



By Dennis Fancett

THE Department for Transport is now consulting on the specifications for the new Northern and TransPennine Express rail franchises, which will start from February 2016. The new franchises will run for 8-10 and 7-9 years respectively.

The franchise specifications include the minimum train service and facilities the new train operator must legally provide. It is therefore vitally important that requirements for better rail services in South East Northumberland are included in the DfT specifications. The consultation represents a once in a decade opportunity to win a better rail service for this area.

These franchises cover a significant geographical area and the DfT is likely to receive conflicting and competing demands from a number of sources. SENRUG is urging as many statutory and stakeholder groups and other interested parties to respond to the consultation. SENRUG's own bold proposals were set out in Newsletter 21 Summer 2013 (page 2) – available at www.senrug.co.uk. SENRUG has also produced a separate leaflet setting out its aspirations.

The consultation document is on the DfT website* and along with both an email and postal response address.

Responses must be received by **17th August 2014**.

For both the recent East Coast and CrossCountry franchise consultations, Northumberland County Council did not make any response directly to the DfT, and in each case the new specification subsequently published by the DfT called for fewer services than this region currently had. We now have a new transport policy team at the Council and they have assured us they will be submitting a robust response to the DfT. SENRUG is also urging other organisations to do the same to maximise the chances of securing real service improvements in South East Northumberland.

*See www.gov.uk/government/consultations/future-of-northern-and-transpennine-express-rail-franchises.

Responses can be sent to:

NorthernTPEconsultation2014@dft.gsi.gov.uk

or to the postal address given in the document itself. ■

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Local Schools get involved with the campaign to re-open the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line

Ashington, Blyth and Tyne Update

By Dennis Fancett



Photo credit: Darren Jensen

NORTHUMBERLAND County Council finally held its Stakeholder Meeting on the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line Re-opening Project, a move SENRUG had been pressing them to make for some time – on 27th May 2014. Committee Member Andrew Carmichael represented SENRUG.

The current status is that the GRIP 1 Study has been completed and the Council now need to contract with Network Rail for the GRIP 2 and 3 studies. GRIP (standing for Governance for Rail Investment Projects) is an internal Network Rail acronym, GRIP 3 is the point at which the best solution is chosen and GRIP 4 is when the costs of that solution are produced – ie the amount the full re-opening will cost. Once that money is committed, Network Rail then deliver the scheme and the final stage – GRIP 8 – is trains running.

SENRUG is delighted the Council now appear to be fully committed to progressing the project – we have been campaigning for that for 10 years, so it is pleasing to note that commitment is finally in place.

There are however still some differences between the Council and SENRUG's approach. The Park & Ride Station at Woodhorn only seems to be a possibility in the Council's eyes whereas SENRUG sees it as essential. Not only would it serve commuters from villages such as Newbiggin, Linton, Lynemouth and Ellington, but it would create an flow of off-peak traffic into Woodhorn during the day, a luxury few commuter railways have, and as such SENRUG believes the Woodhorn station would increase the commercial viability of the line.

SENRUG also believes that both Seaton Delaval and Seghill need and justify their own station. There is no convenient bus or safe walking route between the two communities.

The Council have noted SENRUG's concerns but are warning they predict that only one of the two stations can be justified.

By far the greatest SENRUG concern however is the time and money it takes Network Rail to complete the studies, and the eventual price tag for the scheme as a whole. SENRUG is concerned Network Rail will over-engineer the scheme, and in doing so, make it too expensive to justify. Even with regard to the GRIP 2 and 3 studies, SENRUG believes much of the work has already been done in earlier Council commissioned reports and should not need to be done again.

Whilst re-signalling the entire line might be a great idea, SENRUG argues it is not essential to re-introduction of passenger services and should not be included in the cost of the project. Equally, SENRUG argues that the track as it stands today is of sufficient quality for passenger trains and does not need wholesale replacement. Within the rail industry as a whole, there appears to be no competitive pressure on Network Rail to keep costs down or meaningful way to challenge or scrutinise their costs. ■

Coffee Comes... But Seats Go



SENRUG welcomes the arrival of a Coffee Cart business at Morpeth Station. We have long campaigned for refreshment facilities and the new Cart, which we'll told will be open from 06:00 to 12:00 Monday to Friday, hits the spot. We hope the business does well. But looking for somewhere to drink your morning mocha? Unfortunately, the seats on the London bound platform have recently disappeared. They were moved to make way for the new wind shelter but never re-instated. SENRUG has taken this up with Northern Rail. ■



Join our Facebook group:
facebook.com/SENRUG

Schools Working on ABT Competition

By Dennis Fancett



FIVE Schools in the region are participating in SENRUG's competition to make a DVD, 7-10 minutes long, setting out the business reasons for re-opening the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line.

The Schools are King Edward VI and Collingwood in Morpeth, Northumberland C of E Academy and

Hirst Park Middle in Ashington, and Cramlington Learning Village.

The competition is designed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the withdrawal of passenger services in November 1964 but in a forward thinking way that focuses on the improvements re-introducing passenger trains would bring.

A cash prize of £250 to the winning school and £50 to two runners up has been promised by The Arch Group – The Northumberland Development Company, and SENRUG has also obtained sponsorship from East Coast, CrossCountry and Northern Rail to take a team of 4 students from the winning school to Westminster to present their DVD to their constituency MP, and have a tour of Northern Rail's Control Centre at York on the way.

Wansbeck and Blyth Valley MPs Ian Lavery and Ronnie Campbell have both expressed their full support for the competition and willingness to meet the school delegation at parliament should it be a school from their constituency that wins. Both MPs also strongly support the re-opening campaign itself.

As Chair of SENRUG, I have been invited to visit the schools and / or meet some of the students working on the competition, and have been overwhelmed with the quality of the work and enthusiasm and interest of the students I have met.

The competition is designed to get school students thinking about rail transport, how the rail industry is organised, and also about the role of MPs and government.

The competition judges will be Ian Arkle, Editor of The News Post Leader, Pete Myers, Northern Rail Stakeholder

Manager and Dennis Fancett, Chair of SENRUG.

SENRUG will show the different schools entries and announce the winner at a special SENRUG public meeting in Morpeth Town Hall on **Friday September 12th**, so book the date in your diary now. ■

Edinburgh Trams Are Go!



Trams now connect Edinburgh City Centre with Edinburgh Airport. Sadly however the nearest stop to Waverley Station – St Andrews Square – is perhaps just a little further than someone with a heavy suitcase might want to walk (and it's uphill!). Those arriving by train from Northumberland which is going to Glasgow, Aberdeen or Inverness will find Haymarket station an easier interchange – a fact Transport Scotland seem to be keeping quiet about. ■

Join SENRUG

IF you support our work, please join us. The more people we speak for the louder our voice is heard. Annual Rates are £5 individual or couple, £2.50 concession or £10 corporate. Send a cheque payable to SENRUG with your name, full address including postcode and email address (if you have one) to SENRUG Membership Secretary, PO Box 75, Morpeth NE61 2WG. Or to pay by standing order download a Membership Form from www.senrug.co.uk ■

DfT Declines to Back Down on East Coast Franchise Spec Failings

By Dennis Fancett



SENUG was disappointed the DfT's specification for the new East Coast franchise did not include any of the improvements for South East Northumberland that SENUG had been asking for. In some areas, the minimum service level enshrined in the specification is for a worse level of service than operates today. SENUG raised this with the DfT, and at the same time Ian Lavery MP for Wansbeck raised it with The Secretary of State.

The morning connection from Morpeth to the Flying Scotsman service allowing arrival in London by 09:40 is not a franchise requirement but there is still a requirement to have an early morning departure from Morpeth and for operational reasons it is most likely this will still connect at Newcastle with The Flying Scotsman.

The later Friday only northbound service from London (departs Kings Cross at 19:30) is not a franchise commitment and it will be up to the commercial discretion of the new operator to retain this. The other 2 evening services (currently at 16:30 and 18:30) remain as a franchise commitment.

The new specification calls for fewer Sunday trains at Morpeth in both directions than the station has currently. The DfT did not comment on this in their response. Neither did they comment on SENUG's point that the new franchise does not mandate any improvements to train services at Morpeth, but said they would not make any amendments to the franchise specification.

Other concerns raised by SENUG were clarified by the DfT. On Saturdays, the new operator must still run two northbound services from London to Morpeth, but will have more flexibility as to the timing of these.

Three operators are bidding for the new franchise, these

are First Group, Keolis / Eurostar and Stagecoach / Virgin. The winner will be announced in November and will take over the running of East Coast services from March 2015. First Group requested a meeting with SENUG during their preliminary bid preparation to hear our views. The other two bidders have not invited to SENUG to any consultation or had any form of dialogue with us. The last two times the franchise has been let (to GNER and National Express) the winning bidders were subsequently unable to meet their franchise commitments and abandoned the franchise. For this reason, trade unions and a number of other groups called for the franchise to continue to be operated by government owned East Coast; but this plea was rejected. ■

Delightful Destinations with North East Railtours

By John Earl

HERE in the North East we are used to being a target destination for the many railtours from the south, since comparatively few start from here. An exception is Bill Miller's North East Railtours, using coaches and staff from the Bo'ness Railway near Edinburgh. In an era when a full dining service is nearly extinct, there can be few more delightful experiences than being served wine and a full evening meal while watching the sun going down as the train climbs over Shap, as we did on the Windermere trip last year. I decided to ask Bill Miller, who runs the trips, how they got started, and I was astonished to learn that they have been going over 40 years.

"I actually started with the Whitley Bay Horticultural Society running a special DMU from Haltwhistle in connection with our annual show on the Links in Whitley Bay," says Bill. "That was in 1973. These ran until 1978 when the Metro started and by the final year it was an 8 car set."

"The first loco hauled train was in 1974 from Tynemouth to Spalding with a class 40. From then until 1982 we ran 2 or 3 per year but in 1983 BR ceased to run Merrymakers and offered us the chance to run some of the trains already planned."

"We took on a Newcastle to Oban which was most successful with over 600 passengers and an annual trip to the West Highlands has been run ever since."

Bill acknowledges that stations like Morpeth and Alnmouth have always been very important to the business in serving the local communities, and I can vouch for the fact that although you usually have an early start, there is nothing like starting a long trip from your own station. To find out more, contact Bill at: 0191 2523774, or E mail:- billmiller@tiscali.co.uk. ■

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

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