

South East Northumberland Rail User Group. Newsletter 5. 06/09/2005

Chairman's Report from the AGM 2005.

I shall restrict myself to telling you what SENRUG have been doing during the past 12 months. SENRUG started with several aims and is still pursuing all these. At our next meeting we shall be raising some of these with Northern.

It was soon obvious that until the Northern and the East Coast Main Line franchises were let, we could not discuss our aims with the relevant companies. Both announcements were delayed, but Serco-Ned (trading as Northern) won the local franchise and took over from Arriva in December. We had longer to wait for GNER to be granted the new East Coast franchise. This only started in May.

SENRUG was formed too late to influence the northern franchise process, but we lobbied long and hard for a better east coast main line service. We attended meetings at York, Durham, Newcastle, Morpeth and Alnwick. Members wrote to the press, to Train Operating Companies, MPs, councillors, civil servants and local government officers, and met many of them.

Our agenda was hijacked by the SRA in September, when a leak of the east coast franchise document revealed an SRA plan to cut our 17.30 direct evening train from London and a return train from Edinburgh. Rather than seeking improvements, we were forced to defend our existing service. We and several others created a storm of opposition. We also obtained the support of the TOCs. Eventually the SRA withdrew their proposals. We gained useful experience from this campaign.

Our ambitious long term aim to reopen the ABT line for passengers started with two setbacks. We planned to use a Hertfordshire Rail Tours excursion on the line to publicise our aims, but the train was cancelled at short notice. Then meetings revealed that Nexus and Railtrack had examined the line and rejected plans to reopen the line for several reasons. It was thought too costly at £46m. Also there was no money for any new schemes, as the West Coast line renewal scheme had overspent. Finally the line was thought too slow to attract passengers.

This deadlock may now have been broken by two events. The Vale of Glamorgan railway in South Wales has re-opened for passenger train service after 41 years. Around £17 million was spent bringing the line between Cardiff and Bridgend back up to passenger service standards. The old railway line had been used by freight but had been shut to regular passenger services since 1964. It has been reopened with investment from the Welsh Assembly Government.

This Welsh line is very similar to the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line in length and past history. The cost of reopening it was only £17m, much less than the Railtrack estimate of £46m for the ABT line.

Then in March SENRUG member, Trevor Watson proposed that the trains to Ashington could be routed via Bebside and Bedlington Station to Newcastle via

Morpeth. His detailed plans demonstrated that this would avoid conflicts with slow freight and the Metro trains, and could be quicker than the original Blyth and Tyne route. This removed another objection.

Another look at the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line.

SENRUG has heard that Wansbeck MP Denis Murphy has been in talks with Network Rail, who say that they will re-examine the case for opening the Ashington/Blyth/Tyne line for passengers. Apparently the new proposals by Trevor Watson were looked at with great interest, and Network Rail has agreed to check the original costings. They think Railtrack "hugely overestimated" the capital costs of the scheme and they consider a 40 minute service to Newcastle could operate with "very little capital investment, apart from station refurbishment" This is great news, and it means that SENRUG's faith in the feasibility of this route has been justified, despite the pessimism with which it has been regarded in some circles. Station refurbishment could cost as little as £2m, which is peanuts compared to the £46 million originally proposed for this route. SENRUG has always held £46m to be ridiculously excessive. Blyth Valley Council now appears to be taking an interest too, more good news.

Publicity.

We started the SENRUG website which is managed for us by Luke Earl, and have produced four newsletters.

GNER trains become totally "no smoking".

All long-distance InterCity trains became non-smoking on 29th August, following GNER's decision to ban smoking on its trains. Since rail privatisation in 1997, other InterCity operators, such as Virgin, have all introduced total bans on smoking. But GNER continued to provide limited accommodation for smokers. Now GNER has followed suit and banned smoking from Bank Holiday Monday, despite of their recent refurbishment of the smoking carriages on Mallard trains.

The company said the ban was in direct response to passenger wishes and followed detailed research that showed that more than 90% of its passengers did not smoke and that most wanted a ban. GNER said that customer complaints about smoking had risen by 172% over the past two years, as passenger tolerance had reduced.

Virgin Cross Country Trains agree to stop at Morpeth.

New long-distance services are to be provided for Morpeth seven days a week by Virgin Cross Country Trains following talks with Northumberland County Council. It will be easier to travel to and from Edinburgh, Yorkshire and the Midlands. Journeys as far as Plymouth will also be possible without changing trains after 12 December.

Virgin Voyager trains will call at Morpeth on journeys to Edinburgh at 0943 and 1553 and to Leeds, Birmingham and the South West at 1118 and 1726 daily, Mondays to Saturdays. On Sundays a Bristol to Edinburgh train will call at 1558 and an Edinburgh to Bristol service at 1703. Combined with existing services provided by GNER, there will be a wider choice of trains for day and weekend trips to Edinburgh.

Northbound (Mon - Sat)

0600 Birmingham - Edinburgh (0943)

0825 Plymouth - Edinburgh (1553)

Southbound (Mon - Sat)

0900 Glasgow - Plymouth (1118)

1605 Edinburgh - Bristol (1726)

Northbound (Sun)

1025 Bristol - Edinburgh (1558)

Southbound

1550 Edinburgh - Bristol (1703)

SENRUG says: That Virgin will stop trains at Morpeth for the first time is excellent news, though we shall continue to press for more trains to stop. These Virgin trains set a useful precedent. We shall be even more determined in our fight to retain the Cross Country services north of Newcastle should they be threatened, as recent rumours suggest.

The two northbound weekday trains will provide Morpeth with a service to Edinburgh during the working day, as GNER only run trains early and late. The 09.43 will be welcomed by families and sports fans or indeed anyone visiting Edinburgh, particularly on Saturdays. The two new southbound trains are useful too, especially the 17.26 which fills a long gap in the Northern Rail schedule, caused by the 17.36 northbound continuing to Chathill before returning south.

The Sunday services are useful additions to the time table, and complement the GNER services.

However we have a few reservations, both about the consultation process and the trains. Was anyone from outside Northumberland County officials invited to contribute to, participate or observe the discussions with Virgin? We were not informed of the existence of talks by county, and would have liked an opportunity to put forward ideas.

Cutting the Newcastle – Morpeth – Chathill trains.

Twice this summer, first in the Journal in July and more recently in the Guardian, articles have appeared about the possible cutting of the entire local service north of Newcastle. They were based on a June SRA report. We have had to respond to these.

The Strategic Rail Authority have been at it again, trying to cut our services and free the line for freight, exactly as they did last year, only this time it is the local services which face the chop. Is this because while the West Coast main line in Scotland is being upgraded next year they need more freight slots north of Newcastle? Is this because they have failed to upgrade the alternative line north of Carlisle?

My first response is dismay. It would be a disaster for South East Northumberland commuters, shoppers and students from Cramlington and Morpeth. Every station up to Chathill would close (Manors, Cramlington, Pegswood, Widdrington, and Acklington) except Morpeth and Alnmouth. Cramlington is an expanding former New Town and Widdrington Station and Pegswood villages are also expanding, with new housing estates and potential rail passengers. What we need is an extension of the local service to Berwick, as it was pre-privatisation and a branch to Ashington, not closure.

Tourism is growing in Northumberland, but at present it is held back by a very poor local rail service. Tourism is vital to rural Northumberland, and these cuts would be disastrous. There are other solutions than cuts. Faster trains than the existing Pacers would also enable more freight trains to use the route. The problem of congestion at sections of track like the Benton junction is to improve the line, not cut the service.

This policy of cuts makes no sense. The area has recently lost jobs at Ellington and Cambois and may soon lose jobs at Morpeth. If their replacements are on Tyneside, the existence of the local line will help cut traffic congestion on Tyneside. Also the SRA are failing to learn the lessons of the 1964 Beeching closures. Once people are forced into their cars to start their local journey, they often do not use rail for longer journeys. The surviving rail services will lose passengers too. Finally, if the government is serious that it wants to cut green house gases such as CO₂, this new policy will do the exact opposite. These proposed cuts run contrary to several government policies.

This report is a counsel of despair; the solution is investment, not cuts. Worse, the West Coast Main Line and the South East get investment, but the North East gets cuts. Perhaps the SRA and the Dft are too London centred. They are clearly ignoring the democratic wishes of Northumbrians. The brief of the SRA was strategic planning not short term fixes to route congestion and money shortages, but short term solutions are all this report offers. If this is all the SRA can propose then good riddance.

Why are the Government publishing this as an SRA document? Conspiracy theorists might believe it is so that if they get strong opposition they can disown it, and say this is why the SRA was disbanded?

Ken Allott