

Wansbeck Election Candidates reveal their Transport Priorities

The Prospective Parliamentary Candidates for Wansbeck from the three main parties told a lively Town Hall audience what they would do for transport in the region and nationally.

THE PUBLIC meeting was hosted by SENRUG at Morpeth Town Hall on 11th March and gave the three candidates (Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative) an opportunity to present their public transport policies, followed by a question-and-answers session.

In the end there was very little controversy. All the candidates were keen to stress their support for SENRUG's campaign objectives, in particular its efforts to re-open the Ashington, Blyth & Tyne

line to passengers. As for how they would deliver this support, Labour's Ian Lavery wanted full re-nationalisation of the rail network, admitting he needed to persuade policy makers in his own party to support such an initiative; Conservative Cambell Storey thought that longer franchise periods were the answer; whilst Liberal Democrat Simon Reed said there should be a Transport Expansion Fund which local policy-makers could draw on to support their own priorities.

INSIDE THIS special edition of the SENRUG Newsletter, you will find a summary from each of the candidates (including Nic Best of the Green Party who was not present at the meeting) about their public transport priorities and policies. ●

SENRUG would like to thank each of the candidates for attending the meeting and writing the articles. SENRUG itself, whilst being a campaign group, is not aligned to any political party.

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ABT Charters

2010 will see several chartered trains in steam on the ABT line

THE ASHINGTON Blyth & Tyne line is only open to freight traffic, and SENRUG is campaigning to have it re-opened for regular passenger use. So its increased use by charter trains is a welcome development.

New-build celebrity locomotive *Tornado* will be making the circuit on 24th April. The trip is run by Pathfinder tours and called the Tees-Tyne Express. This may be the last time *Tornado* appears in the North for some time.

On 8th May The North Eastern Locomotive Preservation Group are running a particularly special trip. The loco, K1 class 2-6-0 N^o 62005, actually

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PHOTO: RONALD HUNT

PICTURED: The three candidates at SENRUG's Public Meeting in Morpeth Town Hall. Left to right: Ian Lavery (Labour), Simon Reed (Liberal Democrat), Dennis Fancett (Chairman, SENRUG) and Campbell Storey (Conservative)

INSIDE

The candidates tell us what they think are the key transport priorities for Wansbeck and the rest of the country.

"Eureka" could cause inter-city displacement

MORPETH IS set to lose out if East Coast's planned timetable changes for May 2011—dubbed "Eureka"—are approved. The changes—designed to improve journey times on the East Coast Main Line, introduce a clock-face timetable and increase the number of trains—will result

in a worse inter-city service for passengers at Morpeth.

The morning southbound service to London will take longer—leaving Morpeth earlier and arriving in London later. And the Morpeth stop on the 17.30 northbound service from London will be transferred to the 16.30 departure,

according to Network Rail proposals. Whilst passengers on the 17.30 will be able to change (with a 30 min. wait) in Newcastle, the connecting CrossCountry service is not protected in the franchise.

It isn't all bad news, though. Morpeth will see an improvement to services to and from

Edinburgh, as well as an additional evening service to London. But if business travellers can't return from London in the evening, the new timetable can hardly be seen as an improvement. ●

Details of "Eureka" are on the East Coast website at www.eastcoast.co.uk/eureka

Nic Best, Green Party

FIRSTLY, MAY I congratulate SENRUG on being the professional, well-informed and effective pressure group that it is. It has far exceeded the expectations I had when I helped set it up back in 2004, particularly in terms of the respect and recognition it has earned from the industry. For me, it is an excellent demonstration that democracy is about voices being heard, not just who gets the most votes.



We need major investment in public transport—and in rail even more than buses—to encourage people to switch from using cars. Apart from the carbon emissions argument, good quality rail travel is healthier, less stressful and more sociable than car travel. The Green Party proposes to reallocate the £30bn earmarked for road building over the next 10 years to investment in public transport, which incidentally will create considerably more jobs. At the very least, transport budgets ringfenced by mode makes no sense if you are trying to develop an integrated transport network.

Locally, this re-allocation of investment would allow: opening of the ABT line to passengers including links to Morpeth and Woodhorn; opening up of the Leamside line; and various other loops to increase the capacity of the ECML.

Increased capacity would enable improvements both in local and long distances services, and also in intermediate services such as direct links to Durham and Hexham. I am also keen to see a new semifast service between Newcastle and Edinburgh stopping at all the principal stations. There would also be investment in rolling stock to make best use of the capacity of the existing network.

We also need considerably increased capacity if there is to be any significant shift of road freight back to rail. Again, rail freight and railhead freight depots will create more local jobs than road freight does.

Public transport overall needs to be more coherent, with simpler, more transparent—and integrated—fares. It may be that the only way to do this effectively is to follow Green Party policy to re-regulate bus services and return the railways, both track and operations, to public ownership. At any rate, successive governments' use of fare increases to manage demand must end. I realise that I am rather unlikely to be elected as MP for Wansbeck, but the other parties have been stealing policies from the Greens since we were first formed. A strong Green vote would encourage them to steal these policies too. ◆

Ian Lavery, Labour

I THANK SENRUG for this opportunity to put forward my views and the Labour Party's policy on the vitally important subject of Transport. I am totally committed to substantial investment in Public transport and I will fight to defend free nationwide off-peak bus travel, currently enjoyed by 11 million over 60s and eligible disabled people and sadly now under threat from both the Conservatives and Liberal



Democrats who are both attempting to outdo each other in which party can slash Public spending more. Labour is committed to the continuation of this hugely popular scheme along with the protection and expansion of local bus services.

I will lend my full support to the continued growth of Rail travel and welcome the recent announcement of proposals for a high speed link from Edinburgh and Newcastle to London. We will create 100,000 more train seats across the network by the end of 2010 and simplify rail fares and ticket types. The excellent proposal to carry more freight by the creation of a new Strategic Freight network will continue our policy of moving more freight by rail. The failure of National Express provides a wonderful opportunity for the new publicly owned East Coast mainline service to demonstrate best practice and show its commitment to the rail using public by a much improved timetable to enable residents of Northumberland better access to more intercity trains. I will argue very strongly in Parliament, if elected, for the continuation of public ownership and if necessary other rail franchises to be brought back into public ownership. The restoration of passenger rail services on the Ashington Blyth and Tyne Line will be my first local transport priority. I will continue to build on the excellent work done by SENRUG and my predecessor Denis Murphy to finally deliver this much needed scheme which will bring major benefits to the Wansbeck constituency.

I understand the need to make motoring greener. We are uniquely placed in this region to put Britain at the forefront of a green motoring revolution. If elected I look forward to working closely with organisations like SENRUG and the Local Authority who should be leading on the provision of a green car battery charging network in Northumberland. I have a passionate interest in transport. I look forward to building a genuinely sustainable fully integrated public transport system here in Wansbeck. I promise to be a powerful voice in the House of Commons. ◆

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These details have been obtained from the websites of the perspective candidates' parties and their campaign websites.

Simon Reed, Liberal Democrat

ACROSS BRITAIN, our transport system is in a mess. There is too much traffic on the roads, trains are expensive and overcrowded, and buses too few and far between, particularly in the countryside.

Liberal Democrats believe in public transport: it's part of a fair society and the best way to cut carbon emissions from transport without trying to limit people's opportunities to travel. We will cut rail fares, improve bus services by giving local people more control over fares and routes, and use the tax system to reduce carbon emissions from transport. Last week's announcement of a Rail Expansion Fund would bring immediate benefits to our area. The reopening of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line is a priority. What would Liberal Democrats do?

1. Cut rail fares and replacement bus services, ensuring that train fares go up by less than inflation meaning prices will come down. We will make Network Rail refund a third of your ticket price if you have to take a replacement bus service.
2. National Infrastructure Bank to invest in public transport like high speed rail. Britain needs new high speed rail links to encourage people not to take domestic flights.
3. Improve local bus services. There aren't enough buses for people to get around, especially older people who can't drive. We will give councils greater powers to regulate bus services.
4. Tax pollution, not people. As part of our plan to cut income tax for millions of people, we will ensure polluters pay. We will replace Air Passenger Duty with a per-plane tax to stop planes flying half empty and encourage people to use less polluting means of travel.
5. No 3rd runway at Heathrow. Heathrow is big enough.

Labour promised to improve public transport, but they failed. They pushed up prices and allowed access and quality to fall. Our roads are congested, public transport is more expensive and less reliable, and emissions have risen. They have failed to learn that you cannot build your way out of congestion and are pushing ahead with widening motorways instead of investing in greener public transport. Labour have destroyed their credibility on the environment by giving the go-ahead to Heathrow expansion.

The Conservatives cannot be trusted to improve public transport, because their priorities are all wrong. They want to build more roads, creating more congestion and more emissions. Their commitment to High Speed rail is uncoded, will lead to cuts elsewhere, and only goes as far as Leeds. ●



Campbell Story, Conservative

WHEN I was little my Great-Grandad used to walk me up the Narrow Path in Newbiggin and show me the route of the old railway. My first forays onto Wansbeck's public transport were made a long time after the track, station and trains had departed. Sometimes I would get the bus to Gosforth where my mam worked and the bus to school at Hirst High every day.

I never understood why it took so long getting from Newbiggin to anywhere else. If we're going to sort out the economy of Wansbeck, we need better public transport services. And it's with this in mind that I set myself a little challenge to revisit my childhood journey and get from Newbiggin to Newcastle and back using the bus, train and Metro.

I set off from the Bank House in Newbiggin and got the X31 to the Haymarket—a day ticket cost £6. Once I got to Newcastle I had to get to the Central Station from Haymarket so opted for the Metro as this was quite quick, costing another £1.40 and another ticket.

After pausing for an outrageously-priced pasty at Central Station I took myself off to platform seven and got the train back to Morpeth. The train, albeit a little on the old side, was clean but there wasn't much of it. Having weaved my way through the byzantine complexity of the ticket options I chose the one that seemed most likely to cover all routes, another £4.10. I then took myself to the new bus station in Morpeth and got the 35 to Newbiggin.

Overall the journey wasn't a bad one but there were problems. If there is a way of getting one ticket to cover all three journeys I made that day then I couldn't find it.

That leads me to my second point, the lack of information meant that I ended up paying more than £12.00 for my journey.

Finally, why on earth do I have to have three tickets for my journey?

It is no wonder that our local economy is struggling to grow when it is hamstrung by infrastructure problems like this. If I were to become the MP, I'd campaign for five things to get us a better deal on transport for Wansbeck:

1. A decent commuter and passenger service for all of Wansbeck
2. Better, more integrated tickets and fares
3. Holding the bus and train companies to account
4. Dualling the A1
5. Good public transport if the new Cramlington Hospital goes ahead. ●



THE CONTRIBUTIONS on these pages are from each of the Prospective Parliamentary Candidates for the Wansbeck constituency whose parties have expressed an interest to SENRUG regarding transport-related matters during the recently-dissolved Parliament. The candidates were asked to write a column of up to 400 words on public transport policy, and where the contributions exceeded this word limit they been edited to fit the space available. They are reproduced in the order in which they were received.

SENRUG does not align itself with any political party and remains committed to working with all political parties—whether in office or opposition—to secure improvements in rail transport in this area for the community as a whole. ●

Northern Rail and PassengerFocus meeting

Representatives from Northern Rail and PassengerFocus spoke to SENRUG about rail matters in South East Northumberland.

CHARLENE KANE from Northern Rail (NR) and Kerry Williamson from PassengerFocus were special guests at our Committee meeting on 18th January at former SENRUG Chairman Ken Allot's house. A range of issues were discussed relating to Northern Rail, and a brief summary of the main points is below.

Extended Opening Hours for Morpeth Ticket Office:

Charlene advised SENRUG that the last trial had been positive but only just. However, it was pointed out that there had been no notice of the afternoon openings—SENRUG itself only being told the Friday before the trial started resulting in little publicity until well into the trial.

It is understood that whilst there was a negligible increase in sales in the first three weeks of the trial, the last three weeks had seen a significant increase. NR was therefore asked to consider the last three weeks' figures in preparing their business case.

Customer Information Systems (CIS):

Kerry said a new design of CIS system had been successfully trailed which could be installed for £1,000 per unit, i.e. £2,000 to cover both platforms at Morpeth or Cramlington. For this price, it was thought possible for SENRUG to persuade various bodies to cover the capital costs through grants. Charlene was asked to confirm the costs and also that NR would be able to cover ongoing maintenance and running costs if SENRUG could source the capital.

Manors: It has been a long-standing SENRUG objective to have every local train stop at Manors station throughout the day. Charlene said NR were not convinced and would need to

see a business case. SENRUG felt this was a great pity; not every train operator has the luxury of someone building a huge university campus next to one of their stations—the impact of which has been a 42% increase in passengers at the adjacent Metro station, now the fastest growing on the Metro network (according to Nexus).

Manors station also serves the up-and-coming artists' quarter of the city, as well as the quayside, and provides a better interchange with the Metro's Coast Line than Central Station. It was put to NR that the entrance to the National Rail station is not sign-posted and is very difficult to find, which does not help promote patronage at the station.

Morpeth Car Park Extension:

Charlene said she understood Network Rail had abandoned their plans to extend the car park. This was news to SENRUG (and sadly has been confirmed subsequent to the meeting). It means that the Council's complimentary scheme to improve the junction at Coopies Lane to allow busses to pull in to the station turning circle could backfire badly as the Council will need to yellow-line Coopies Lane, causing a growing parking problem to get significantly worse. We understand the Council are now investigating whether they can take the scheme over themselves.

Christmas Sunday Trains:

Charlene stated these had not proved commercially successful in 2008 which is why they had not run in 2009. Noting that this was another issue where NR's publicity machine had failed (their leaflets arrived too late and Morpeth was omitted due to a printing error; whereas on the other hand NR had declined

SENRUG's request to photocopy its own black and white leaflets, despite their former MD Heidi Mottram having said they would be pleased to do so), SENRUG asked if it had been a near miss or whether there was very little chance of seeing these services reinstated in future years, and whether the extension to Alnmouth had made any material difference to the overall viability. Charlene agreed to investigate.

On the positive side, Charlene stated that plans for the Indian Restaurant in the disused station buildings at Morpeth are now back on the agenda. NR is also interested in hearing from anyone who would be interested in running a coffee cart or kiosk at

the station—contact details can be provided on request. So, if you are looking for a business opportunity, do consider whether this could be an opportunity for you!

IN SUMMARY, although SENRUG's relationship with NR is extremely constructive and as a company they do appear to value the contribution from such campaign groups, there are a number of issues that are not being progressed as quickly as would be ideal. Indeed, those who can remember the earlier committee meeting back in 2006 with Steve Butcher (former NR Area Director, now interim Deputy Managing Director) will be aware that almost the same issues are being raised nearly four years later. ●

« **ABT Charters, continued from p1**

worked on the old Blyth & Tyne line and was shedded at Blyth. The train is scheduled to visit North Blyth, then hauled by diesel up to Ashington and possibly Lynemouth.

On 16th October the Railway Touring Company's charter will be hauled by LMS Jubilee 5690 *Leander*, which, after visiting the ABT will proceed on to the Weardale Railway.

MEANWHILE, SENRUG continues to plan a further charter of its own. Details can't be given until negotiations are complete, but it will use a two-car diesel unit, just like that which

would run on the line were it re-opened. The event will be significantly different from our spectacularly successful charter in 2008, but still geared to promoting the re-opening campaign. If you represent a business or grant making body that would like to sponsor SENRUG's next charter, please contact our Chairman, Dennis Fancett, ASAP (email enquiries@senrug.co.uk or call 01670 825500). ●

Charter details are provided in good faith but please check with the organising companies concerned for further details.

What would you like to see in the SENRUG Newsletter? Would like to contribute to the next issue?

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