

Network Rail reaches key milestone on Dartmoor Line

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The reopening of the railway line between Okehampton and Exeter is one step closer after Network Rail finished relaying the new track and sleepers this week.

Following the confirmation of government funding in March, engineers started immediately and have worked tirelessly upgrading this 14 mile stretch of track between Okehampton and Coleford Junction, where the Dartmoor Line joins the existing railway line to Exeter.

As well as laying new track and sleepers, Network Rail engineers have been working day and night on drainage, fencing, preparing the ground for the new railway and much more.

Over 11 miles of new track has successfully been laid and 24,000 concrete sleepers installed using an innovative NTC (new track construction) machine, which is able to simultaneously evenly drop sleepers into position, lay the track on top and then clamp the track into place.

The concrete sleepers, which were stored at the work site adjacent to Okehampton station, have been transported along the Dartmoor Line using a Class 56 locomotive train that has pushed around a quarter-

mile long set of wagons containing on average 2,430 sleepers per journey at a speed of 5mph.

The 29,000 tonnes of ballast (the stones that support the track) have also nearly all been installed and this will be followed by the process of tamping. This involves a machine travelling along the newly laid railway and inserting vibrating metal rods into the ballast to compact it so that it effectively supports the track while lifting the track so that it is level.

Once complete, this process helps the train wheels to align with the track which results in a smoother ride for passengers and prevents the train wheels from causing damage to the track.

To enable engineers to work throughout the night, over four miles of lights have also been erected. These lights have been powered by silent generators to ensure residents living near to the Dartmoor Line are disrupted as little as possible.

Now that the main elements of the track relay work have been completed, Network Rail will be turning its focus to other aspects of the project including upgrading several level crossings, installing new GSM-R masts (the railway's mobile communications system), undertaking bridge repairs as well as running engineering test trains to check the quality of the newly laid track.

Becky Tipper, Network Rail scheme project manager, said: "We are delighted with the progress the team has made and this is credit to the hard work and dedication of our engineers involved in this project.

"To have already laid the 11 miles of track, 24,000 sleepers and nearly completing the installation of the 29,000 tonnes of ballast is no mean feat and we are looking forward to focussing our attention on the next stage of work.

"It has also been really comforting to see such interest and support from the local community. We are committed to reopening this important railway line as quickly and safely as possible and look forward to the resumption of regular passenger services in the not too distant future."

Rail Minister Chris Heaton-Harris said: "It's brilliant that so much progress has been made already in this project. Network Rail engineers have done an incredible job installing 11 miles of new track and 24,000 sleepers, bringing us closer to seeing regular passenger services restored later this year.

"Restoring the connections between our communities, and building new ones, is key to levelling up across the UK."

Matt Barnes, GWR regional development manager, commented: "Once reopened, the Dartmoor Line will form a vital rail link for Okehampton and the surrounding areas so we are pleased to see the progress Network Rail are making to upgrade the infrastructure.

"With daily trains running every two hours by the end of the year and hourly services expected to be start in 2022, the new line will help extend the social and economic benefits of the railway to the area and the communities it will serve.

“Once Network Rail has completed their work, we will commence our crew training programme to help ensure a swift return to passenger services on the line.”

Richard Burningham MBE, Manager of the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership, added: “Hats off and many thanks to all involved in this tremendous feat. To have laid 11 miles of track already is fabulous and it’s been great to see video of the very innovative piece of kit which has helped on the Dartmoor Line. Thanks too to the Government for funding all this work.”

For more information and the latest updates on the Dartmoor Line, please visit www.dartmoorline.com

Photo credit: Network Rail