

Bright future for Cambrian

By Chris Magner

A bright future is being signalled for rail services in Shropshire and Mid Wales.

A new partnership of local authorities, the Welsh Development Agency, Central Trains and Railtrack, has been formed to transform the future of the railway west of Wolverhampton.

In a radical move, local authorities are supporting an infrastructure strategy for the routes between Wolverhampton, Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth and the Cambrian Coast and also Shrewsbury, Wrexham and Chester.

The infrastructure strategy proposed by Central Trains and Railtrack could see the creation of a new passing loop at Dovey Junction and line speed improvements which will allow a complete re-shaping of the service pattern.

This would include the ability to double the train service between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth to an hourly service, increase in the Machynlleth-Pwllheli service, and double the current two-hourly Shrewsbury-Chester service.

The aim is to reduce overall journey times and improve connections at Shrewsbury and Machynlleth between long dis-



A new Turbo emerging from Manton tunnel, Leicestershire, in the new livery of Central Trains which is one of several operators to have taken delivery of two and three-car versions of the class 170 trains. They look good and go well but some passengers complain of cramped seats

tance and local trains. The improvements will cost around £5m.

Central Trains is already kick-starting the project with changes planned during 2000 and the partners will seek bulk funding over the next two years.

Commenting on the proposals, Montgomeryshire MP Lembit Opik said: "The partnership is a momentous step forward to improve the region's rail ser-

vice, with two notable elements. First the agreement between authorities, Central Trains, Railtrack and the Welsh Development Agency that we can create an hourly service and update rolling stock.

"Secondly the willingness to create a consortium that will actually make this happen."

Central Trains managing director Andy Cooper said: "Our proposals will transform the

railway across Mid Wales and the Marches.

"It is crucial for all local authorities and agencies to speak with one voice.

"This consortium will provide a platform for this exciting strategy to attract the necessary funds.

"It also demonstrates the determination of local communities to have a rail service fit for the future."

Bikes – another test for SRA

The rail companies' commitment to the principle of integrated transport is often in doubt.

Although they pay lip service to the idea of carrying bikes on trains for instance, they often make it virtually impossible in practice.

Soon we will see how effective the Strategic Rail Authority is in helping to implement sensible policies. It is boasting of taking an active part in procuring trains for Connex South Central and South West Trains (1,500 vehicles) to replace the slam-

door trains on safety grounds. But those very trains which the SRA wants to replace are the ones which are most flexible in carrying bikes as well as prams, pushchairs and luggage – in their guards vans.

The space allocated for bikes in the latest 170 Turbos is completely inadequate and South West Trains has deliberately reduced the amount of space for bikes on its Wessex Electrics which, although serving holiday destinations, now have no space for large luggage.

Many trains now have less lug-

gage space than a road coach! ScotRail, which ironically won a Cycle Mark, was also reported to be considering reducing bike space on some of its trains. The North Wales coast line now has bike-unfriendly 158s.

Virgin by contrast has said it will provide for bikes on its new trains. With all the public money going into helping it run a better service, future provision should be better than it is now.

The SRA must specify that in all new trains there is room for bikes – preferably four bikes per carriage but at least two. That means on a four car train there should be at least eight spaces for bikes and preferably 16.

There are now constant complaints from families who want to leave their cars behind and take their bikes on the train that they are met with an array of rules and some rail officials determined to prevent them.

And the train operators continuing drive to cram as many people as possible into a train means that it is becoming

more difficult for people travelling on business to work on trains and more difficult for a family to find a table.

Most people who travel by train want to sit at a table but many train operators continue to insist on shoe-horning us into airline-style seats. Eurostar is one of the worst offenders.

This is where the SRA should insist that the train operators' selfish financial interests should take second place to the passengers' desires and needs.

Travelling in Switzerland, Germany and France reminds the rail traveller that we are being deliberately squeezed in more ways than one by the operators. This is largely the result of privatisation.

In fact it is in the rail companies' long-term interests to give people room to breathe. If they don't, the growth in rail travel will be short-lived.

Some passengers are already being driven away – in their cars.

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