

Station Travel Plans in the Cambridge area

The issue I wish to consider is how people living in certain communities can access the rail network. I believe that main regional centres should have such access in all directions, and that all towns and large villages should have a direct access to some station with a service commensurate with the size and importance of the community. By comparison, here are some illustrations of existing services.

1. Audley End. This is the main railhead for Saffron Walden (2.5 miles) and is served by all trains on the line of the route (3 per hour to Cambridge, 2 to London and 1 to Stansted Airport), as compared with the next stations in each direction which have only 1 per hour to Cambridge and London.

Saffron Walden is a medium-sized town well within the London commuter area, and also an important tourist destination. I suspect that there are many people who live there and work at Stansted Airport.

However, the bus links between Saffron Walden and Audley End terminate after 19.31 (for passengers to Saffron Walden) and 19.08 (for passengers from Saffron Walden). On Saturdays the corresponding times are 19.08 and 18.42, and on Sundays there's no service at all. There are later buses to/from Stansted Airport (19.33 from Saffron Walden, 21.00 return) but it's a much longer bus ride, again with no Sunday service. The only Sunday buses are 4-5 journeys to/from Cambridge via Great Chesterford rail station, in the wrong direction for travel to/from London and only served by the all stations service.

2. Lakenheath. This is the nearest station to the substantial village of the same name, but it is well beyond walking distance and there are no bus links.

At present it only has trains at weekends, 1 each way on Saturdays and 3 on Sundays, which were put on to serve a nearby RSPB reserve. Meanwhile Lakenheath itself has lost its through bus service to the next town in a westward direction along the line, Ely -- as documented in CBT's web pages about cuts to buses.

When it ran, the bus took nearly an hour. By contrast the train takes only 15 minutes. It can therefore provide a much faster service even if one allows for the need to change to buses at each end (provide they are well timed).

The station lies near the Norfolk/Suffolk border. On the south side is bus route 201 (and some others), linking Mildenhall and Thetford, which is supported by Suffolk CC; on the north side is bus route 28 (and some others), linking Kings Lynn and Thetford, which is supported by Norfolk CC. I recommend the following:

- (a) Give the station a regular train service (at least 2 hourly Mon-Sat)
- (b) Divert routes such as the 201 to pass the station and continue to Thetford on the Norfolk side
- (c) Divert routes such as the 28 to pass the station and continue to Thetford on the Suffolk side
- (d) Time these bus routes so that passengers from Lakenheath village, Feltwell, Hockwold etc. can get good connections to/from Ely.

I fed in Lakenheath village to Peterborough to the Traveline journey planner. The majority of journey options took over 3 hours and involved at least 3 changes. It must also be remembered that Peterborough, though a focus for cross country journeys from East Anglia, may not be journey's end so further changes may be required.

Lakenheath is well known for its US air force base. I should add that in recent years several roads and footpaths in this area have been closed allegedly on security grounds, which hinders the efficient operation of public transport.

3. Kennett. This is a station on the Cambridge to Ipswich line, with a service every 2 hours (plus others that pass through nonstop). It is also on the Peterborough to Ipswich route, but this is currently suspended because a bridge on the line has had to be reconstructed following a damaging derailment, and in any case most trains on this line also passed through nonstop.

The station is the closest to the market town of Mildenhall. There is an hourly bus link on routes 400/1 (though nothing on Sundays) which runs through to/from Newmarket, which is served by all Cambridge-Ipswich trains (though the station is about 10 minutes walk from the bus stop) but isn't even on the Peterborough-Ipswich route.

I recommend that all trains passing through Kennett should stop there to give Mildenhall a better choice of railhead links.

Currently Mildenhall's only link with the outside world on Sundays is by National Express coach, the main service being route 727 which links Norwich with the London airport system (at premium fares). Rail interchange is possible at Stansted Airport, Newmarket and Thetford. This route is also possible on weekdays. It does not stop at Elveden, despite the proximity of a Center Parcs village and the lack of other services on this section of route; nor at Snetterton, a mixed development which recently lost its main bus route without replacement, and which is close to another rail station (Eccles Road) which is only served by a handful of trains.

4. Manea. This station on the Ely to March line has only 2 trains each way, timed for commuters. The village's only other public transport is a bus service to March, which offers 4 journeys on Mon-Fri only.

The village is close to the Ouse Washes which forms a barrier to movements by road in the direction of Ely. Rail is therefore much more suitable, and a campaign to increase the level of train service has recently sprung up in the village. I don't have contact details for the campaign but could get them if required.

If this campaign were to succeed then there would be less need for the bus service to March. I therefore propose that it should be replaced by a new service to Wisbech which would be timed to connect with trains to/from Ely. Wisbech itself has adequate links with the rail network (e.g. by half hourly X1 to/from Peterborough and Kings Lynn) but the intermediate villages don't. At present they are served by a shuttle (hourly with gaps) between Three Holes and Wisbech, plus an irregular service between March and Downham Market via Three Holes offering some connections.

I propose the following:

- (a) Stop the soon to resume Peterborough to Ipswich train service at Manea, giving it a 2 hourly service
- (b) Run connecting buses to/from Wisbech via Welney, Christchurch, Three Holes, Upwell and Outwell
- (c) Modify the March-Downham Market service to provide appropriate connections.

The Welney stop is about a couple of miles of a Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust reserve. This could either be served direct from Manea, as indicated above, or by the March-Downham Market service which could be routed past the reserve entrance.

5. Cambridge. Now by contrast we move to the area's main regional centre. The station has an enviable train service to London, but travel thereto is hindered by the poor location of the station. The connecting bus service is every 5 minutes during the day, every 15 minutes in the evenings and on Sundays, with late night buses on some days of the week. However it is expensive, and although the City is part of the Plusbus scheme the add on for Cambridge is only slightly lower than the cost of an all day ticket for Stagecoach.

Speaking personally, though one of the bus routes from the station passes close to my home, its half hourly interval during the evening is a major inconvenience, especially as many buses are timetabled to leave just before the arrival of trains from London.

The last bus from the station that runs every day is at 23.05. There are many trains after this time, from both London and other directions. The later buses (which run every hour) are not well timed to connect with most of these trains.

For cross-country journeys, the only access by rail is via Peterborough. The last train is at 22.17, just missing an official connection with the 22.14 arrival from Leeds (as well as missing the 23.05 bus at Cambridge) -- a situation that has persisted for many years. During the day, services from Peterborough are in principle hourly to Cambridge and Stansted Airport, hourly to Ely and Norwich, and 2 hourly to Ely and Ipswich (when the line reopens); and from Ely, there are 2 further trains per hour to Cambridge, the Kings Lynn-London and Norwich-Cambridge services. However in the evening some of these frequencies are reduced and connections are erratic at both Peterborough and Ely (as well as with buses at Cambridge station), so that journey times from arrival at Peterborough to Cambridge city centre can be around 2.5 hours. Despite this, passengers from Yorkshire etc. have to pay fares at levels that are justified by the high speed of the East Coast Main Line, even though the average journey speed is much lower.

Passengers from Cambridge can travel cross country by bus to join Inter-City trains at other stations. However many of the stations on cross country bus routes are spurned by the Inter-City train operators, and even when they are served there is no ticket interavailability so passengers have to use the same route in both directions regardless of convenience. In addition, the only station with a good bus/rail interchange facility, Milton Keynes, is marred by restrictions which prevent passengers from using Saver tickets on outbound trains on Monday to Friday mornings.

I therefore propose the following:

- (a) A new bus route to follow the A14 corridor and link Cambridge with Huntingdon, Kettering and Rugby
- (b) All these stations (except Huntingdon), and those on the Cambridge-Oxford route (St Neots, Bedford and Milton Keynes) to have at least half hourly Inter-City services. (At present St Neots has none, those for Bedford and Kettering are currently planned for reduction to hourly, and Rugby will only have Birmingham trains and stoppers on the Trent Valley line. Milton Keynes will retain 3 trains per hour, but not all WCML destinations will be served, e.g.
 - (a) Liverpool and Preston)
 - (b) Rail tickets between Cambridge and relevant destinations to be interavailable between the above bus/rail routes and routes via Peterborough, and to be purchasable at an agency in Cambridge city centre so one doesn't have to go out to the station to buy a ticket
 - (c) A target should be set of a maximum 90 minute journey time from arrival on any Inter-City train at Peterborough to arrival in Cambridge city centre, whether via Cambridge station or by bus via Huntingdon or St Neots

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