

The Fenman

Newsletter of the Fen Line Users Association

Issue 2/2018

King's Lynn

Watlington

Downham
Market

Littleport

Ely

Waterbeach

Cambridge
North

“Calling for the earliest delivery of the ‘half-hourly’ King’s Lynn – King’s Cross commitment”

FLUA NEEDS YOU

“They say life often mirrors fiction so for “life” read FLUA and for “fiction” read Timetable. This latest newsletter is a little later coming your way than we had hoped, but at least it has arrived! You will notice that the format and some of the content is a little different from what you have been used to and is something that we have been considering for a while. Our “while” has been a month or two where the railway’s has been eighteen years!

Your FLUA committee is struggling a bit at the moment following the resignation of three committee members – two of whom have been involved with the organisation since its founding in 1986 - and those of us who are left don’t have all the skills required to run the organisation as efficiently as we would wish. I thank the three departed members for their hard work and dedication over the years – their contribution has been immense. We are therefore renewing our appeal for members to join the committee and particularly need those with IT, finance and journalistic skills to ensure FLUA is able to fully represent users of the Fen Line. The post of Treasurer will need to be filled when the current holder stands down in November but plenty of help and support is available for this and all the other roles.

There is nothing new to say about the appalling mess that the Department for Transport, Network Rail and GTR have subjected a large number of the travelling public and Fen Line Users in particular to over the last few months. In addition to the timetable fiasco, I think just about every promise of improvements to the infrastructure has been postponed, delayed or broken. Not good enough, railway industry!

Some people will be tired of hearing me say this but for a long time now I have said that all trains on the Midland Main Line from Sheffield and all East Coast Main Line ones together with the Inner and Outer suburban services from Bedford, Peterborough and King’s Lynn southwards towards St Pancras, Moorgate and King’s Cross are being sacrificed on the altar of the Thameslink Core. We can but hope that one day the Gods in the Ivory Towers will be satisfied and an acceptable normal service resumed. I won’t be holding my breath, however!”

Enjoy the new look FLUA Newsletter.

Colin Sampson – Chairman and Acting Secretary Tel: 01366 – 388003 Email: colintsampson@gmail.com

Timetable Meltdown

GTR announced the May timetable as “A transformation that will change not only journeys but the lives of our generation and generations to follow”. This has certainly proved the case for many but not in the way that passengers would have wished for. The younger generation have had problems getting to and from school whilst the slightly older generation have found their morning and evening journeys to and from work disrupted. For the first few days Fen Line services seemed to escape relatively unscathed but all too soon our trains were making additional stops to fill the gaps left by cancelled Thameslink services on the Cambridge and Peterborough routes. These typically included Royston, Letchworth, Hitchin, Stevenage and Finsbury Park adding a further 6 or 7 minutes to the already extended journey times that were introduced in the new timetable. On some days direct services to London were cancelled and passengers had to make do with a shuttle service to Cambridge whilst on several occasions 2 consecutive departures from Kings Cross were cancelled leaving a 3 hour

period without trains – all of which is totally unacceptable. Some Fen Line commuters have opted to travel on the Greater Anglia peak services direct to and from Liverpool Street where they get a more reliable service and there is now very little difference in journey time. For example the 17:07 and 19:07 services take a minute or two over 2 hours to reach King’s Lynn whereas the King’s Cross evening services are now timed at 1 hr 50mins but with the extra stops (and regular delays) were often taking over 2 hours to reach their destination. After numerous apologies and little else, other than encouragement to claim for compensation, we are now on version 3 of the “new” timetable and things finally seem to be settling down. The finger of blame for the fiasco has been pointed at various parties and ultimately led to the resignation of GTR’s CEO Charles Horton whilst an official investigation by the Office of Rail and Road has now started. In fairness the changes were probably the most dramatic in the entire history of the network but those who remember the very first discussions about running trains through central London under the banner of Thameslink 2000 have rightly commented that “they’ve only had 18 years to plan for this”!

The only benefit of the new timetable seems to be that when trains are on schedule they do have a longer turnaround time at King’s Cross and are shown much earlier on the platform indicator board too – an issue FLUA has been highlighting for a number of years.

Overcrowding Gets Worse

The extra stops and cancelled services inevitably led to serious overcrowding with platform staff raising concerns over safety. One of the worst cases was on the 16:42 King’s Cross to King’s Lynn service on 25th June which was formed of only 4 coaches instead of the usual 8. There were so many people trying to get on that the driver was unable to close the doors and when requests for passengers to move down the train seemed to go unheeded – only because there was simply no space for people to move into – the British Transport police had to be called. Inexplicably the train then stopped at Finsbury Park where the doors opened, perhaps in the vain hope that some of the passengers would have had enough after 5 minutes and would bail out there! Needless to say there was certainly no room to take any more people on board. By law, buses and coaches have strict limits on the number of standing passengers that can be safely carried when all seats are taken – ironically the railways, that always put safety ahead of everything else, don’t seem to be bound by such legislation.

The Half-Hourly Service ?

Despite the immediate priority of getting a stable and achievable timetable in operation we continue to keep up the pressure for progress towards the promised half-hourly service the Fen Line so desperately needs. Unfortunately, the wheels turn frustratingly slowly on major projects such as Ely North Junction. James Palmer, Mayor of the Cambridgeshire Combined Authority and a great supporter of public transport, is challenging the delay and is determined by direct lobbying of central Government and Network Rail to target barriers and red tape which typically hold back infrastructure projects. He believes that with different strategies the project can be completed more quickly. As for extended platforms to cater for 8 coach trains an informed source suggests we might have these by the end of 2019.

Cambridge Congestion



According to figures released by the Dept of Transport crowding on trains from Cambridge in the morning peak is the second worst in the country with 16% of passengers having to stand. London comes top of the list with Manchester some way behind in third place. The official figures are based on journeys made in Autumn 2017 when on average almost 52,000 people went through the station on a weekday. This will come as no surprise to Fen Line users – and these figures were recorded well before the May 2018 timetable was introduced and the additional pressure this has put on services. The situation hasn’t been helped by the Class 387’s having 40 fewer seats per unit than the previous Class 365’s. These have now moved to Scotland for use on services between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Photo: Mike Lamport

Down The Line

A STATION BY STATION ROUND UP OF WHAT'S HAPPENING

King's Lynn

When Greater Anglia introduces brand new trains on their peak services to and from Liverpool Street this will require provision of an extra siding to berth stock overnight.

Watlington

Improvement works will take place beginning on the night of 10 August with the closure of part of the car park for resurfacing work and the installation of new lighting and new kerbing. A through road will be maintained on the existing roadway that is not being altered as part of these works but the affected area of the car park will remain closed (and fenced off for safety reasons) until completion of the works which is planned for Sunday 9 September. The closure will not affect access to the rear privately run car park and a clear walking route to the platforms will be maintained from here.

Downham Market

Daryl in the ticket office has stepped ably into the shoes of Rob and has helped a number of members get some great deals. If you are travelling to a destination off the usual route to London then do have a word with him. Platform One cafe is proving to be a real asset and the bacon rolls can be highly recommended! There is currently no news on the much needed extension to the car park.

Littleport

The new extended car park is very well constructed and has been open for business for some time now providing 118 spaces in total. The down platform ramp, underpass footpath, the lengthening of the down platform and closure of the barrow crossing has been delayed and until this happens (along with the lengthening of the platforms at Waterbeach) we are not able to have 8-car trains.

Ely

Work continues apace on the southern bypass (due to open in October) which will allow the closure of the level crossing leaving the low bridge (which apparently has the dubious accolade of having the highest strike rate by road vehicles of any bridge in the country) to be used only by cars accessing the station from the Soham direction. In time this will allow some changes to the track layout and signalling at this end of the station allowing a better flow of rail traffic through this important location. Ely station has been the biggest beneficiary

of the new timetable with an all day half-hourly service direct to King's Cross – when the trains run!

Waterbeach

Pink and red hearts bearing the cryptic message S/0791/18/FL (actually the planning application reference for the proposed new station/development) and more direct ones such as “we need 8 car platforms NOW” appeared all over the station on 19th June. Whilst FLUA cannot condone the misuse of railway property it certainly attracted media attention and does show the strength of feeling on the issue. And with “standing room only” now being the norm at peak times at this station it does reinforce the need for longer trains as soon as possible – whether at the current site or a proposed new station.



Photo: Ben Walsh

Cambridge North

The route's newest station celebrated its first birthday on 21st May and usage has already risen to over 10,000 passengers per week exceeding growth targets. With the new timetable virtually all Fen Line trains now call here giving valuable travel opportunities for those employed locally. A Costa coffee outlet has now opened.

Cambridge

Still the top destination for travellers on the Fen Line the new timetable fails to address the serious overcrowding on afternoon and peak services departing for Waterbeach, Ely and beyond. However, for those with an enforced wait here the recently opened “Old Ticket Office” pub provides a welcome opportunity for refreshment. Greater Anglia has been quick to turn the problems on the King's Cross line to their advantage introducing a range of cheap fares from Cambridge to London on their own route and promoting these with full page adverts in the local press. Their platform staff can now be seen with “It's cheaper to Liverpool Street” on their high visibility jackets!

Coping With The Heat

One benefit of the Class 387's is that they have air conditioning although the system struggles to keep things cool when carriages packed with standing passengers leave little room for the air to circulate. When things do go wrong there is at least one window in each carriage which can be opened but only by a member of staff and the standard advice to passengers is "to carry a bottle of water with you". The recent exceptionally high temperatures also have an impact on the rail infrastructure and this has been a particular problem in East Anglia. When the air temperature is 30 degrees, the temperature on the rail can be up to 20 degrees higher and this can lead to signalling problems and in extreme cases result in a buckled rail which means severe speed restrictions have to be put in place. Modern track, which is laid in long continuous lengths, is pre-stressed to cope with expansion and in some places special joints allow for movement to be safely accommodated. However, Network Rail has painted rails white at critical points around the network as this helps prevent the rail absorbing as much heat and can keep it up to 10 degrees cooler than an unpainted rail. Sometimes simple solutions still work best!



Rail expansion joints allow movement



White paint reflects the sun's rays

Other News

Is one sitting comfortably?

One of the most contentious issues of the Class 387's is the seating, with the national press recently reporting that even HM the Queen prefers the seating layout of the old rolling stock! Regular travellers have their favourite seat, or indeed standing place, with some suggesting coaches 2 and 3 offer the smoothest ride.

Pigeon brings rail services to a standstill!

On 29th June an early evening train heading north from Watlington was delayed for 20 minutes as the signaller was unable to set the points for the single line section. The driver went down on the track to assist and found the problem was a dead pigeon which had got jammed between the rails. However hi-tech the railway might be it is still at the mercy of the weather and nature.

The train now arriving.... is nowhere to be seen.

One of our members who collects his wife from King's Lynn station in the evening relies on GTR's own mobile phone app to track the progress of her train and regularly finds that it is shown as having arrived even when he is standing on the platform and it is not even visible in the distance. Are they using these incorrect arrival times to calculate compensation under the delay repay scheme he asks?

2018 AGM - Save The Day

This year's AGM will be held at Littleport Village Hall on Saturday 24th November and will give members the opportunity to raise issues with key staff from across the network. The meeting starts at 2pm and light refreshments will be available.

You have received this newsletter as a subscribing member of FLUA or as a Key Decision Maker or Person with a Relevant Professional Interest in or relevant to the Rail Industry. Your contact details are stored securely and never shared with third parties. Please see our website: www.flua.org for full details of our Privacy Policy. If you do not wish to receive further copies of The Fenman please contact us.