



South East Northumberland Rail User Group. Newsletter 4. 23/03/2005

GREAT NEWS.

SEN RUG wins its fight to save the 17.30 Kings Cross evening train . GNER promise to keep running this service to Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick. They are also keeping the 18.35 train from Edinburgh to Alnmouth, Morpeth and Newcastle, more great news.

GNER has promised many useful improvements to stations and trains, better services for cyclists and for the disabled and better integration with other forms of transport. We promise to keep up the pressure for these and other improvements.

SEN RUG TALK

7.00pm 14th April.

Methodist Church Hall. Howard Road. Morpeth.

Colin Wheeler, an international rail consultant and an ex-British rail engineer will give a talk: “.....”

2 Dates for your diaries.

Next meeting:

7.00pm Thursday 21st April, Storey Park Community Centre, Morpeth.

AGM 7.00pm Thursday 7th July. Cornmarket, Town Hall, Morpeth.

Guest Speaker, Ruth Annison, Wensleydale Railway.

We should like to announce the late arrival of.....

At last, we can announce the arrival of the much delayed (one month) Inter City East Coast main line franchise from the SRA to us. It's a good job the SRA are not the people trying to run our railways! Oh, but of course they are! However under the new Railway Bill (see later) they, like some Train Operating Companies, will soon disappear, only to re-emerge in a new livery, the Ministry of Transport colours.

GNER have been awarded the 10 year franchise, as leaks to the Journal last month predicted. It is good news, as GNER have the experience and there will be much greater continuity, and no need for expensive repainting.

GNER's chief executive Christopher Garnett said: "Everyone in GNER is delighted to have won a new franchise. We look forward to building a bigger and better railway, running extra services with more reliable and more comfortable trains, and carrying many more passengers.

"I am very grateful for the fantastic support we have received from passengers across the route. We will be working doubly hard to repay the faith shown in us. I would also like to pay tribute to GNER's employees who have kept going during recent uncertain months and have continued to deliver an excellent standard of service."

SENUG says: "There are many important promises in this list of passenger benefits. We thank GNER for these and we shall watch keenly to ensure these benefits arrive in South East Northumberland."

Key passenger benefits and other highlights of the new franchise include:

- Continuation of the 17.30 departure from King's Cross running through to Edinburgh stopping at all existing stations including Morpeth, Alnmouth, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Dunbar.
- A £25 million station modernisation programme, including 900 extra car parking spaces, 400 extra covered cycle spaces, lifts at Newark and Grantham, and improved access at all 12 GNER-managed stations.
- Up to £5m investment over the franchise term in improving access to franchise facilities for the disabled.
- At least £3 million on measures to improve passenger security at stations, car parks and on-trains.
- An investment of up to £75m in GNER's fleet of diesel High Speed Trains. Together that would increase the size of GNER's fleet of HSTs from 10 to 13. £25m will be spent transforming the interior of every HST to bring them up to the same high standard of passenger comfort as GNER's rebuilt electric trains, known as Mallards. Further work will be undertaken to improve the reliability of the entire HST fleet.
- The completion of the rebuild of all electric Mallard trains by October 2005.
- The roll-out of GNER's innovative on-board wireless internet service to all trains by May 2007.
- A 90% punctuality target by 2010, including a contractual commitment to restore operational performance to better than pre-Hatfield levels. This to be achieved by a host of initiatives including:
Creation of a new Integrated Control Centre in York with Network Rail by September 2006.
£4 million on making the route more reliable, including further work on the overhead power lines.

- Lease of an extra rescue locomotive.
- Tackling fare evasion by a range of measures including automatic ticket barriers at Peterborough, Durham and Newcastle, supported by an additional 60 ticket examiners across the route.
 - Improved travel information to passengers with new information screens in nearby shopping centres, metro and bus stations, as well as real-time bus running information at stations.
 - Real improvements to transport integration, including new bus-rail links with through ticketing between Darlington and Durham Tees Valley Airport, Doncaster and Robin Hood International Airport, and Newark and Lincoln.
 - A new website detailing all aspects of the franchise services including facilities for cycles.
 - Improved conditions for the carriage of cycles on trains.
 - Through-bus tickets at key destinations along the line of route.
 - Investment in Taxi-Bus facilities for easy access to and from key stations for GNER customers.
 - Easier ticket purchase, including 50 new self-service fast ticket machines at stations and more online web and internet ticket sales.
 - 18 new Special Constables along the line of route.
 - A new early morning-peak service from Peterborough to London.
 - New half hourly London-Leeds services throughout the day.
 - A commitment to develop a newly electrified stretch of track south of Leeds, providing greater Leeds to London capacity.
 - Establishment of a new staff 'University' for the development of leadership, management and customer service skills and culture across the franchise.
 - £5m of investment in depot facilities.

GNER has operated the East Coast franchise for the past nine years, having been awarded it initially in 1996 for seven years. Subsequently a two-year extension was granted which expires at the end of April 2005.

The new franchise is for 7 years from May 1st 2005, with an automatic 3 year extension, subject to agreed performance targets being met.

Since starting, GNER now carries 34% more passengers on 22% more trains.

It has consistently achieved the highest passenger satisfaction ratings of any UK long-distance operator (according to the SRA's National Passenger Surveys) and has created the most reliable long-distance train fleet in Britain.

Secretary of State for Transport, Alistair Darling said:

"GNER is committed to improving punctuality and reliability of its services along the entire East Coast route. It will refurbish carriages and invest in stations, as well as maintaining the high levels of on board service. Extra staff will also be recruited to provide added passenger security.

"Improvements like this will encourage more and more people to travel by train along

the route."

Our only concern is that GNER may have been forced to bid too much, over £130m a year, to break the pattern of the SRA never awarding a franchise to the sitting TOC. If they have the worry is that we, the travelling public, will be the people who pay, not the GNER shareholders at its American parent company, Sea Containers. Perhaps those fares which can rise will have to rise, like walk on fares or cheap offers. Staff pay and conditions may be cut or staff reductions may be needed. The service to passengers may suffer. Trains may be cleaned less frequently. The pressure from the Ministry of Transport to cut trains north of Newcastle may return. We at SENRUG must be very vigilant.

Of course we hope that none of these may happen, and that GNER's revenues rise according to plan, enabling them to pay for the franchise. Their decision to retain our evening services gives us real hope.

This franchise was deliberately let by the SRA with no provision for replacing the rapidly ageing 125 fleet of diesels. Therefore GNER may be forced to run their 125 trains for much longer, as they get even older and less reliable. This smacks of short term expediency, not long term sensible planning. Long term planning was why the *Strategic* Rail Authority was set up, and here it has failed.

The East Coast main line is seen by the Treasury as a cash cow. SENRUG needs a government commitment between now and the election that the £1.3 billion raised will be spent here. There must be guarantees of investment on the East Coast main line. As a minimum we need electronic information boards at all stations and ramp or lift access to all station platforms for prams, wheeled cases and wheelchairs. Along the East Coast Main Line track bottlenecks must be removed and a much more robust overhead power supply installed.

Why is the Treasury so keen to raise money from our line? Well, we all know that the West Coast Main Line upgrade is over budget and that London CrossRail will be very expensive. I hope we, the poorer taken for granted voters in the north east, are not subsidising richer floating voters in the south east.

Oh yes there is, oh no there isn't.

The pre-election pantomime season arrived in February. Alistair Darling talked of trains transporting fresh air and the need to make cuts. Ironically, this was at odds with the sensible Community Rail Partnerships for these very same trains being discussed elsewhere in his Ministry. Then a leaked announcement gave details of a review of the Northern franchise. This instantly brought adverse publicity. It was followed days later by a rapid retreat, denials and cancellation of the whole review, or was that just a postponement until May 6th. Call me cynical but... We now know from further leaks that this survey will indeed restart after the election.

Why was a review of the new franchise included in the terms of the new contract, which only started on 12th December 2004. We can only suppose that the

Treasury are leaning on Alistair Darling at the Ministry of Transport. Small stations north of Morpeth may be at risk, so even more need for SENRUG vigilance.

If you wish to add your support to that of the RMT, who are asking for the present services to be protected, you could ring them on 0800 376 3706 and ask for their two postcards, which you can send to your MP and Alistair Darling. The RMT website is at www.rmt.org.uk.

Alternatively, you could write a letter on these lines to your MP:

Dear.....MP

The Strategic Rail Authority review of Northern Rail services could result in cuts, replacement of trains with buses and large fare increases. Passengers across the north of England have already suffered and there is no appetite for yet more cuts, replacing trains with buses or massive fare increases. Please support Early Day Motion 726, which asks for these services to be protected.

Yours faithfully,

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The Railways Bill.

Several summaries of this Bill and its likely effects have been published, including one excellent article in the February edition of Which Magazine. There are some useful changes and simplifications in the Bill, but also some worries.

- It takes the functions of the SRA back to the Ministry of Transport.
- It brings the TOC's and Network Rail together, so running the trains should be managed better.
- It gives Network Rail extra powers and duties. Their engineers will have to be much more passenger aware, perhaps a difficult task.
- The Rail Passenger Council, that peculiar beast, a Civil Service public watchdog, loses its regional forums and will shrink back to a southern headquarters. Will we still be heard?

However, the Bill does not always make it clear where blame lies when things go wrong, and we need to press for Alistair Darling to take overall responsibility.

Worse, it makes closing lines and removing services easier, as there will be no need to consider the effects on the passengers who use the services, when cuts are proposed. Maybe there are no plans for cuts at present, but the effects of the Beeching cuts in the 1960's are still being felt. Can we be sure that all future governments will always reject cuts to so called uneconomic services?

Why is there no assumption that new lines and services will be needed in the future?

Why is there no underlying assumption that there would be big

environmental gains if more people use the railway? The Bill seems to reflect the pervading pro-road culture at the Ministry of Transport.

The Ashington Blyth and Tyne Line.

A lot of thought and planning by Northumberland County Council officials has gone into re-opening stations at Blyth, Bedlington Station and Ashington. It was therefore very frustrating to learn last month that there was no funding for returning passenger trains to the line, as the money was all needed for London CrossRail. This is the expensive underground line needed to take passengers to East London and its Olympic Stadium. It is an excellent proposal, but why should we in the North East have to suffer?

However, one of our members, Trevor Watson, has made proposals which might overcome some of the objections, so watch this space.

Rail Excursion News 2005.

We are hoping to run our own excursion on the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line some time in July, more news as soon as we have it.

North East Railtours are running a rail tour to OBAN from Newcastle, Cramlington and Morpeth on Bank Holiday Monday, 2nd May. A class 37 will probably be used north of Edinburgh.

The departure from Cramlington will be at around 06.15, returning at around 23.15. You will have 3 hours or so to explore the town of Oban. Travel by the very scenic West Highland Line and Oban branches.

Adult fare £46.00 Child £37.00. First class and catering options are available.

For details contact North East Railtours on 0191 2523774 / Mr W.S.Miller, 30Glendale Avenue, Whitley Bay, Tyne and Wear, NE26 1RX.

Future Trips:

July 2nd ELY AND NORWICH

September 17th ROTHESAY

15th October AYR AND STRANRAER

2nd December LINCOLN for the Xmas market.

Support For Public Transport.

The British public call for tougher action on climate change in a survey published by the World Wide Fund for Nature on Thursday 24 March 2005. More than 90 per cent of the British public support tougher action on British business to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, according to a YouGov poll carried out for WWF.

Nearly half of people (46 per cent) would support increasing taxes to subsidise transport fares to encourage people to use their cars less.

WWF has released the poll as part of a campaign to press politicians to take tougher action to fight global warming, particularly in the run up to the general election. "It is vital that the next government makes the right decisions over the next parliamentary term. This poll gives politicians a strong mandate to make the tough decisions needed to reduce pollution from industry, housing and transport. Ignoring this issue is not an option."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5154196-103676,00.html>

GNER pays £1.3bn to retain east coast mainline

Mark Milner

Wednesday March 23, 2005

Guardian

GNER has won its battle to retain the franchise for the east coast mainline rail link between London and Scotland in the biggest deal in European railway history.

It has agreed to pay the government £1.3bn over the next 10 years and promised more than £100m in new investment to upgrade its rolling stock and stations.

GNER, part of the Sea Containers group, beat off competition from Virgin, Firstgroup and Danish group DSB to win the approval of the Strategic Rail Authority. Unions warned the deal announced yesterday could mean higher fares and cuts in jobs and services.

GNER played down fears that it would have to push travel costs up dramatically to fund its deal. Its chief executive, Chris Garnett, said: "Fares will go up but they will not go up in the big way people are describing." He said GNER had received "fantastic support" from passengers and would be working "doubly hard to repay the faith shown in us".

The company said it was aiming to fund its agreement by attracting more customers, especially on off-peak services.

"£1.3bn looks a scary number but it's a very achievable and very realistic figure," a spokesman said.

Average loadings were running at about 50% but GNER was aiming to push that to 65% over the next 10 years.

Under the terms of yesterday's agreement GNER, which paid the Treasury £22m a year under its previous franchise agreement, has been granted the franchise for the next seven years with an automatic extension of three years if it meets performance targets.

It has agreed to invest £75m in upgrading its high-speed trains, another £25m in stations and to raise its operational performance to levels above those seen before the Hatfield crash in 2000 with at least 90% of trains running on time by 2010. It will also increase the number of services between Leeds and London by developing a newly electrified section of track south of Leeds.

The transport secretary, Alistair Darling, said: "The government wants to see improvement in the quality of service to passengers as well as a good deal for taxpayers." The Rail Passengers' Council welcomed the SRA's decision as bringing "certainty and continuity". But its chairman, Stewart Francis, said it was not yet clear who would end up footing the bill, adding that GNER passengers "don't want to be stung with big fare rises to make up the gap".

"They will be looking to GNER to find alternative ways of growing their revenue. That way passengers can be confident that they are getting the bigger, more reliable and value-for-money railway that they have been promised."

Virgin's Will Whitehorn congratulated GNER. "They put in a very, very aggressive bid." He said Virgin had offered to pay in the region of £1bn for the franchise.

A Firstgroup spokesman said: "We had some excellent plans for the franchise which we are sorry we won't be able to introduce."

The rail unions expressed disappointment that the government had not taken the opportunity to return the east coast link to public ownership.

RMT leader Bob Crow said: "This is not good news for the travelling public or our members. This franchise should have been brought back in house. Instead we have the prospect now of higher fares, service cuts and a squeeze on our members' terms and conditions."

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<http://www.rmt.org.uk/C2B/PressOffice/display.asp?ID=1244&Type=2>

RMT welcomes MPs' call to defend Northern rail services

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FEBRUARY 23: A CALL by MPs to protect railway services in the north of England against service cuts, fares hikes and 'bustitution' has been welcomed today by Britain's biggest railway union.

A parliamentary early-day motion tabled by Manchester Blackley MP Graham Stringer, and supported by MPs from across the region, calls on the government to prevent any worsening of services, replacement of off-peak services with buses or job losses threatened by the Strategic Rail Authority's review of Northern Rail Services.

"The SRA told us that the new Northern franchise would deliver better rail services and bring an end to uncertainties over rail services ion the North of England," RMT general secretary Bob Crow said today.

"Barely three months later it seems that everything is up in the air once more and that rail services and jobs could be cut and fares might go through the roof.

"The North of England needs more and better rail services, not less and more expensive ones.

"Graham Stringer is to be congratulated for tabling this motion, and every MP who wants to see our railways grow and develop rather than suffer a slow death from Beeching-style cuts should sign it," Bob Crow said

Early Day Motion 726

That this House notes Strategic Rail Authority plans to review service and fare levels on the Northern Rail franchise; is concerned that the review will lead to higher fares, replacing off-peak rail services with buses, line closures and job losses; further notes that the Northern Rail franchise has only operated since December 2004; believes that SRA assurances that the new franchise would "deliver greater value for money to taxpayers" and "bring to an end any remaining uncertainty over the future shape of rail services in the North of England" have been cast in serious doubt; and urges the Government to use its powers under the Railways Bill to oppose any line closures, job cuts and bustitution proposals which may arise as a result from the review

["http://edm.ais.co.uk/weblink/html/motion.html/ref=726"](http://edm.ais.co.uk/weblink/html/motion.html/ref=726)