

Demand from England and Wales to restore Beeching lines as deadline for proposals closes

- 50 proposals submitted to build or reopen lines and stations in England and Wales, closed in and around the Beeching cuts
- bids will now be considered by expert panel, taking next step towards improving connectivity for communities
- part of wider £500 million Restoring Your Railway fund to level up the country

Fifty bids to build or reopen lines and stations closed during the Beeching cuts, with the potential to level up regional economies and boost access to jobs and education, have been received across England and Wales, the Rail Minister Chris Heaton-Harris has announced today (30 June 2020).

MPs and local authorities have bid for a share of the second round of the [Restoring Your Railway 'Ideas Fund'](#), to develop proposals to build or reopen railway lines and stations, including those closed by British Rail chief Dr Richard Beeching from 1963.

Proposals for the restoration of lines and stations to re-connect their communities will now be considered by an expert panel including Network Rail Chair Sir Peter Hendy, with announcements regarding the successful schemes expected by the end of the summer.

The Rail Minister announced that 50 proposals have been submitted from right across the country. These include proposals from MPs in the north east to reopen the line at Ferryhill, County Durham, and restore the Consett-Newcastle Connection, to proposals from the south west to transform the Newquay line, reopen Charfield station, and reinstate the Bodmin to Wadebridge railway.

Rail Minister Chris Heaton-Harris said:

Receiving so many bids once again underlines how passionate people are about reconnecting communities.

Local MPs, councillors and community leaders are the greatest champions of their local lines, and I look forward to working with them to ensure the projects with the greatest potential have the support they need.

Improving local transport links is vital as we level up access to

opportunities across the country, reconnect communities and kickstart our recovery from Covid-19.

Today's news follows the announcement in May that 10 bids will receive a share of the first round of the Restoring Your Railway 'Ideas Fund'. The schemes were awarded up to £50,000 each to progress plans to improve local connectivity, bringing communities one step closer to better rail connections with the capacity to boost job opportunities and ease congestion.

As part of the Restoring Your Railway Fund, the government also announced the third round of the New Stations Fund, which will invest £20 million in new stations and help restore closed stations to their former glory. The fund has now closed with a decision on successful applicants due in the Autumn.

[More firms can now benefit from the Future Fund](#)

- companies which have participated in accelerator programmes now eligible for the popular scheme
- more than 320 early-stage, high-growth firms have so far benefitted from £320 million of support through the Fund
- this surpasses the £250 million initial funding made available by the government

Changes to the scheme's eligibility criteria will mean that UK companies who have participated in highly selective accelerator programmes and were required, as part of that programme, to have parent companies outside of the UK will now be able to apply for investment.

To date, more than 320 companies have benefitted from £320 million of Future Fund support. Under the scheme, early-stage, high-growth businesses from a diverse range of sectors can apply for a convertible loan of between £125,000 and £5 million to help them through the Coronavirus outbreak.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, said:

Our start-ups and innovative firms are one of our great economic strengths. As we begin to bounce back from coronavirus they will help drive our recovery and create new jobs.

This change means that those start-ups who have strived to be the very best, and taken opportunities to grow their business, will be able to benefit from our world-leading Future Fund.

The Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

As we restart our economy, it is crucial that our innovators and risk-takers get all the support they need to flourish.

Our decision to relax this rule recognises the importance of many of the UK's most cutting-edge start-ups as we bounce back from coronavirus.

Initially, £250 million was made available by the government under the Fund, to be matched by private investors, with the Treasury making clear the amount could be increased if needed.

Due to the popularity of the Fund, more funding has been made available, with around £320 million having now been invested. The scale of the scheme will be kept under review.

Accelerator programmes, such as TechStars or Y-Combinator, give businesses access to finance, mentorship and expert networks.

Participants in accelerator programmes are often required to set up a non-UK parent company in order to participate which means some did not meet the Future Fund criteria of having a UK parent company when it opened for applications in May.

Further information

- The Future Fund is backing high-growth, innovative firms across the country through Covid-19. The scheme has already provided £320.6 million of convertible loans to 320 businesses.
- The change announced today covers accelerator alumni only. The government remains committed to using the Future Fund to support economic activity in the UK.
- Companies will still be required to meet the 'substantive economic presence' tests (that half or more employees are UK-based and/or half or more revenues are from UK sales).

Local action to tackle coronavirus

Mr Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a statement on local action to tackle coronavirus.

The impact of coronavirus has been deeply felt.

And yet thanks to the extraordinary action that this country has taken, it is now in decline at a national level.

The number of positive new cases is now below 1,000 a day and the number of recorded deaths yesterday is 25.

I am pleased to report there were no deaths in Scotland for the fourth consecutive day and that there is currently nobody in intensive care with coronavirus in Northern Ireland.

So we have been able, carefully, to ease the national restrictions.

And alongside the easing of these national restrictions, we have increasingly taken local action.

In May, we shut Weston Hospital to new admissions after a cluster of cases there.

Earlier this month, we closed 2 GP surgeries in Enfield and a meat processing factory in Kirklees.

And the Welsh Government has closed factories in Anglesey and Wrexham.

We have put in place a system to tie together local and national action, based on insight provided by the Joint Biosecurity Centre, working closely with Public Health England and the NHS.

Analysis is based on 3 levels of spread.

Individual cases are identified and managed by NHS Test and Trace.

When many cases are found in 1 setting, be it a care home for instance, a factory, or a hospital, that is classified as a cluster, and that will be dealt with largely by the local Director of Public Health, who has statutory powers to close individual organisations.

When Public Health England or the new JBC identifies clusters that are linked to one another, that is defined as an outbreak and a range of local and national actions may be needed.

Decisions are taken through our Local Action Committee Command structure. It works as follows.

If PHE or the JBC spots a problem that needs attention or the local Director of Public Health reports up a problem through the Regional Health Protection Teams, then the outbreak is assessed at the daily Local Action Committee Bronze meeting.

Issues of concern are raised to the Local Action Committee Silver meeting, which is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer.

And problems requiring ministerial attention are then raised to the Local Action Committee Gold meeting.

Yesterday, I chaired an emergency Local Action Committee Gold meeting specifically to deal with the outbreak in Leicester.

Unfortunately, while cases in most parts of the country have fallen since the peak, in Leicester they have continued to rise.

The 7-day infection rate in Leicester is 135 cases per 100,000 people, which is 3 times higher than the next highest city.

Leicester accounts for around 10% of all positive cases in the country over the past week.

And admissions to hospital are between 6 and 10 per day rather than around 1 a day at other trusts.

Over the past fortnight, we have already taken action to protect people in Leicester.

We deployed 4 mobile testing units and extra capacity at the regional test site.

We provided thousands of home testing kits and extra public health capacity to boost the local team.

This afternoon, I held a further meeting with local leaders, with Public Health England, the JBC, the Local Resilience Forum and my clinical advisers, followed by a meeting of the cross-government Covid Operations Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister.

We have agreed further measures to tackle the outbreak in Leicester.

First, in addition to the mobile testing units that I mentioned earlier, we will send further testing capability, including opening a walk-in centre.

Anyone in Leicester with symptoms must come forward for a test.

Second, we will give extra funding to Leicester and Leicestershire councils to support them to enhance their communications and ensure those communications are translated into all locally relevant languages.

Third, through the councils, we will ensure support is available for those who have to self-isolate.

Fourth, we will work with the workplaces that have seen clusters of cases to implement more stringently the COVID-secure workplaces.

Given the growing outbreak in Leicester, we cannot recommend that the easing of the national lockdown, set to take place on the 4 July, happens in Leicester.

Having taken clinical advice on the actions necessary, and discussed them with the local team in Leicester and Leicestershire, we have made some difficult but important decisions.

We have decided that from tomorrow non-essential retail will have to close.

And, as children have been particularly impacted by this outbreak, schools

will also need to close from Thursday, staying open for vulnerable children and children of critical workers as they did throughout

Unfortunately, the clinical advice is that the relaxation of shielding measures due on the 6 July cannot now take place in Leicester.

We recommend to people in Leicester, stay at home as much as you can and we recommend against all but essential travel to, from and within Leicester.

We will monitor closely adherence to social distancing rules and will take further steps if that is what's necessary.

The more people following the rules, the faster we will get control of this virus and get Leicester back to normal.

We will keep all of these local measures under review and we will not keep them in place any longer than is necessary.

We will review whether we can release any measures in 2 weeks' time.

These Leicester-specific measures will apply not just to the city of Leicester, but also to the surrounding conurbation, including for example, Oadby, Birstall and Glenfield.

I know that this is a worrying time for people living in Leicester and I want you to know that you have our full support.

We do not take these decisions lightly, but with the interests of the people of Leicester in our hearts.

I want everyone in Leicester to know that we have taken every one of these decisions to protect them from this terrible virus.

We must control this virus. We must keep people safe.

These actions are also profoundly in the national interest too because it's in everyone's interests that we control the virus as locally as possible.

Local action like this is an important tool in our armoury to deal with outbreaks while we get the country back on its feet.

Mr Speaker, we said that we do whatever it takes to defeat this virus.

And we said that local action would be an increasingly important part of our plan.

The virus thrives on social contact, and we know that reducing social contact controls its spread.

So precise and targeted actions like these will give the virus nowhere to hide and help us defeat this invisible killer.

I commend this statement to the House.

[Hong Kong response is censored](#)

Last Friday we posted an [article](#) on our WeChat channel to respond to errors in media reporting on the UK and Hong Kong.

We did this because we wanted you to have all sides of the discussion on Hong Kong.

We also wanted to make clear that we support Hong Kong's stability and prosperity. As the Prime Minister has said: "Britain wants nothing more than for Hong Kong to succeed under "one country, two systems"

The article was blocked after two hours but in that short time was viewed 350k times – the highest for any article we have ever posted.

We also received 1,050 comments. Many of your comments supported the new national security law and disagreed with the UK's criticism but some welcomed the opportunity to hear a different voice and our point of view.

The Chinese international broadcaster CGTN has also published a reply to our article titled 'A comprehensive response to the British Embassy'. Unlike our article, this will not be censored and can be read and discussed by anyone.

It is not unusual for our posts to be censored but we are not unique. We receive similar censorship to netizens and Chinese media.

The editor of the Global Times Hu Xijin has previously called for greater space for public discussion. In a Weibo post he has said 'China should open up more channels for criticism and suggestions and encourage constructive criticism'.

[Hu Xijin Weibo link](#)

While Caixin previously published an article on the importance of free speech with Shanghai academic Jiang Hong which was censored. When they published a follow up article 'Story about Adviser's Free Speech Comments Removed from Caixin Website' this was also censored.

In the UK the Chinese Ambassador, Liu Xiaoming, and his deputy, Chen Wen, regularly appear on the BBC and other broadcasters to discuss the problems Hong Kong has faced. Chinese diplomats and officials also freely discuss Hong Kong on Twitter or challenge the validity of claims on other issues such as COVID-19 and are not censored.

[Liu Xiaoming tweet link](#)

[Hua Chunying tweet link](#)

The media are free to interview whomever they like because it promotes a wide range of perspectives and access to information that is important in tackling tricky problems whether that is Hong Kong or COVID-19.

It also means that everyone has a voice and it is not just the most powerful that can be heard.

There are many areas where the UK works side by side with China whether that is trade or climate change. We are both global leaders in tackling global warming and our two countries continue to create wealth and jobs together, with a trade relationship valued at more than £80bn in 2019. The potential of our economic and scientific partnership is huge and you will have seen us post many articles that promote this.

However, we would also like to be able to share with you content on topics where we hold a different opinion to the Chinese Government without it being censored.

The UK has a wide ranging relationship with China where we can have constructive discussions even if we disagree.

We also think that is important that you have a chance to understand our point of view so you can reach your own conclusion. We hope that this post is not censored.

[Ensuring aid reaches north-east Syria](#)

Thank you very much, Mr President. Let me also, of course, thank Mark Lowcock for his briefing and Susannah Sirkin from Physicians for Human Rights for what she had to say as well, which was very powerful.

Mr President, the United Kingdom remains committed to ensuring that aid in Syria reaches those who need it, regardless of location. In light of that, we continue to believe that it is necessary to renew the cross-border mandate in the north-west and to re-authorise the mandate for the north-east. And we strongly support the efforts of our humanitarian co-penholders to enact it. A mandate renewal for twelve months in the north-west is the minimum required to enable aid agencies to function effectively in the region. And re-authorisation in the north-east at Yaroubiya represents the most effective way of getting aid to an incredibly vulnerable population.

Mr President, I agree with all of those who've said humanitarian aid should not be a political issue and nor should the modalities in the mechanisms.

Mr President, in the north-west, cross-border operations remain at their highest level since the mandate was approved in 2014, and both crossings remain vital.

In May 2020, 3.4 million people benefited from UN food, security and livelihood assistance, which directly came through Bab al-Hawa. One million people benefited from health assistance provided by cross-border aid through Bab al-Salaam. There have been no cross-line deliveries. There would be no reasonable justification for shutting off this vital lifeline for the millions in the region. In the north-east, over 1.4 million people living outside regime control continue to require humanitarian assistance. Cross-line remains an inadequate replacement for the cross-border mandate, and this is stated clearly in the Secretary-General's June report. While we welcome the two World Health Organisation consignments delivering aid cross-line in May, there are 32 medicines that, as of the start of June, were a month away from running out at medical facilities in the north-east because the cross-border mandate was taken away.

Our Russian colleague raised the humanitarian principles. I just like to put on record our deep concern over the actions of the Syrian authorities in areas under their control and on cross-line in connection with the humanitarian principles. Colleagues, when cross-line deliveries fully compensate for the loss of cross-border, we'll be happy to say it's not needed in north-east. But until then, we have a responsibility to re-authorise cross-border into that region.

Now, Mr President, tomorrow, alongside many other Members of the Council, we'll make a pledge at the EU-UN Brussels IV conference. The United Kingdom will continue to show its leadership on the humanitarian fault with its pledge. And we encourage others to donate generously, too.

My Russian colleague spoke of hypocrisy over humanitarian aid. All I can suggest is that all members of the Security Council look carefully tomorrow at which countries pledge and consider how much assistance has been given by different countries over the long years of the war, and then they can make their own minds up about hypocrisy.

Colleagues, we must all make sure that aid gets to those who need it most. However, we must once again emphasise that there will be no automatic transfer of our aid provision to the response led from Damascus if the renewal of the vital cross-border resolution is blocked.

Mr President, let me conclude by noting, as Mark Lowcock did, that Russia has just pulled out of the humanitarian de-confliction mechanism. This, of course, is the mechanism which is meant to protect hospitals and health workers. I say "is meant to" because the Board of Inquiry found it highly likely that Russia and the regime bombed two hospitals and a school. As so often, Russian Federation attacks any impartial report it disagrees with. But this new action, pulling out of the mechanism, I'm afraid only increases the chances of this happening again and more innocent lives being lost. We see absolutely no justification for this move. And so we strongly urge Russia to reconsider its decision and to put Syrian lives first.

Thank you very much, Mr President.