



# BEDFORD COMMUTERS ASSOCIATION

THE RAIL USER GROUP FOR BEDFORD AND FLITWICK

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## APRIL 2021 NEWSLETTER

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### I. May Timetable Changes

Both Thameslink and EMR will be changing their timetables from May 17<sup>th</sup>. The changes are as follows:

#### EMR

Major changes will affect EMR services calling at Bedford. The new electric service from St Pancras to Corby will commence and this will mean:

- Peak hour services will be reinstated to Luton and Bedford
- Trains will run half hourly from first to last trains
- Southbound services will depart from Bedford at xx10 and xx40 (first train 06.10) calling at Luton, Luton Airport Parkway and St Pancras with a journey time of 42 minutes
- Northbound services will depart St Pancras at xx15 and xx45 minutes past the hour calling at Luton Airport Parkway, Luton, Bedford and stations to Corby with a journey time of 40 minutes
- As a result of lobbying by the BCA a limited number of InterCity services will stop at Bedford (Monday to Friday) for commuters wishing to travel north of Bedford to the East Midlands. In the morning peak trains for stations north to Nottingham will call at 06.37 and 07.10. In the evening the 16.12 from Nottingham will call at Bedford
- At other times customers for north of Kettering will have to change at Kettering.
- On Sundays InterCity trains will call at Bedford until midday when the electric service to Corby will start and take over calling at Bedford.

#### Thameslink

The present service will continue with only minor changes which are

- The 07.22 departure from Bedford will be retimed to 07.15 and call additionally at Flitwick (07.25) and Harpenden;
- The 07.44 departure from Flitwick will start back at Bedford at 07.32. This will plug the 26 minute gap in the present service at Bedford that the BCA had lobbied for; and
- The full Orpington to Luton peak service is reinstated.

The Monday to Friday off peak and weekend services remain the same.

The next scheduled timetable change is in December but this may change as we follow the Government's "road map" out of Covid and if there is a consequential increase in demand as people return to work.

The BCA is having regular meetings with Thameslink and EMR to discuss future timetable upgrades.



The latest motive power for Thameslink maybe! (photo: Steve Floyd)

## 2. East West Rail

### What's been happening on East West Rail so far?

On the Western Section, from Oxford to Bedford:

Oct 2015 Oxford Parkway station opens with 100 mph trains to Bicester and London.

Dec 2016 Trains start running between Oxford, Oxford Parkway, Bicester and London. Start of engineering the Bedford to Bicester section.

Feb 2019 Public inquiry opens into reconstruction of the line from Bedford to Bicester and Aylesbury via Bletchley.

Feb 2020 Parliament approves the Bedford to Bicester/Aylesbury project with a request for £1.1 billion of Government funding. Construction starts in Buckinghamshire.

Jan 2021 The Government approves about 70% of the funding. There is not enough for the Aylesbury line nor the Bletchley to Bedford upgrade. Several construction sites working between Bicester and Bletchley.

On the Central Section, from Bedford to Cambridge:

- Dec 2013 Government publishes 'Tech Connected', supporting a new railway from Oxford to Cambridge.
- Jun 2016 Network Rail publishes route options for the new Bedford – Cambridge railway. A few months later a NR publishes a detailed study into the possible routes.
- Jan 2019 EWR Co starts public consultation on potential route corridors: online, in print, and exhibitions in a number of towns across the area. The number of route options is reduced compared to Network Rail's studies.
- Feb 2020 EWR Co announces the preferred route from the consultation is from Bedford station, running to the north of Bedford, then east to near St Neots and Cambourne before approaching Cambridge station from the south.
- Mar 2021 EWR Co issues detailed plans for the next phase: future development of the Western Section as well as the new Central Section railway. The plans are open for public comment and there is a virtual exhibition.

A quick summary of the main features of the new phase of EWR

(a) Tracks and stations

- New tracks and platforms at Oxford and Cambridge.
- Complete rebuild of Bedford and Bedford St. Johns stations with new tracks and platforms.
- A completely new railway from Bedford to Cambridge via new stations near St Neots and Cambourne.

(b) Proposed train service

- Two trains per hour\* between Bedford and Oxford; plus
- Two fast trains per hour\* between Bedford and Bletchley (as well as the current stopping service); and
- Four trains per hour\* between Bedford and Cambridge. \* in each direction.

The EWR Co recently opened a consultation which will run until June 9<sup>th</sup> 2021. The purpose of this consultation is to find out people's views about the following aspects – the documents present various options in each case:

- Options for the location and layout of the **rebuilt stations at Bedford and Bedford St. Johns.**
- Options for the development of stations and train services in the Marston Vale (Bedford to Bletchley)
- Options for the route from Bedford station to Cambridge and the location of the new stations at St Neots and Cambourne.

The consultation involves other optional areas, but those three are the most important for Bedford and Flitwick passengers. You can read about all the options on the EWR Co's website, here:

[https://eastwestrail-production.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/public/EAS060\\_ConDoc\\_290321\\_Digital\\_MASTER.pdf](https://eastwestrail-production.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/public/EAS060_ConDoc_290321_Digital_MASTER.pdf)

Or search for 'ewr make meaningful connections'.

There are many more technical documents and maps in the EWR Co's library:

<https://eastwestrail.co.uk/library/documents>

<https://eastwestrail.co.uk/library/maps>

The BCA will be responding to the consultation and we would like to know your preferences and comments by Monday 10<sup>th</sup> May. Our email address is [admin@bedfordcommuters.org.uk](mailto:admin@bedfordcommuters.org.uk).

We would also urge members to respond individually to the consultation as it will affect those who travel from Bedford station. Remember they propose to rebuild Bedford Station so it is an opportunity for us to inform them of what we would like in the replacement eg. more facilities and additional platforms.

What the new project does not include

- Direct trains from Bedford to Milton Keynes
- Infrastructure for electric trains – trains will be diesel.
- A station in north Bedford, though the railway will run through it
- A new line to Aylesbury as originally planned – with trains continuing on existing tracks to Chiltern towns such as Amersham and High Wycombe.

### **3. Performance**

We have received the following from Thameslink regarding Network Rail's major programme of investment to improve reliability on the Midland Main Line between London and Bedford:

*“Through a major programme of investment in the first 50 miles of the Midland Main Line and the Thameslink core, Network Rail's engineers are set to improve the punctuality and reliability of all cross-London Thameslink and East Midlands Railway journeys.*

*The fresh approach applies systems engineering to the challenge of keeping the Thameslink core, the section of railway between London Blackfriars and St Pancras International and the Midland Main Line open to rail traffic. The location of these two sections at the centre of the network means that if something goes wrong, it can rapidly have a network-wide impact.*

*The 'first 50 miles project' is designed to ensure that different engineering disciplines from power to structures are all working together with the support of colleagues from the train operating companies. While most of the work is behind the scenes to break down silo-working between teams, the project blends routine maintenance and renewals with major capital investment to tackle problematic sections of infrastructure, with the first two multi-million-pound initiatives due early in 2021.*

#### Putting flight to power reliability challenges in the Thameslink core

*The first capital investment initiative is designed to improve the reliability of the overhead power supply in the Thameslink core. Chris Sharp, Infrastructure Maintenance Delivery Manager at Network Rail, explains “This element really brings systems engineering to life. For example, much of the Thameslink core is comprised of Victorian-era tunnels. To a structural engineer, these tunnels being damp is not a major issue, but the new way of thinking is about what does that water mean for the integrity of the power supply or the signalling system. That can mean that structural work such as waterproofing being brought forward far faster than is necessarily needed from a purely structural approach”.*

Following the change in approach, targeted investment is now being planned for delivery early in 2021 as the team seeks to drive up reliability for customers. Millions of pounds of investment have been secured for replacement overhead line equipment and to introduce additional secondary electrical insulation to bridges, tunnel roofs and structures. Chris explains that the latter is also designed to help tackle an unlikely culprit for issues with the overhead power; pigeons.

It's hard to imagine that something 25 centimetres tall is capable of causing quite so much disruption, but unfortunately pigeons like to settle on the overhead equipment. That's rarely an issue in the open-air, but for example in a tunnel environment, the bird can also contact the roof and suddenly 25,000 volts is headed exactly where it shouldn't be. The circuit breakers will activate and while that's happening a train will not be able to draw power. As well as improving secondary insulation, we're also bird-proofing the old King's Cross Thameslink station to help address the issue at source.

#### Improving signalling resilience across the Midland Main Line

The second focus area for the 50 miles project is the resilience of the signalling system, as a single signalling fault can disrupt multiple train services across a wide area.

The team is scrutinising all eleven signalling power feeders between St Pancras International and Bedford. The section in the Harpenden area has been identified for improvement and the team began installing over eight kilometres of new armoured cabling shortly after Christmas in a major investment into the route.

Chris explains that this project was only possible because of the new approach to joint-working between Network Rail and Govia Thameslink Railway.

“The challenge with signalling is it's enormously difficult to test while the system is switched on. During late October, taking advantage of lower passenger numbers, we agreed a period of special working. This involved the train service being thinned-out on a planned basis, with drivers and customers briefed in advance. In turn, the signalling team could then turn sections off, intrusively test each cable for faults and work out the strategy for the replacement works this winter.

“The result of all this work and investment will be a more reliable Midland Main Line. This is the kind of thing that customers should take for granted, but as people look to return to the railway in 2021, we want to be welcoming them back to a railway that is better than what was there before.”

#### **4. Flitwick Station Transport Interchange**

Central Bedfordshire Council has announced that work on the transport interchange is due to commence in August. To recap, the new interchange will provide the following improvements:

- a new station forecourt with pedestrian, cycle and vehicle access
- new passenger drop-off and dedicated taxi areas
- new cycle and motor cycle parking
- a public transport interchange with three bus stops, passenger waiting areas, including real time departure information
- improved access to the station from Steppingley Road
- dedicated facilities for Center Parcs Woburn passenger collection and drop-off

## 5. Bedford – Wixams

Further funding has been obtained for the building of a two-platform station at Wixams. Construction is due to commence in 2023 with completion in 2024.

## 6. Flexible Ticketing

You would have received recently an email regarding Railfuture's paper on flexible ticketing and the letter the BCA sent to the local MPs, which is reproduced below for information. We would urge all members to write to their MPs on this subject so that they can lobby the DfT and Treasury. As a result of Covid working patterns will change and so must fares to reflect this change. The Williams Report is yet to be published but the expectation is that it will be by the summer.

MP  
House of Commons  
London SW1A 0AA

17th March 2021

### **Flexible Rail Fares**

Dear

*The Bedford Commuters Association (BCA) represents rail users from Bedford and Flitwick who use Thameslink and East Midlands Railway services. Our members are concerned that when pandemic restrictions are eased the current fare structure will be a poor fit to their new travel patterns and effectively increase their fares.*

*Most companies, especially those with large offices, have advised their staff that flexible working will become the norm; there are strong drivers, for example, reduction in office rents. It means that employees will work at home for at least one day per week which means the current range of season tickets will become poor value for money.*

*It's very important that the government and the rail industry responds urgently and offers new, flexible ticket products suited to the new way of working. The lack of a response will have significant downside:*

- *A disincentive to use rail – more traffic, more congestion, and more pollution;*
- *A loss of income to the train operators and government compared to income from new ticket products;*
- *Public and media will see the current tickets as unfair and inflict reputational damage on the government.*

*To avoid those effects, the new fares system should have the following attributes:*

- *The current range of season tickets should remain available for those unable to work at home;*
- *New products should be offered in peak times and off-peak times versions, and from any station to any station;*
- *Nationally consistent discounts and sets of conditions that apply across all train operators;*
- *Provide genuine flexibility in travel, for example two days one week, three the next; products that require travel on, say, three consecutive days will not work;*
- *Reliable and simple mechanisms that allow the passenger to record ticket use at the start and end of their journey – it should not be a requirement that the passenger has either a smartphone or a computer.*

*On behalf of Bedford/Flitwick passengers, I ask that you lobby the Department for Transport and HM Treasury to work with the train operators to implement flexible fares products that encourages more regular but not necessarily daily travel to the workplace. Evidence of the advantages of flexible working to business, workers, and the environment is growing daily and it's clear to me that it represents a permanent change. The government needs to respond urgently.*

*I look forward to your reply.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Arthur Taylor  
BCA Chairman*

## **7. Car Parking Changes**

- a) APCOA have taken over management of all GTR car parks.
- b) Late Pay Scheme:

Govia Thameslink Railway has introduced a new scheme, 'Late Pay', where motorists in a hurry to catch their train, can now park at the station and pay for their parking up to 24 hours later.

'LatePay' is offered by APCOA, who have taken over the management of our car parks. The scheme works at 61 of our 149 car parks that use CCTV pictures of number plates (automatic number plate recognition or 'ANPR') to automatically check who's parked where and when.

The scheme will operate at both Bedford and Flitwick.

Then, using the APCOA Connect website, motorists can, for no extra fee, pay up to 24 hours later, which save themselves time at the station or avoids a parking fine if they forgot to pay when they arrived.

Users can also pay by bank or credit card using the payment machines at car parks. However, to help limit the spread of Covid-19 and for the safety of customers and staff, cash payments are not being accepted.

## **8. Accessible Travel Policy**

We have received the following from Thameslink:

*"We recently published our new [Accessible Travel Policy \(ATP\)](#). It was developed with our Access Advisory Panel, a group of customers with additional access needs such as physical and non-visible disabilities, elderly passengers or those travelling with young children, that travel on our network and meet regularly with our senior managers. The policy was recently approved by the Office of Rail and Road.*

*It is available directly on all our websites and is supported by the "[Making Rail Accessible](#)" leaflet. This provides practical information for customers on what assistance and support is available, how to access it, what customers should expect on their journey and how to access additional information.*

The policy supports GTR's commitment to create a more accessible and inclusive railway. We believe that all customers, regardless of disability or any other need for additional support should have the confidence to travel on our network, and the ATP outlines our commitments to make this happen.

Under the ATP, we are committed to:

- Reduce pre-booked assistance request time to six hours before travel by April 2021 and two hours by April 2022.
- Provide all 3,000 frontline staff with specialist training by disabled practitioners
- Introduce an expanded mobile support team at partially-staffed or unstaffed step-free stations to provide faster assistance on request.
- Improve online information on station accessibility for both GTR websites and industry journey planners

## 9. Journey Planning – New Live Function

The following was received recently from Thameslink:

*“GTR has introduced a new ‘Live Map’ function on each of its brand websites, following a successful trial on the Southern website.*

*We are the first train operator to launch such a feature, with the maps displaying live data to give customers a snapshot of how the network is performing at that exact moment and most importantly – highlights any disruption.*

*Using a Red, Amber and Green service status for each route, our customers will be able to see upfront if there are any issues in their area and be alerted to alternative routes.*

*Although passenger numbers are low right now due to the national lockdown, this will greatly help key workers and other customers relying on GTR for essential travel. The graphic representation shows users the network at a glance and will be a permanent fixture post-pandemic when passenger levels will gradually increase.*

*The new Live Map feature, can be found at the top right hand side of each of the company's brand websites including Southern, Thameslink and Great Northern.”*

## **STAY SAFE**

For more information, see our website - [www.bedfordcommuters.org.uk](http://www.bedfordcommuters.org.uk)

If there is something you want to tell us about, please email: [admin@bedfordcommuters.org.uk](mailto:admin@bedfordcommuters.org.uk)

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Chairman: Arthur Taylor, 6 Chaucer Road, Flitwick, Beds, MK45 1QG  
Acting Editor: Jim Allwood, 25 Church Close, Martock, Somerset, TA12 6DS

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