

Executive summary

Network Rail has been commissioned by the Central Rail Corridor Board, whose Members comprise local MPs and representatives from regional, county and district levels (and Observers who are representatives of County, District, Town and Parish Councils) to undertake a study to investigate the technical feasibility, costs and benefits of reinstating the Lewes to Uckfield railway line, and so identify whether or not there is a business case for the proposal.

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. New bridges will be required in place of all the former highway level crossings, with particularly significant work required in Uckfield Town Centre and also along the A22 Uckfield bypass.

The base option consists of a single track railway with passing loops provided at Uckfield and also the junction with the main line near Lewes. This would be sufficient to operate a half hourly service along the route. The total estimated capital cost for this option is £141.0 million, including a 30% contingency allowance as required at this stage of project development.

Priced options were studied for the construction of intermediate stations at Isfield and Barcombe Mills, and separately for the provision of double track throughout the reinstated route. Depending upon the final specification adopted, these would add between £7.4 million and £38.8 million to the base capital cost, again including a 30% contingency allowance.

The benefits of the reopened link are relatively low based on current assumptions for growth in population and employment in the area (contained in the draft South East Plan's Regional Spatial Strategy. This leads to a negative Net Present Value (NPV) and a Benefit to Cost Ratio (BCR) ranging between 0.64 and 0.79 dependent on the service options modelled. The projected annual operating ratios (annual revenue to cost ratio) range from 0.69 to 1.63.

In order to make the case for the reopening of the line, the benefits realised need to be at least double that forecast in order to meet the absolute minimum BCR required of 1.5, and treble to meet the usual minimum BCR of 2.0. This in turn will require a significant increase in population along the corridor as a whole and/or a fundamental shift in the travel behaviour of the existing population.