



Photo credit: Trevor Watson

2015 Start for ABT?

County upbeat on Rail future report by John Earl

A well-attended meeting at Morpeth Town Hall on October 17th heard Simon Reed, the County's Executive Member for Infrastructure and Environment, give a very positive indication of progress on many matters of concern to SENRUG members. The background is that rail use in Northumberland has gone up exponentially, from 1.3m journeys in 2002/3 to 1.9m in 2010/11. Morpeth went from 123K to 244K (3rd highest after Berwick and Hexham) and Cramlington went from 41K to 85K (the 6th highest).

Since then of course Morpeth has gone through the 250,000 mark which means that it is officially a "Category D" station and therefore out of danger from the point of view of the McNulty report and its cutbacks. It is already seeing changes that from the point of view of SENRUG are long overdue, but nevertheless very welcome. Lifts should be in place by the end of November, and information screens are planned to be ready for the December 2012 timetable change. In the new car park an extra 75 spaces are to be provided – with site clearance this month, expected completion is December. Simon acknowledged the need for information screens at Cramlington, and promised to lobby for them.

The aspiration for Morpeth is for an hourly InterCity service (XC and EC) with a half-hourly local service (Northern). The council is making the case for more and better trains, and will look at ideas such as the one recently put up by Transport Scotland for a semi-fast service, but they do not want to prejudice the present

stopping pattern. Support is there for reopening Belford station, which would certainly help with the morning commuter service.

There is concern about the ageing rolling stock, particularly on local services, and they would like to see more late night trains. The County Council shares SENRUG's concern about possible new franchise management proposals that may result in a loss of North East influence on the franchise. They felt that the Local services should not be included in the new East Coast franchise (see article on p. 3). The plans to restore passenger services to the Ashington-Blyth-Tyne line were going well under the present executive, Simon thought. A positive report including sound arguments and a business case was presented to DfT officials in August 2012, and a GRIP 3 costing study from Network Rail is scheduled for completion in Spring 2013. This will allow the Council time to request inclusion in the franchise specification as an option when the costings are known. The best service option is thought to be hourly during the daytime plus half-hourly peak time, and it was hoped that it would be self-financing in the long term, although it was obvious that capital grants would have to be sought for initial infrastructure. For the present ruling group it was thought that a scheduled opening in 2015 was realistic and would fit in with the franchise timetable; however, much would depend on the outcome of elections next year.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

As SENRUG approaches its 10th anniversary, we look back at some of the rail improvements achieved.

Northern Rail Stakeholders Conference

report by Trevor Watson



Photo credit: Trevor Watson

The attendance at this event in York on 13th November was some sixty delegates from rail user groups / councils representing the Yorkshire and North East areas. Richard Allan [Area Director Northern] outlined the purpose of the day. Key points I picked up in relation to SENRUG were: The performance of Northern is improving and in the Tyne/ Tees/ Wear area is 93.13% up 2.58% on 2011. The present Northern franchise extension will expire on 1st April 2014. The scope of the new franchise is not known yet i.e. are the Northern and Transpennine franchises to be combined?. Northern operate 2500 train services a day and passenger journeys are now up to 90 million per year up from 60 million 8 years ago. The average age of Northern's diesel fleet is 24 years. Two thirds of the fleet have been refurbished and some more units based in the North East are to have a make over soon, however one third of the Northern fleet are Pacers with no likely replacements in the cascade of rolling stock program pipeline yet. In the workshop session in the afternoon we were asked what developments we wanted to local train services. I suggested that they looked to providing a local Sunday service and an earlier weekday commuter train starting at Morpeth calling at Cramlington earlier than the overcrowded service presently starting from Chathill.

SENRUGGED!

With SENRUG coming up to its ten year anniversary, all the evidence is that we have lasted the course with the following improvements:

More inter-city services at Morpeth

- Major timetable improvements from May 2011, doubling of East Coast services with earlier morning and later evening trains
- Responded to DfT East Coast refranchise consultation calling for above services to be secured in the next franchise specification and more to be added.

Station facilities at Morpeth

- Lifts to both platforms now being installed.
- Customer Information Screens at both platforms now installed.
- Car Park extension now being built
- Facilitated discussion between Northern Rail and Morpeth Development Trust re restoration and bringing back into use derelict station buildings
- Facilitated discussion between Northern Rail and local business re opening of a "coffee cart" business at Morpeth station

Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line

- Worked with County Council to ensure scheme is highlighted as no 1 priority in Local Transport Plan
- Pursued with County Council who commissioned Demand Assessment Report as required by DfT procedure.
- Participated in meeting at which County Council reported findings of that report to DfT, and subsequent road tour of station sites with DfT officials.
- Secured commitment from County Council they will now proceed with GRIP 3 costing study, the next step after the Demand Assessment Report.
- Advised Wansbeck MP Ian Lavery re meeting he has been promised with Secretary of State to discuss the scheme
- Met with Managing Director of ARCH – The Northumberland Development Company responsible for the regeneration of Ashington and Blyth Estuary Enterprise zones – who is fully briefed and fully committed to the scheme.
- Corresponded with Blyth Valley MP Ronnie Campbell and secured his commitment to the scheme and the SENRUG approach.

Additional services Newcastle – Cramlington – Morpeth

- Suggested that the Liverpool – Newcastle TPE services be extended to Cramlington and Morpeth instead of lying idle for 55 minutes at Newcastle. This would complement the existing Northern Rail service and would create 2 trains an hour each way instead of one, also an evening and Sunday service
- Met with First TPE to discuss the proposals and secured their provisional support.

Local service north of Morpeth

- Campaigned for regular daytime services to Chathill and extended to Berwick with Beal & Belford re-opened.
- Alerted authorities that the Blue Sky Forest development at Widdrington will generate increased demand for local trains.

SENRUG Response to DfT Consultation on Next East Coast Franchise

SENRUG submitted a comprehensive response to the DfT on September 2012. Main comment was that the additional calls at Morpeth, introduced in May 2011, should be safeguarded by becoming a requirement of the new franchise. SENRUG also requested off peak services for Morpeth in both directions, since it is on the off peak services that the cheaper "advance" tickets are available. SENRUG also suggested DfT should establish a minimum standard of station facilities for smaller inter-city stations such as Morpeth which would include staffed ticket office, waiting room and toilets, Customer Information Screens (now being provided), bank machine and refreshment facilities. By coincidence, SENRUG has subsequently been contacted by a commercial vendor wishing to establish a refreshments trailer at Morpeth station, and directed the vendor to the correct contact at Northern Rail, indicating SENRUG's support for the initiative.

Because, at the time, DfT were considering merging the local service into the East Coast franchise, SENRUG set out in an annexe its aspirations for the local services. These are: Re-opening of Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line to Ashington and Woodhorn; Newcastle – Cramlington – Morpeth service to be doubled to half hourly, a north of Morpeth service throughout the day to Chathill and extended on to Berwick (with Belford & Beal re-opened), and Customer Information Screens at every station which would specifically include Cramlington.



Photo credit: Northern Rail



The photo of a landslide at Scremerston near Berwick during the September 2012 floods explains why Network Rail had to close the line during extreme weather.

FAIR FARES? It's getting worse!

Dennis Fancett, chair of SENRUG, gives a personal view

Morpeth to Aberdeen is the latest route where you'd be advised not to purchase the so-called cheapest fare you are offered, particularly if willing to travel on a restricted "advance" ticket but booking at short notice. Morpeth now has a direct service both to Aberdeen (departing 08.56) and returning, leaving Aberdeen at 18.16 and arriving at Morpeth 22.25. The need for the 5 minute dash through the building works across Waverley station to make the connection on the return journey was finally eliminated at the May 2011 timetable change.

But the fares situation remains confusing to the uninitiated. Savvy customers can get the best deal whereas the uninitiated might assume the deal they are offered is the cheapest and pay over the odds for their ignorance. As an example, on 25th November (at 23.00 hours), I used the East Coast website to look for the cheapest possible fare from Morpeth to Aberdeen, on the 08.56 departure, for the following Tuesday 27th November. This was shown as £30.35. However, if you book only as far as Edinburgh it is just £13.60. Book another ticket from Edinburgh to Aberdeen on the very same train (departs Edinburgh 10.27) and its £12.60. Total therefore is £26.20, saving £4.15. The East Coast website also allows you to select your own seat. By choosing the same seat for both journeys, you won't even need to move to another part of the train at Edinburgh.

You may think a £4 saving is not too much to worry about, but the trouble with investigating anomalies with "advance" fares is that it is difficult to prove the fares existed at any given point in time. This is a journey a member of our household makes regularly and on other occasions, we've been able to save £15 per journey by booking 2 separate tickets on the same train. And if you are making the journey twice a month, that's £360 per year.

On the same day, traveling from Morpeth to York on the direct CrossCountry service at 08.13 you'd pay £22.50 if booked as one advance ticket, but £4.90 to Newcastle plus £12.00 Newcastle to York on the same train, saving £5.60 (advance fares advertised on 25 Nov for travel on 27th Nov on the East Coast website). *Continued on the next page...*

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FAIR FARES? It's getting worse!

Continued from previous page.

Do the Rail companies actually know how stupid the fares system is? If there is any logic or reason behind it they have failed to articulate it. Does anyone actually care? Neither Government (DfT) nor national watchdog PassengerFocus have as yet flexed their muscles on this one. It's time for these anomalies to be sorted out. It should never be possible for it to be cheaper to buy two separate tickets for a journey on a single train. What about a "double the difference" payback scheme if such an anomaly is discovered? Supermarkets offer these sort of schemes so it is not impossible but would focus pricing and fares managers to think long and hard about what they are hoping to achieve through such fare anomalies?

DELIGHTFUL DESTINATIONS

Why not try - Sheringham?



The North Norfolk Railway goes from the centre of Sheringham to Holt along the coast. It preserves the line of the old Midland Great Northern Railway

An occasional series highlighting excellent places to visit by train that will not break the bank.

report by John Earl

*"**Sheringham** has a timeless unspoilt Norfolk charm and a stunning coastline but offers so much more. A haven for walkers with elevated woodland and heath, a dream for **Steam Railway** enthusiasts with one of the country's prettiest lines '**The Poppy Line**' and a joy for avid **bird watchers** amongst woodland and coastal locations. **Golfers** are well catered for to with a superb course overlooking the sea."*

Thus speaks the tourist advert, but believe me, it's all true! If you have never been to Norfolk, this is a good place to start. Nowhere in this little town is more than ten minutes from the station (walking), and if you add the beach and a large leisure centre with wave machine, there's plenty for the kids to do as well.

Single tickets start at £25.40 (Standard) or £32.80 (First) with a Senior Railcard, which is a great bargain for the distance travelled - this is one way to get some advantage from the fare anomalies mentioned by Dennis in the previous article.

If you want to go into Norwich, Wroxham or Cromer while you are there, the local trains go every hour and run right up to midnight – for a small town, a better local service than ours! Trips along the coast to watch birds or go to see the seals at Cley or Blakeney are easy with a regular coastal bus.

With its seafood stall run by Joyful West, a butcher called Icarus Hines and a hardware store that is nearly as comprehensive as Smalls, Sheringham is a bit of a "Morpeth on Sea", so if you like to feel at home on holiday, it's a comfortable place to be. And as for timeless, last time I was there an old man sold me some whittled wooden clothes pegs on the town square. Thinking I had missed an opportunity, I went back for more, but needless to say he had disappeared into thin air...

Please let us know what are your "Delightful Destinations".

STOP PRESS – SENUG in talks with Seaton Delaval developer

Our supporters in Seaton Delaval were quick to spot that plans to develop land for a supermarket may compromise a possible future station for the ABT near the road bridge. Following a public meeting that was halted at the last minute to allow County planners to "gather more evidence", SENUG has been asked to meet with the developers to discuss their concerns. Following a positive meeting, the developer has revised the plans to include additional space to accommodate vehicular and pedestrian access to the potential future location of the station.



On behalf of SENUG, we wish all our readers a Merry Christmas and a happy new year.

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

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