

Your society's future

Birmingham forum

Report by Bill Collins, Nigel Cripps, Nick Dibben and Andrew McFarlane

Ways of changing RDS to make it more effective as the leading campaigning organisation for rail were discussed at a forum in Birmingham on 18 September.

The starting point for the discussion – which involved 35 members from 12 branches, including members of the national executive – was how RDS might deal with problems of retaining national executive members and the slow progress in establishing a permanent office with the associated full time staff.

The meeting heard about the difficulties of finding office accommodation at a price that RDS can afford and briefly discussed whether it is appropriate to accept an office that is subsidised by a firm involved in the rail industry or a trade union.

Many present were keen that the society should transparently retain its independence. (Editor's note: This discussion took place shortly before the office deal was finalised.)

The need for and function of committees

It was noted that more money is spent by the national executive on committees than branches receive in subvention. A number of speakers questioned the need for national committees and suggested the funds would be better spent if they were used to finance branch activities.

Not all supported this blanket approach and specific, useful tasks undertaken by committees were mentioned.

Some national committees received support at the meeting while others were not mentioned at all or comments were made by members who had resigned from specific committees because they believed they were not making a useful contribution to the society.

A recurring theme was that communication is poor and that even if the committee is doing useful work it is wasted unless there is a good communication route to branches.

Summing up, the leader of the discussion suggested that things are not right and some

change is necessary. Committees need clear objectives including a mechanism for measuring performance so that value for money judgements can be made.

A role may be to provide technical and specialist support to branches, coordination and relieving the national executive of detail work thus enabling it to concentrate on policy matters. There must be an effective flow of information to the activists in the branches.

Costs and funding

Some branches are very short of money and their campaigning is being handicapped. Other branches do not have this problem either because they need to campaign less or undertake specific fund-raising activities. There was agreement that fund-raising activities use time that should be allocated to campaigning for rail.

A crucial issue is increasing membership. Income has been lost because there are fewer RDS publications. The *By Rail* series had proved to be a useful way to promote rail travel and provide income to branches. Many members wondered whether funds could be released by scrapping committees and diverting money to active branches.

There was little support for the status quo or for basing subvention on branch membership numbers. A fair procedure is needed which delivers the resources to the branches where their level of activity means that they require more funds to service their members and to campaign.

The meeting was advised that the national executive is currently considering proposals for changing the arrangements for distributing funds to branches.

Representation on national executive

Since its foundation RDS has elected officers and members of the national executive by a secret ballot. Originally this was by members at an annual general meeting. Last year for the first time a postal ballot was held – and will be held in future.

It was apparent that branches without a member on the national executive felt disadvantaged, the problem mentioned repeatedly was that the flow of information was

unsatisfactory in both directions. No one suggested that the present arrangement was perfect but there were suggestions that the branch liaison officer arrangement should be given longer to function properly.

Unlike the other topics discussed it was apparent that there was a divergence of views on this issue. Generally the farther members live from the Home Counties the keener they were for change.

A particular problem is that the railway industry has recently changed from a national organisation to a regional one. This regional structure crosses the present RDS branch boundaries.

A further issue is devolved government. The Welsh and Scottish Assemblies are responsible for transport and some parts of England have, or are establishing passenger transport authorities which have some regional powers over transport planning.

It is not in the gift of RDS to shape the future structure of the railway industry or the emerging patterns of regional government. Some thought the current arrangements were satisfactory, others suggested the appointment of national officers by election and the national executive membership on a regional basis.

One idea was one member per branch, but some felt this would lead to the executive being too large and a more satisfactory arrangement would be to group some of the smaller branches together.

The meeting concluded that branch delegates should meet before Christmas to discuss options for the future and a further meeting before the next annual general meeting to allow any proposed changes to be presented and voted upon at that meeting.

Conclusions

It is difficult to change any organisation but there are extra difficulties for a voluntary organisation. RDS has no control over the structure of the railway industry and the emergence of regional government. Change is coming to the society's structures. The overwhelming impression is that RDS has a large, able, active membership that wants to campaign vigorously for rail within an effective organisation.

New rail partnership fund under pressure

By Chris Wright

The Government's rail partnership fund is welcome but its budget of £100 million – spread over three years – is inadequate.

In Oxfordshire, Grove-Wantage Road and Kidlington are two prime candidates for funding, both having been developed since 1990 and rejected for funding in the past.

Costs have risen from £350,000 to over £1 million.

Grove would remove 600 Didcot journeys a day and 600 Oxford trips a day, 30% of journeys along the route. Oxford-Bristol hourly trains pass the station site and a public consultation found most locals in favour.

Kidlington would attract 600 users a day and slash peak-hour journey times into Oxford from 25 minutes to six minutes.

Oxfordshire however are under the impression that it is unlikely to succeed with its two bids because the RPF will be rationed out. The East-West rail link phase one proposals have been submitted to the Strategic Rail Authority and it is reported that a basic Bedford-Bletchley-Oxford service has passed the preliminary examination.

Phase one would deliver a 60mph single track link which would serve neither Milton Keynes Central nor Aylesbury.

The queue for funds includes the Leamside line in county Durham, Ferryhill-Gateshead, the Ivanhoe line, Leicester-Coalville and Ashington-Newcastle.

Funds will also be sought to prime the planned Chelmsford-Basingstoke service.

An array of viable and desirable schemes is emerging to promote a real alternative to the car but £100 million over three years will not be enough.

Good schemes are almost certain to be rejected unless more funds are provided.

Waiting for action

Improving public transport can have a key role in reducing the amount of the PM10 and nitrogen oxide pollutants in Britain's urban areas, it was found in a study by consultants W S Atkins for the Government. Along with other measures, these pollutants could be reduced by 70% in central London. Only the political will is now needed. People with breathing difficulties will be waiting to see what action is taken.