



NEWSLETTER – DECEMBER 2006

The last 6 months have certainly been busy for your SENRUG committee, with a number of important developments impacting on passengers and potential rail travellers in South East Northumberland.

The period started back in the summer when Northern Rail suddenly announced that they would be keeping Morpeth's ticket office open in the afternoon, for an initial trial of 3 weeks. It would be nice for SENRUG to take the credit for this initiative, but actually our thanks must go to Betty Greener, the ticket office clerk, who had managed to persuade Northern management this was the right thing to do. Betty then went on to work all the extra hours herself, for the benefit of local rail customers. SENRUG has written to Northern Area Manager Steve Butcher commending Betty and asking him to thank her for her initiative.

But there was hardly any advance notice of the extended opening hours, and SENRUG were worried the initiative would flop if no-one knew about it. It must be remembered that the ticket office being open also gives access to the toilets and waiting room, means that advance purchase tickets can be bought or different rail travel options discussed with a helpful member of staff. So SENRUG took it on themselves to publicise the extended opening times and got coverage in the local press. As news filtered round, the number of people buying tickets in the afternoon increased. The trial was extended for a few further weeks – which Betty also manned - and we understand unofficially that by the time the trial eventually finished, sufficient ticket sales were being generated to make Northern think about extending the opening hours permanently. We are still waiting to hear the formal response.

Next up was SENRUG's AGM at which we welcomed Dr Paul Salvesson, Director of Community Rail at Northern, as our guest speaker. Paul gave a very upbeat "can do" talk in which a number of new initiatives were hinted at. There can be no doubt that Paul, who previously led the Association of Community Rail Partnerships, is a real ally of those looking to improve rail services in a local area.

Following the meeting, I wrote to Northern asking them to introduce a trial Sunday service on the line on the Sundays running up to Christmas. And the result is ... they have! This is an astonishingly positive result for both Northern and SENRUG as these services have been introduced without any additional DfT subsidy. It is up to us, the rail passengers in the area, to ensure these services are fully used if we want to see them return next

year, or even made permanent. I particularly draw to your attention the A1 will be closed between Stannington and Seaton Burn on Sunday 17th December – so if you're planning a shopping trip to central Newcastle or MetroCentre please do take the train. Please also note the time of the return trains from MetroCentre have changed slightly; they will now leave at 11.25, 13.25, 15.25 and 17.25. Northern's first Sunday service on 12th November was greeted with a welcome reception from SENRUG with Town Crier Alec Swailes in attendance, and a steam organ playing fair ground music for the whole morning (which attracted many people to the platform to find out what all the fuss was about)



SENRUG wishes to thank Morpeth Co-op for donating the free mince pies and Express Taxis for letting us use their office for making teas and coffees. Special thanks also to Janet Macleod Trotter for baking her own cakes decorated with Northern's logo, which impressed Wayne Dixon, Northern's area manager present on the day.

Meanwhile, SENRUG and RailFuture member Trevor Watson had been beavering away with Virgin, arguing that there were gaps in the timetable that would allow more Cross Country trains to stop at Morpeth. Again the result has been positive. Virgin Cross Country have announced a further 2 trains each way (bringing total to 4 on Monday to Fridays) will serve Morpeth from 10th December 2006.

Virgin's commitment to Morpeth was further demonstrated on 9th November when Brian Johnson, Cross Country's Franchise Director was the guest

speaker at SENRUG's next public meeting, which attracted a record turn out of over 40 guests. Brian gave a brief history of the development of the Cross Country network, going right back to the days of the former regional companies before nationalisation under BR, then followed through with the developments initiated by Virgin since privatisation. Brian's talk was followed by a lively question and answer session.



Whilst all this has been going on, SENRUG have continued to plug away at the question of level access to Morpeth's northbound station, and also re-opening the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line. We can cautiously report positive developments on both of these fronts. With regard to the level access issue, SENRUG is in the process of obtaining quotes for the provision of a ramp, and also applying for grant funding to cover the costs. OK, you might think this is something the rail companies should be doing themselves, and we agree. But at the very least this step will help us to know how much money we are talking about, and if the grant application is successful we will of course be pressing the rail companies to proceed.

As far as Ashington, Blyth & Tyne is concerned, Trevor Watson's proposals for re-opening the line in managed phases has finally caught the attention of Northern Rail. Phase 1 is simply to extend the existing services that terminate at Morpeth down the line to re-opened stations at Choppington and Bedlington. This we believe can be done within the time currently allowed for the train to sit in the siding at Morpeth, and Northern Rail are now actively looking at it. True, it won't serve Ashington, but if we can get this first phase working again, it will focus everyone's attention on full scale re-opening to Ashington and quite possibly a new station at Woodhorn Museum as well, once people will see what can be done.

Notwithstanding 2006 being a very positive year, the following 12 months will produce a number of challenges for SENRUG and rail passengers. First of all is the fact that whilst Virgin have been so responsive in seeing the case for a regular inter-city service from Morpeth station, the fact is their contract to run Cross Country expires in November 2007 and at present we don't know who will be running the service after that. As the Morpeth stops are voluntary, it's possible that the new operator – if not Virgin again – may reach a different conclusion about Morpeth and cut these stops. SENRUG tried in vain to get the DfT to specify a

minimum number of Morpeth stops in the new franchise contract – but the best we have been able to achieve is a brief statement that some trains must call at some of the stations in Northumberland. We have also been making the case for Morpeth to the other bidders which are First Group, National Express and Arriva.

Then there is the fact that GNER have hit major financial difficulties and have announced they can no longer afford to run the East Coast Main Line at the price they originally offered. Obviously, the DfT can not simply agree a lower price as this would be unfair to the other companies who spent millions of pounds producing a bid, but didn't win as their price was lower than what GNER had promised. We understand (see *The Times* 27/11/06) the DfT will allow GNER to continue to run the service until they can repeat the bidding exercise – which could take as much as 2 years. The problem here for Morpeth users is that when the DfT let the franchise last time, they did not include a requirement for the evening northbound service from London which calls at Morpeth (the 17.30 from Kings Cross). On winning the Franchise, GNER announced they would honour this stop voluntary. Firstly then is the possibility GNER might now try to cut this train (ie terminate it at Newcastle) to save money, and secondly, once again we will have to fight the DfT to ensure the requirement is definitely included in the new franchise document it will now prepare, so we don't lose it from 2008.

So, once again, a positive year in 2006, but the possibility of much of our hard won improvements being lost in the next 12 months. We need to remain vigilant, and become a much stronger organisation. We desperately need to say we are speaking for more members, so if you or a friend would like to join SENRUG please send your name, address and email with a cheque for £5 (£2.50 unwaged) to Coral Patmore our Membership Secretary at 11 Campion Way, Ashington, NE63 8JG.



Finally, as your new Chairperson from this summer, I would urge you to contact me with any suggestions for new campaigns, attracting new members and new funds, or offers of help. SENRUG members are welcome to

all of our committee meetings, whether you are willing to serve on the committee or not. You can contact me by email on dennis.fancett@btopenworld.com or by phone on 01670 825500.

The Committee would like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Please do remember to use the Sunday trains for your Christmas shopping in Newcastle or MetroCentre.

**Dennis Fancett, Chairperson, SENRUG
South East Northumberland Rail User Group**