

Clitheroe-Hellifield Line Restoration Update

Clitheroe and the Ribble Valley are being held back by poor public transport connections. That's according to Ribble Valley Borough Council (RVBC), who believe that there could be significant economic, social, and environmental benefits of restoring regular passenger services on the Clitheroe-Hellifield line. They have bid for a share of the Government's £500m [Restoring Your Railways Ideas Fund](#) to restore regular passenger services on the line north of Clitheroe for the first time since 1962.

After much campaigning, passenger services resumed between Clitheroe and Blackburn in 1994 after almost 3 decades of virtually no passenger services, and it is hoped that services to the north could recommence as early as May 2023. At the moment, there is usually one train every hour from Clitheroe to Rochdale via Blackburn, Bolton and Manchester Victoria, with more regular trains during peak times. Only one passenger train per **week** departs north from Clitheroe, the [DalesRail service](#) which leaves for Hellifield, a village in North Yorkshire, in the morning and returns in the evening.

Anyone who has tried to travel anywhere from Clitheroe not on this line using public transport can vouch that it's a lengthy and expensive experience and that driving is preferable. Blackburn, 12 miles from Clitheroe, takes 23 minutes to reach by train. Skipton, 19 miles away and with no direct rail connection to the Ribble Valley, takes an hour by bus and up to three hours after 6pm, on a service which is regularly threatened with cancellation. Hellifield itself is only 15 miles away but takes around 2 hours to reach by train or bus.

When did the bid go in?

Ribble Valley Borough Council submitted their bid to the Restoring Your Railways fund to support introducing regular passenger services on the Clitheroe-Hellifield line in March 2020, which you can read [here](#). The bid was supported by North Yorkshire County Council, Lancashire County Council, Transport for the North, Community Rail Lancashire & Lancashire Enterprise Partnership.

Population in the Ribble Valley is expanding rapidly — since 2008, over 3,000 new homes have been built, and planning permission has been granted for at least another 3,500- and simultaneously we as a society are looking to reduce our dependence on cars to cut CO2 emissions, get the economy moving again after the paralysis and uncertainty of Covid and Brexit. The Government has pledged repeatedly that they are serious about 'levelling up' the entire country. So, there is much justification and hope for reopening the line.

What progress has been made on the bid?

In May 2020, the Department for Transport announced the bid had passed the first stage and awarded funding to create a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC). The task of writing the SOBC was handed to international consultancy firm Stantec, a ['top tier global design and delivery firm'](#), headquartered in Canada with over 22,000 employees worldwide. Stantec completed and published the SOBC in March 2021, and you can read the thorough 39-page report [here](#) (summary and conclusions are on page 37).

The report considered 12 different options for new routes extending to various destinations north of Clitheroe, as well as the possibility of more regular services and new stations. Of

the 12, Stantec recommended 5 progress to the next stage, an even more in-depth viability study known as an Outline Business Case (OBC).

These are the 5 ideas the SOBC recommended progress to the Outline Business Case (OBC):

1— Keep the current rate of services on the line (roughly one per hour), but extend all services which currently terminate at Clitheroe to Hellifield, where trains go to Leeds, Carlisle, Skipton and Morecambe. The annual cost of this is estimated at £1.5m, and the essential infrastructure required for implementation would be £3.3m.

1b— Keep current rate of service, but extend one of every two trains terminating at Clitheroe to Garsdale, a small station about 40 miles north on the Settle + Carlisle line, where trains go to Leeds and Carlisle, and stopping at the existing operational stations en route. The estimated annual cost of this would be £1.7m, but would require no additional essential infrastructure costs to introduce.

2a— Increase the regularity to two trains per hour departing Clitheroe with one train every two hours extending to Garsdale. This would cost an estimated £1.7m annually (likely more due to additional operating costs of running additional trains between Blackburn and Clitheroe not included as part of the study), and would not require any expenditure on essential infrastructure.

2b— Increase regularity to two trains per hour with one every two hours to Ribbleshead, a small station about 30 miles north of Clitheroe where trains go to Carlisle and Leeds. This would cost £1.7m per year (plus likely additional Blackburn + Clitheroe costs) and would not require any expenditure on essential infrastructure.

2c— Increase regularity to two trains per hour with one every two hours to Settle Junction, a few miles up the line from Hellifield where trains can reverse. This option would cost £1.7m (plus likely additional Blackburn + Clitheroe costs) and would require essential infrastructure spending of £3.3m

Of all the options, **1b**— one train in two extending to Garsdale — seems to perform best in terms of achieving goals with the fewest disadvantages and lowest costs. You can see the detailed analysis of the key advantages and disadvantages of each option on page 39 of the



[SOBC](#), and you can see all 12 options they considered and how they performed against the study objectives on page 20.

According to the SOBC, since the line is already used for regular freight and infrequent passenger services, trains to Hellifield could begin as soon as May 2023, presumably trains beyond Hellifield to Garsdale could begin by then although the SOBC doesn't say that explicitly.

What happens next?

Stantec's SOBC reached the government in March 2021 but there has been no news about the progress. I contacted Stantec and RVBC on 8th March, and RVBC's Director of Economic Development and Planning who led on the bid passed on the most recent update from the Department of Transport:

"Restoring Your Railway is an incredibly popular programme and with such an ambitious portfolio of potential restoration schemes the Government needs to consider how best to target the available £500m funding to the most promising schemes. We are considering next steps for over 20 schemes, including Clitheroe — Hellifield, which have now reached this SOBC stage of development, with a decision on the next tranche to progress anticipated in the coming weeks."

So, hopefully we should find out soon. The Clitheroe-Hellifield line is one of 38 bids which have made it to the SOBC round, according to the Department for Transport's website, although from that reply it sounds as if that number has already been whittled down to closer to 20. You can see the other bids [here](#).

Even with hourly trains to Rochdale, Clitheroe is quite an isolated town. We rarely get new infrastructure (community hospital notwithstanding), and particularly not anything for the benefit of younger people. A regular train service to the north to connect Clitheroe with Yorkshire, Cumbria and beyond would be brilliant. The Ribble Valley is a beautiful part of the world, and so are the Yorkshire Dales. A regular, direct train line between the two would be one of the most scenic train routes in the entire country, as well as an extremely useful one. I hope we hear soon from the DfT about the line and that RVBC get funding to put together the Outline Business Case. For a small amount of money relative to the £500m fund, restoring passenger services on the line from Clitheroe to Hellifield (and hopefully beyond) would make an enormous and lasting difference to the area and benefit a huge number of people.

Sam Holden