



NEWSLETTER – SEPTEMBER 2007

ABT HOPES RISE AS SENRUG MEETS MINISTER

SENUG Chairman Dennis Fancett was invited to Westminster recently (18th July) to meet Rail Minister Tom Harris to discuss the first phase of re-opening the Ashington Blyth & Tyne (ABT) line to passengers. The plans, put forward by SENRUG, are for a phased re-opening starting with the short section from Morpeth to Bedlington via Choppington. A recent report confirmed the scheme is viable and a relatively low cost way to bring huge regeneration benefits to this area.

The meeting was facilitated by Wansbeck MP Denis Murphy who particularly requested a representative from SENRUG be present. Others present were the North East Assembly’s Development Board Chair, Cllr Dave Ledger, and transport manager Dave Marshall as well as David Laux from the County Council. The Minister told the delegation they had been “doing the right thing” to get as far as they had, with



From left to right SENRUG chairman Dennis Fancett, David Laux, Cllr Dave Ledger and Denis Murphy MP at the House of Commons.

the detailed feasibility study completed. He also expressed himself “intrigued” by the scheme and commented it was in line with the Eddington philosophy, as it used existing rail assets. He asked to be kept informed of developments.

Overall, the ministerial meeting was considered very successful with the Minister extremely positive about the project. Of more concern is the recent announcement that the North East Assembly will be abolished. Up till now it has been the NEA who have been driving this scheme forward, and we are waiting to see whether whoever takes over will push it with the same level of commitment.

LETTER TO THE LEADER

SENUG received several letters from the Leader and Chief Exec of Northumberland County Council about their new plans for a single authority which they claim will result in a saving of £17m each year. As these plans have now been accepted, we have written to the new Council Leader Cllr Peter Hillman asking if some of this saving can be used to fund the ABT re-opening. (ABT option 2 needs just £100k per year plus £4.1m capital). The letter also pointed out a number of areas where we feel the Council’s leadership in rail matters has been rather lacklustre.

ASHINGTON BLYTH & TYNE EXHIBITION

Our exhibition on the ABT re-opening plans has recently been at Choppington Welfare and Bedlington Station

Residents Association. It is now at Hirst Welfare in Ashington. If you have suggestions of venue which would be willing to host the exhibition, please contact Dennis Fancett who will make the arrangements.

THE RETURN OF ARRIVA

Many people in South East Northumberland will be surprised to find they will be saying goodbye to Virgin, who will hand the Cross Country rail franchise over to Arriva on 11th November 2007.

The perception here in the North East is that Virgin had done a very good job, in particular having demonstrated their willingness to listen to SENRUG’s case for inter-city stops at Morpeth. Nevertheless, at the end of the day it’s about who offers the Department for Transport the best value for money, and this is obviously where Arriva scored

SENRUG were invited to hear presentations from all 4 bidders on their plans for the franchise. Whilst it was not the quality of these presentations that won them the franchise, it must be said that Arriva’s was probably the most comprehensive, in particular in terms of creating more capacity to relieve the existing overcrowding problems.

A further feature of Arriva’s presentation is that they stated they were committed to bus – rail integration. However, a few years back Arriva also



ran the Northern (local) rail franchise, and during this time they made absolutely no attempt to integrate the bus services (also Arriva) with their trains. So, we have already written to Arriva asking them to demonstrate this commitment by having the buses pull in to the station turning circle at Morpeth. A reply has been received, non committal as yet but we will keep pushing. SENRUG is of course determined to build a constructive and mutually beneficial relationship with Arriva as operators of the New Cross Country franchise, and so far, the evidence suggests Arriva feel likewise.

BYE BYE GNER

The East Coast Main Line franchise, currently operated by GNER, also goes to a new operator. National Express will take over from 9th December 2007.

A criticism of the current GNER operation was that (apart from getting their sums wrong) it did an awful lot for Leeds but not much for anywhere else in the country. This allowed niche players like Grand Central to announce their London - Sunderland service, which GNER complained would bite into their Newcastle revenues. But, if there are that many

passengers for Sunderland, why didn't GNER think about a Sunderland service themselves?

National Express do not seem to have fallen into this trap. Their commitment to start a new London – Lincoln service proves they are thinking about other towns – including places where a rail market needs to be re-established. Lets hope the possibility of more Morpeth services on the East Coast Main Line is not sacrificed for the objective of cutting a few minutes off the London – Edinburgh times. It only needs a selection of trains throughout the day to get to Edinburgh as quickly as possible. Many of the remainder could make additional stops at Morpeth. SENRUG's input to the DfT consultation made suggestions of when extra Morpeth stops were needed and a copy of this document also went to National Express.

MORPETH STATION RESTAURANT

Plans have been submitted to convert some of the redundant station buildings at Morpeth into an Indian Restaurant. These plans can be inspected at the FirstCall office in Morpeth. John Earl has already seen them and thinks that overall, they will enhance the station, though inevitably there will be some disruption whilst building work is carried out. In general SENRUG welcomes anything that brings life into the station area.

NEW FROM NORTHERN

Just over 18 months ago SENRUG met Northern managers and made several suggestions for improving local rail services. It's taken a long time coming, but 2 of SENRUG's suggestions have now been acted on. Northern's first northbound service of the day now stops at Cramlington at 06.12. This train arrives Morpeth 06.17, Alnmouth 06.37, and Chathill 06.53. Change at Morpeth or Alnmouth for following GNER service to reach Berwick at 07.14, Dunbar 07.38 Edinburgh 08.06, or (in winter months) Glasgow 09.25. Or you can now return to Cramlington from Newcastle in the early morning, leaving Newcastle at 06.00.

Secondly, Northern DUO tickets are now available from Morpeth and Cramlington (2nd adult goes half price). For some unknown reason they were not before. Cramlington's Help Point has finally been fixed, and the station has new signs saying which platform is for which direction (though Morpeth is still waiting for these).

But we are still waiting for Northern's response re the opening the ticket office at Morpeth throughout the day (we are told the business case is still going through) – see item *Travellers Tales* below, and on the question of every train stopping at Manors. In general though we enjoy a positive relationship with Northern Rail and are regularly participate in their stakeholder events – the last one, held on a special train to Whitehaven, was much enjoyed by those who went.

TRAVELLERS TALES

Recently we needed to travel to Aberdeen urgently at late notice. GNER offer some reasonably priced tickets as late as up to 6 pm the day before travel, representing a significant saving over the walk-on fare. Although we could see these tickets available for sale on the web, the system would not sell them to us. This was because, travelling the next day meant there was not time to post them out. There is no *Fastticket* machine at Morpeth, and the rail companies no

longer let you order tickets in advance and collect them at the ticket office. Of course, we could not pop down to the station to buy the tickets over the counter since the ticket office at Morpeth is closed in the afternoon.

I phoned GNER but their unhelpful response was to buy the tickets from Newcastle. This would have meant leaving Morpeth at 07.20 to get to Newcastle in time to collect the tickets, and then getting the train back which stops at Morpeth at 08.55, and paying extra for the privilege.

Surely there must be a better way? There is, but you have to be pretty savvy to work it out. Buy a Megatrain ticket for £1 to Edinburgh on the Virgin service 50 minutes later. This can be bought on the Megabus website and you don't need a paper ticket so no problem about being unable to pick it up. Then back to the GNER website to buy a saver return Edinburgh to Aberdeen (Scotrail) and a further single Edinburgh to Morpeth (for the return journey). These tickets can be collected at the *Fastticket* machine at Edinburgh. The overall price even worked out cheaper!

But come on rail companies; it's not good enough for advance tickets to be available for sale but passengers unable to buy them because the ticket office isn't open.

ENGINEERING WORKS

Trevor Watson reports that engineering works are being carried out on the line every weekend from 15th -16th September through to 3rd - 4th November 2007. No trains will run north of Morpeth on these dates. GNER services to Edinburgh will be diverted via Carlisle and there will be coaches connecting Newcastle with Morpeth, Alnmouth Berwick and Dunbar. On Saturdays 27th October and 3rd November Newcastle – Cramlington - Morpeth trains will be replaced by coaches

PETITIONS

Have you signed our petition on the re-opening of the ABT line yet? We have 600 signatures so far, but would like a 1000 before the deadline which is next April. Get your friends, family and work colleagues to sign at <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/ABTreopening> We've become aware of some other worthy petitions too. The government subsidises bus companies by paying for senior citizens to get free bus travel. Yet it does not do the same for rail travel (not even local rail journeys). If you think that's unfair then sign at <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/FreeSeniorsRail> ASLEF have set up a petition to ban 60-ton lorries from British roads. Heavier lorries mean roads become more unsafe and extra money has to be spent on repairing them etc. Rail is a much better option for bulk freight. Sign at <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/Ban60tonlorries/>

JOIN SENRUG

A year's membership of SENRUG still only costs £5, or £2.50 for the unwaged. To join, send a cheque payable to SENRUG to John Earl at 28 Bracken Ridge, Morpeth, NE61 3SY. Can we also urge existing members who have not yet renewed their subscription for 2007/08 to similarly send a cheque to John.

Dennis Fancett, Chairperson, SENRUG. Email dennis.fancett@bopenworld.com or tel 01670 825500