

# Battle for rural rail

By Jonathan Bray

The rural rail campaign is gathering pace. Although neither the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority or the Government has yet come off the fence on rural rail they can now be in no doubt of the strength of feeling on this sensitive issue, and of the scale of the likely opposition to any moves against the rural and local rail network.

RDS members have played a key role in raising the temperature.

Many MPs have now written to transport ministers following requests from their RDS constituents and 103 MPs have also signed up to Parliamentary Early Day Motion 672 in support of rural rail.

At a national level a string of meetings has taken place with key decision makers.

Among those lobbied face-to-face by the big three pro-rural rail groups (RDS, Save our Railways and Transport 2000) are Sir Alastair Morton, Tory transport spokesman Bernard Jenkin MP, the Countryside Agency, Environment Minister Michael Meacher and the Downing Street Policy Unit.

The case for rural rail was also strongly made in evidence from all three groups to a House of Commons Select Committee enquiry into the Government's rural white paper.

One of the most important of these meetings was held on 22 September when Alan Bevan, Jonathan Bray and Paul Salvesson (of the Association of Community Rail Partnerships) met Franchise Director Mike

## The Virgin look for Cross Country



**Bombardier Transportation was showing artist's impressions of the new diesel trains it is building for Virgin Trains' Cross Country services at the Railtex show at Earls Court, London from 30 November to 2 December. Alstom and Fiat are also building trains for Virgin. After years of waiting for the upgrade, first deliveries are expected next year and 125mph running should start on the West Coast main line in 2002 with tilting trains operating with the Train Protection and Warning System. By 2005 there should be 140mph running with full Automatic Train Protection.**

Grant and head of franchise management Nick Newton.

Our delegation argued that the shadow strategic rail authority should be more positive and learn from the many success stories at home and abroad of how rural rail can be turned around.

Rather than subsidise low frequency poorly used services, why not spend the money instead on hourly frequencies, proper promotion and on developing community rail partnerships?

We could learn too from the regionalisation revolution on local rail services currently sweeping mainland Europe.

Across Europe it is increasingly common for regional authorities to take control of their local rail services and deliver higher frequencies, fares initiatives. Increased investment and higher ridership usually follow.

Mike Grant and his colleagues

were clearly in listening mode, keen to look at all the options for the future of the regional network up to and including micro-franchising.

It was a largely positive meeting but still no strong commitment was made to the future of rural rail services. A matter for the Government, they said.

So the campaign goes on. In the pipeline are plans for a short glossy document making the case for rural rail, a House of Commons adjournment debate, another Early Day Motion and meetings with Ministers.

RDS members who have written to their MPs really have helped ensure that rural rail is now registered on parliamentary and ministerial radar screens.

For those of you who haven't yet got involved, a rural rail action pack is available from Save our Railways, 15 St John's Hill, London SW11 1TN

The Railway Development Society is an independent voluntary body

**Media inquiries:** Campaigns director Alix Stredwick, Roman House, 9/10 College Terrace, London E3 5AN  
**Tel** 020 8981 2992

**Fax:** 020 8981 2994

**Mobile** 0771 2471411

**Email** [AlixStredwick@rds.freewire.co.uk](mailto:AlixStredwick@rds.freewire.co.uk)

**Website**

<http://www.rds.freewire.co.uk>

**General enquiries:** John Lee, The Birches, Eye Lane, East Rudham, Norfolk PE31 8RH

**Tel** 01485 528088 (and fax)

**Chairman:** Steve Wilkinson  
52 Manor Park, Histon, Cambridge CB4 9JT **Tel:** 01223 563672

**General Secretary:** Trevor Garrod,  
15 Clapham Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk NR32 1RQ **Tel:** 01502 581721

**Membership secretary:** Elisabeth Jordan, 13 Arnhill Road, Gretton, Corby, Northants NN17 3DN

**Membership:** £15 per year; pensioners, students and unemployed £7.50; user groups and parish councils £15; other local authorities £30; companies £40. Families £2 extra per member, after £15.

### Railwatch

is edited by Ray King,  
4 Christchurch Square, London  
E9 7HU

**Tel** 020 8985 8548

**Fax** 020 8985 8212

**Email** [Railwatch@argonet.co.uk](mailto:Railwatch@argonet.co.uk)

Subscription supplies (£4.50 annually): Alan Cocker, 11 Franklin Road, Ipswich, Suffolk IP3 9DX

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