

Brighton Main Line 2 is the “oven-ready” Rail Project for the U.K. Government in 2020



‘GO WITH LABOUR - HOW?’ says the protestors’ banner back in 1967 when British Rail scrapped electrifying main line services linking London with Kent, Sussex and Surrey and instead sought complete closure. Communities converged on Tunbridge Wells protesting to Wilson’s Labour government, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. For over 50 years unabated calls to reopen have been ignored.

Who will finally seize the golden opportunity?

Brighton Main Line 2 is “oven-ready” - as politicians and the rail industry well know. So let’s have no more dithering and obfuscation - let’s get it done now for everyone’s sake.

Boris Johnson is eager to crack on and deliver infrastructure schemes across the UK and BML2 ticks all the boxes in delivering tons more rail capacity in the most overcrowded part of the South East. It will make a huge difference to the lives of millions of rail users, boost the capital’s global position post-Brexit and generate new jobs and opportunities, as well as attracting worldwide investment across London. Among all proposed rail schemes, nothing gives more ‘bang for its buck’ than BML2, whilst fulfilling all the environmental requirements we need to start pursuing for a more sustainable future: *“There are many rail schemes, crying out for far smaller sums than HS2, which could offer a bigger impact pound for pound. An excellent example is BML2”* - Christian Wolmar, London Mayoral contender, broadcaster and Transport Writer.

Our new prime minister intends rewarding the North of England and all those who have lent him their vote and we've heard all the loud shouting about levels of investment per head being significantly less than in the south – by which they really mean London of course. There certainly needs to be substantial investment in northern railways, especially longer and better trains, electrification, and line re-openings which we sincerely hope will transpire.

But whilst we fully understand Boris's sense of duty to honour his commitment to them, what of the South East outside London? Wages are low, but housing and living costs and other pressures are considerably far higher in this part of the country which also has its pockets of deprivation: *"Sussex is a great place to live if you can afford it, but lots of people really struggle"* – Kevin Richmond, Sussex Community Foundation.

Voters here have loyally supported the Conservatives for generations, but is there to be no recognition of gratitude? Shall we always remain condemned as 'the undeserving south' where support is simply taken for granted? We are not talking about London, which in this area sucks in all the funding, but the periphery – left to soldier on, year after year, making do with a grossly overwhelmed rail network which is the busiest in Europe: *"Sussex railways are the most congested in the UK"* – Network Rail.

The Conservatives know this because their former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, admitted this on a visit to Sussex a while ago: *"– a part of the country so often ignored, or left behind under previous Governments"*. He went on to declare: *"Effective transport links are vital for our economy to function properly. I want to take the opportunity to look at rail links in Sussex more generally, including the viability of Brighton Main Line 2."* But this much-needed project is still in its box.

Our friends in the North imagine we're handed all the investment, but whereas their short-formation services are jammed, our TWELVE car trains are jammed feeding into London. The inescapable truth is that without re-establishing closed main lines, there is no capacity left for increasing services on the Brighton main line – and the situation is just as hopeless in Kent: *'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.'* – Network Rail.

Put simply, we're stuffed. We suffer – and London suffers – and especially that we're now leaving the EU our new PM needs to get a grip and act urgently by doing something about it.

£100bn has been mooted for immediate infrastructure projects. Well, about £1bn of that would re-establish TWO new main lines from the south into the capital. BML2's Sussex and Kent phases are both 'oven-ready' and could be up and running within a matter of a few years. Similarly, if politicians are genuinely serious and true in their intentions about addressing the 'climate emergency' then how much longer is it to remain shelved?

We're looking at very short strategic links – not rural branch lines which were shut because they didn't pay. Sixty years ago these routes were already undergoing modernisation with an electrification programme underway for relieving the South's busy Tonbridge and Brighton main lines and completing the network. Instead, and in an act of utter ministerial myopia, and despite widespread protests alleging political vindictiveness, both were closed during Labour's term in the 1960s. Since then, neither Conservative nor Labour administrations have addressed this folly in spite of persistent calls throughout the last half-century. Labour knows it won't win seats, whilst the Tories take support for granted and focus their efforts elsewhere.

Heads they win; tails we lose. And all the while they build millions more homes as, alongside other problems, our transport system is increasingly overwhelmed.

BML2's London phase differs because it is multi-billion. For good reason, it continues to attract serious interest and commitment from the private sector, keen to invest in a fast new railway linking Gatwick with Stratford via Croydon and Canary Wharf. In the last few months there have been further exciting developments which we will report on shortly, but this too needs political leadership to deliver it and be freed from civil service aloofness and departmental indifference. We await the bold and visionary leader who will seize this great project and push it through in the interests of the UK capital.

Meanwhile, the Sussex and Kent phases are ready to proceed with no further delay. Study after study by private consultants and Network Rail conclude there are no engineering obstacles to reopening the routes and they know what huge advantages would be delivered: *"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 developments could include shorter journey time, re-doubling any single line sections, connecting into Tunbridge Wells and electrification"* – Network Rail (2007).

Twenty years ago, in its '20:20 Vision' franchise bid, Connex pledged to fund and provide two new main lines for Sussex [one via Uckfield] and to reopen Kent's lost main line into Tunbridge Wells – if only New Labour's Strategic Rail Authority had enabled that to happen. *"Passengers on today's London to Brighton line are forced to travel in sardine-like conditions — so grim they would be illegal under EU law for the transport of animals. Yet running parallel is an alternative line, once also leading to Brighton, which peters out abruptly at the buffers in the middle of rural Sussex ..."* — The Daily Mail.

During the 2017 general election Labour pledged to 'build a second main line to Brighton' whilst many eminent figures have added their support for BML2: *"It is stark staring obvious that the second mainline to London is needed. Substantially increasing capacity into our cities remains the industry's greatest challenge. BML2 — by reconnecting Brighton with London as one seamless journey — has the potential to do this. It is therefore a strong contender for serious investment because it would strengthen the existing overloaded network."* Labour Peer Lord Adonis and former chairman of the National Infrastructure Commission.

And BML2 is not just about transport: *"We must have a long-term, permanent solution to reduce pressure on the BML and expand capacity between Sussex and London. I believe BML2 does just that. Quite simply, BML2 deserves to win on environmental, transport, tourism and economic efficiency grounds – it has everything going for it."* — Labour Lord Bassam of Brighton.

The economic prosperity of the highly-populated Sussex coast depends on excellent regional rail connections which it currently lacks. *"BML2 would open up more services to London, with new destinations in Kent and beyond. It would significantly benefit Gatwick and ease the chronic overcrowding on the present service. If the Greater Brighton area is to truly prosper, then BML2 is the key to unlocking that economic growth and we call on the Government to recognise this."* – Brighton & Hove City Labour Group

If the new government is truly intent about addressing the rising tide of concerns around climate change and enabling people to travel in more environmentally acceptable means, then they need to be inclusive by listening to those who speak for so many people and act accordingly – and swiftly: *"It's abundantly clear that the Government should invest in Brighton Main Line 2. Not only would the new line ease congestion on the route to London but it would connect Brighton to towns in East Sussex, Kent and Surrey. I fully support the BML2 project and will continue to put pressure on the Government to turn this very positive vision into a reality."* – Caroline Lucas, Brighton Green Party MP.

Railways do far more than transporting hard-pressed commuters to work every weekday, but the importance of rail for all generations and for all purposes is so often overlooked. *“Proposals to develop a second Brighton Mainline would be a huge boost to the local economy, increasing the attractiveness of Brighton as a tourist destination as well delivering greatly improved links between Brighton and East Sussex. The Brighton Main Line 2 project is an essential investment which will pay for itself many times over and is a critical element of a more sustainable development plan for the South East region.”* – Brighton & Hove City Green Party.

The Government’s very own ‘South East Plan’ tells us: *“South East England comprises the largest tourism market in the UK outside Greater London. Brighton & Hove in particular are key attractions”*. But without BML2 the Sussex coast and large swathes of the south east remain wholly inaccessible by train because of these ludicrous gaps in the network – a legacy of half-baked, dim-witted transport policies of the 1960s.

And from highly-respected and loyal Conservatives we hear much the same because it is in everyone’s interest to see BML2 happen: *“Unless the nettle is grasped over BML2 – Brighton & Hove and the whole of Sussex is in danger of getting stuck in a siding. The economic case for BML2 in my view is compelling and was the main reason why it was included in our recent Greater Brighton devolution bid to Government. It is clear to us that BML2 offers a golden opportunity to provide a new, direct rail link between London and Brighton with its tunnel under the South Downs.”* – Cllr Geoffrey Theobald, Conservative Leader (2015) Brighton & Hove City Council.

And from Brighton we go to Tunbridge Wells (once an easy rail trip but now an arduous 2-hour bus ride) where there has been support from the Royal Borough which today consequentially suffers the jam-packed Tonbridge main line. Clogged with road traffic and now devoid of the once-expansive rail services about to be electrified, but instead lost in 1969 we hear: *“I would be delighted to see BML2 go ahead, as the reopening of Tunbridge Wells West would be a real boon to the town – bringing greater choice and more services both to London and other parts of Kent and Sussex. Reopening lines closed in the 1960s and 70s is also an important part of the Government’s new rail strategy, and the Secretary of State for Transport has warmly welcomed the BML2 consortium’s endeavours.”* – Greg Clark MP for Tunbridge Wells.

Southern is on record as saying “*We would like to have more capacity for trains from the South Coast into London*” – an aspiration familiar to train operator Southeastern although the rail industry and its associates are clueless, other than increasing standing room for long periods.

We need far more than the promised ‘root and branch review’ of operating the railways when the plain fact of the matter is that the network is simply overwhelmed and needs expanding. This sample of cross-party political voices we’ve quoted are not wrong in their unanimous support for BML2, whilst if we’re going to make people’s lives better and truly act on climate change then we must embrace the best and most productive rail schemes around. So come on, it’s time to get that “oven-ready” project out of the freezer!

Published January 2020 by Wealden Line Campaign, PO Box 645 Uckfield TN22 5BZ • For historical details see our website: <https://www.wealdenline.org.uk>