

South East Northumberland Rail User Group.

Newsletter 2. 29/10/2004

Over the last few days there have been several important rail related news items. Here are a few of them collected for your attention, and also a request for your support in fighting the proposed cuts to service included in the SRA's Inter City East Coast Mainline Franchise bid document.

1. Last Monday it was announced that Serco-Ned would be taking over the Northern Franchise from Arriva on 12th December 2004, a little later than the original 17th October date, but earlier than we expected.
2. On Wednesday newspaper speculation suggested that Serco-Ned might replace 25 year old Pacers with new cheap Chinese built rolling stock. It is good news that they want to replace old Pacers, but are these the right replacement rolling stock?
3. This is a letter which I have just sent to the local papers, highlighting our hopes for the local service when Serco-Ned take over.

Dear Sir,

When Serco-Ned take over running the local trains from Arriva on 12th December, what will change? Newer, faster, more comfortable trains on the line north of Newcastle would be nice. Better access for pushchairs and wheelchairs at Cramlington and Morpeth is a must, and electronic information screens and announcements at all stations would make travel even better. An end to different fares for the same journey, depending on where the journey starts would show sense too. Evening and Sunday trains to Cramlington, Morpeth, Pegswood and north: are we too ambitious or just making good environmental sense? Trains again running to Ashington, Bedlington and Blyth, well we can but hope.

South East Northumberland Rail User Group will be pressing for these improvements and more. If you wish to join our campaigns please write to: The Secretary, SENRUG, 28, Bracken Ridge, Morpeth, NE61 3SY. Membership is £5pa, with concessionary and corporate rates.

Yours faithfully,

Ken Allott

Chairman, SENRUG

4 GNER and other 3 other TOC's are beginning to worry about the diesel 125 HST trains, which are nearing the end of their useful life. They came into service in 1976, first west of London and soon after on the East Coast main line. Christopher Garnett, Chief Exec. of GNER, has warned the SRA that efforts to prolong their life are running out of steam. "I can't answer the question of when they'll start to go wrong, but suddenly you're going to get multiple failures." he said. The 1996 overhaul was only intended to keep the trains running until 2003. Rail experts believe it could take 10 years to design and build replacements. No replacements are assumed or planned by the SRA in the latest bid documents.

- 5 Many of you will be aware of your committee's recent efforts, writing to the local papers and highlighting the SRA's proposed cuts to our trains. We have also brought the cuts to the attention of Castle Morpeth and discussed the cuts with Northumberland County Council officials. We have lobbied the three Northumberland MP's along the route of the line and written to the Strategic Rail Authority on your behalf about their rumoured cuts to a number of the services currently operated by GNER. Now we officially know what is in the ICEC main line franchise bid document, we can start a more focussed letter campaign.
- 6 On Tuesday 26th John Earl and Ken Allott attended a pre-bid meeting with bidders Virgin/Stagecoach in the Royal Station Hotel, Newcastle, to discuss our wishes and concerns.

The Strategic Rail Authorities Inter City East Coast Franchise Stakeholder Briefing Document was issued to the bidders on 6th October 2004 and to the general public two weeks ago. It is available for viewing on the following web site: www.sra.gov.uk. The document is some 44 tedious pages long, however the issues most relevant to SENRUG rail users can be found on page 14 and in "Appendix Two: The Base Case Timetable Descriptor" on pages 38 & 39.

From this document the situation for Morpeth can be summarised as follows:

- (1) The 17.30 Kings Cross to Edinburgh will terminate at Newcastle. Bidders have been asked to "assume that passengers for intermediate stations to Edinburgh would change onto the 13.38 VXC service from Bournemouth to Glasgow Central, which would call additionally at Dunbar and/or the 18.00 Kings Cross – Glasgow Central, which would call additionally at Morpeth, Alnmouth and Dunbar".
- (2) 18.35 Edinburgh to Newcastle will be withdrawn. Bidders have been advised to assume that "passengers for intermediate stations to Newcastle would take the 18.00 (retimed 18.05) VXC service from Edinburgh to Birmingham New Street, which would call additionally at Dunbar and also provide a connection at Alnmouth into the local service"

You can see that there is no mention of Morpeth getting a direct service from Edinburgh as a replacement. Are they trying to gradually remove us from the Inter City network? Also, the re-timed Virgin 18.05 would still run behind the local service from Chathill to Alnmouth and not connect, unless the local service were also re-timed, which is not mentioned.

On 28/9/2004 the SRA stated:

"Contrary to speculation, the SRA has no plans to cut Cross Country services"

However the Virgin contract has years to run though it is subject to regular renewal. There have been no new formal bid proposals published for it yet, so the SRA can say this quite accurately. However nothing they have said so far commits the SRA to maintaining the service after a new contract begins.

The drawbacks of the proposed changes are easy to see, even if the local Chathill-Newcastle train is retimed.

*This would be an end to cheap return tickets to and from Edinburgh using the evening service, as three different Train Operating Companies would be involved.

*Would connections at Alnmouth be guaranteed if Virgin Trains ran late?

*Are Virgin Trains certain to run south from Edinburgh after 2006?

*Parents with children and buggies, people with luggage and wheel chair users would have extra loading and unloading at Alnmouth if travelling on south, a slow process. Would all trains have access for wheelchairs and ramps and would there be any staff to help passengers?

*Could passengers be stranded at Alnmouth?

IN ORDER TO PROTECT OUR TRAIN SERVICES, PLEASE DRAFT YOUR OWN VERSION OF A LETTER ALONG THE FOLLOWING LINES:-

(1) 17.30 Kings Cross – Edinburgh Proposals

- (i) Ask for clarification about the change – will the transfer from the 18.05 VXC service at Alnmouth onto the local Serco-Ned train be a guaranteed advertised timetable connection?
- (ii) Impress the need for the maintenance of the through service.
- (iii) Request that the wording of the SRA instruction to bidders be amended by deleting the words “/or” described above, so that the 18.00 Kings Cross to Glasgow definitely stops at Morpeth.
- (iv) Question the assumptions that the bidders should make. Assumptions for bidders do not guarantee a service for Morpeth users.
- (v) Remind that as part of the guarantee to a minimum level of service when the railways were privatised in the 1990’s the last through service to Morpeth had to depart from London between 16.30 and 19.00 and question why this vital link may be removed if the last train to stop is not the 18.00 GNER but the VXC Bournemouth train.

(2) 18.35 Edinburgh – Newcastle Proposals

- (i) Strongly oppose the proposed cut.
- (ii) Explain that it will badly affect Morpeth/Edinburgh travellers on their homeward journey
- (iii) Again question the assumptions that the bidders should make. Assumptions for bidders do not guarantee a service for Morpeth users.

(3) Security of other GNER (Intercity East Coast Franchise Trains)

- (i) Enquire what the future holds for the other trains not stipulated to be part of the minimum level of service, for example the Friday evening train from Kings Cross.
- (ii) Ask which services (if any) are proposed to be cut.
- (iii) If services are to be cut ask for the evidence to justify these cuts. It is claimed that the service north of Newcastle is only 20% full. Was this reading taken north of Morpeth or Alnmouth? No-one has seen a survey done between Newcastle and Morpeth. Is it from a survey, and when was it done or was it taken from ticket sales, which can be very misleading?

(4) Future of Virgin Cross Country Services north of York

The statement from SRA is badly worded and open ended. While on the face of it we might have nothing to worry about, equally we may have.

- (i) Does the statement mean that the SRA has no plans to cut any VXC services at all?
- (ii) For how long? Presumably there will be a tie in period with Virgin (as with all other train operating companies and the SRA) before termination of agreement

(5) Complain about the loss of cheap through tickets if the service is split between TOC's.

WHILE THESE POINTS MAY PROVIDE SOME USEFUL GUIDELINES FOR LETTER WRITING WE ARE CERTAIN THAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO THINK OF FURTHER QUERIES TO SUPPLEMENT THOSE DESCRIBED ABOVE. PLEASE ALSO REMEMBER that the proposed cuts have been drawn up by the SRA without any consultation with SENRUG or ARUP (Alnwick) or possibly any Rail User Group.

PEOPLE TO WRITE TO INCLUDE:

Alan Beith MP at the House of Commons.

Ronnie Campbell MP at the House of Commons.

Dennis Murphy MP at the House of Commons.

Alistair Darling MP Secretary of State for Transport at the House of Commons.

David Quarmby Chair of The Strategic Rail Authority, 55 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0EU

Robin Etherington First Group, Tall Trees, 11 Station Road, Hampton –in-Arden, Solihull B92 0BJ

Richard Branson, Brian Souter, Chris Green and Simon Bailey Virgin Stagecoach Group Room 27, West Wing Offices, Euston Station, London NW1 2HS

Christopher Garnett GNER Sea Containers House, 20 Upper Ground, London SE1 9PF

Iain Duff at the Rail Passenger Council email: iain.duff@railpassengers.org.uk

**Fran Critchley Rail Passenger Council North Eastern
email: fran.critchley@railpassengers.org.uk**

Leader of Northumberland County Council

Leader of Castle Morpeth District Council

Leader of Morpeth Town Council

One North East

Finally, an appeal to all keen photographers.

On Saturday 6th November a Hertfordshire Rail Tours specially chartered train will leave Newcastle at 12.50 and travel north to Benton, then leave the mainline, follow the Metro tracks a few miles and then head north to Newsham. From there it crosses the River Blyth on the viaduct, and heads for Bedlington Station, Hepscoth and Morpeth, returning to Newcastle on the main line. It will be travelling slowly, so it should be possible to leapfrog the train in a car and see it twice or more. It will then journey south through Newcastle to Ferryhill where it will leave the ECML and travel on 'freight routes' to return via the Durham Coast Line to Sunderland and back to Newcastle at around 16:50. SENRUG is keen for any photographers to get in touch with the secretary. We should like to use this event to help publicise our campaign to re-open the Blyth and Tyne line.

Prepared by Ken Allott on behalf of SENRUG, with the help of P Groves of the Alnwick Rail User Group.