large numbers of people, but in the AONB there is no east–west train link and gaps exist in the links to the coast, particularly the Uckfield–Lewes section, **which impairs the network as a whole.**” (37) [our emphasis]*

The Wealden Line continues coursing down through the equally sensitive and beautiful Low Weald open countryside with its villages, hamlets, woods, riverside walks and broad meadows. Importantly, it then approaches the South Downs National Park (SDNP) the authority of which, not surprisingly, equally and fully recognises the importance of WLS:

*“The National Park Authority supports restoration of the short sections of the Lewes–Uckfield railway (near Hamsey)”* The SDNP also states: *“the original course of the former Lewes–Uckfield railway line will be safeguarded for future restoration.”* Because it is so important to them, they add: *“development proposals will not be permitted where they would adversely affect their future potential for such restoration.”* (38)

The operational railway then continues further into the SDNP to serve the Seven Sisters Country Park, easily the most stunning and iconic image of Britain meeting the seashore located between Seaford and Eastbourne with Beachy Head.

Unquestionably, the South is tremendously fortunate in being blessed with such wonderful areas of nature so breath-taking in their scale and beauty, yet their presence is a formidable responsibility, because they have to be cherished and looked-after for future generations. We owe that to them and it is up to us to ensure these locations can continue to be enjoyed in the most responsible way possible. Accordingly we have to invest in Sussex, because its economy relies to a large extent on these natural attractions, as well as the historic and often unique character of its various towns.

On a pre-election tour of Sussex in 2015 the then Chancellor of the Exchequer referred to the forthcoming London & South Coast Rail Corridor Study he was funding by saying of Sussex: *“ – a part of the country so often ignored, or left behind under previous Governments.”* (39)

He wasn't wrong and it falls to us to now make a profound and lasting difference.

**Footnote:** Through our experience of the last forty years we have amassed a large amount of information and useful, practicable solutions to the various challenges thrown in our path. These range from Tunbridge Wells land/engineering issues; the Spa Valley Railway incumbency; route realignments at Groombridge; Uckfield town centre traffic solution; crossings towards Lewes, etc. We would be happy to discuss any of these in however much detail is thought necessary in order to make swift progress with the scheme.

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Compiled and written by Brian Hart on behalf of the Wealden Line Campaign and the Brighton Main Line 2 Project Group. 2 February 2022.