

Local action



North West

By Robert Cummings
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Metrolink The branch has expressed support for extending Metrolink to Manchester Airport, Stockport, Ashton-under-Lyne, and Rochdale via Oldham. However, we have objected to the proposed permanent closure of the existing route between Oldham Mumps and Oldham Werneth. This should be used for a faster Metrolink service, avoiding Oldham town centre, for those stations beyond Oldham which currently enjoy a relatively fast heavy-rail service to Manchester. It could also be retained to allow future freight and rail tours, or the possibility of extending Metrolink towards Greenfield. Other concerns extend to the loss of through ticketing, and the closure of stations at Dean Lane, Oldham Mumps and Oldham Werneth.

The Hellifield and East Lancashire Partnership (HELP) seeks to establish a return service for the Carlisle-Settle-Clitheroe-Blackburn-Bolton-Manchester-Manchester Airport route as part of the Northern franchise. This proposal has the support of Railfuture North West.

Colne-Skipton A campaign has also recently been launched to reopen the line between Colne and Skipton, providing another much needed Transpennine link. This campaign is supported by the branch, which has welcomed the introduction of a Sunday service between Manchester and alternately Colne and Clitheroe this summer.

Electric poser Merseytravel has become the franchising authority for Merseyrail Electrics. Concern has been expressed that Merseytravel does not have the same duties as

the SRA regarding freight, but local authorities along with EWS and Merseytravel have united to develop opportunities, particularly at the new Twelve Quays ferry terminal in Birkenhead. It is hoped that the proposed franchising arrangement will not create further problems for our desire to extend third rail electrification. Bidders, including Keolis and Arriva, have been sent our aspirations for the franchise which is due to start in early 2003.

Silent station The branch is unhappy with Railtrack's Major Stations plan to have a "silent station" experiment for a month at Manchester Piccadilly in September. The plan is not to have any announcements apart from platform alterations and announcements of late-running. A member of the North West RPC (who is partially-sighted) has called the move "a disaster". Railtrack claims the system

works well at Manchester Airport (which does not of course operate a walk-on service) and that Railtrack does not have time to announce all of the trains. Disabled groups have never accepted the arrangement at the airport.

Midlands

By Alan Bevan
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Barriers up On Tuesday 11 June ticket check barriers were reinstated at Birmingham New Street station in an effort to combat the estimated 7% of rail passengers travelling without tickets. Central Trains are employing an additional 24 staff at the barriers and in due course an assessment will be made of the benefits of installing automatic ticket barriers at West Midland stations.

New Street plans A £150million plan has been put forward by

The second in the Iron Road series has been published by Wayzgoose. Iron Road to the Highlands is available from refreshment trolleys on board ScotRail trains, as well as bookshops, through the Amazon website and at tourist information centres. The 44-page book includes

route plans, moody pictures, maps, a gazetteer, a gradient profile as well as historical, rail and tourist information. More information from Wayzgoose, Park View, Tatenhill Common, Staffordshire DE13 9RS. Tel: 01283 713674. Email: wayzgoose@wayzgoose.org.uk



Railtrack to double the size of the passenger concourse at New Street. Passenger numbers are predicted to increase beyond the capacity of the station floor area which could oblige Railtrack to introduce control measures at peak times. However official responses to the plan are mixed. At track level, plans exist for additional platforms and interim improvements for New Street costing some £31million. A scheme for a deep-level New Street tunnel and platforms for local services are forecast to cost £1.3billion. To cope with the future volume of trains a group of private developers is proposing an alternative scheme for a brand new station in the Proof House-Curzon Street area. The scheme envisages a surface-level 17-platform station to be called Birmingham Grand Central which would operate in conjunction with New Street. Grand Central was supported by Central Trains as part of its previous rebrand bid and is considered a more affordable scheme.

Old Moor Street Chiltern Railways and the Bull Ring developers are proceeding with renovation of this terminus station - disused since 1987 - and aim to reopen tracks to two platforms by summer 2003 and link both the old and new stations with enhanced facilities.

NEC station Birmingham International Airport and Virgin Trains have suggested that the name of Birmingham International rail station should be changed to Birmingham Airport for NEC.

Cross-City Six From September 2002 the Birmingham Cross-City line will increase its train frequency from four to six trains per hour at the busiest stations, having benefited from a grant from the Strategic Rail Authority's rail passenger partnership fund.

Snow Hill 150 On Sunday 6 October exhibitions and other events are being held at Birmingham Snow Hill station to celebrate its 150th anniversary. The Midlands branch aims to have a stand there.

Some members will recall that the former Railway Development Association not only objected to the 1972 closure of the original Snow Hill station but also devoted considerable endeavour lobbying for a modern local rail service along the full Snow Hill route which eventually culminated in the new Moor Street and Snow Hill stations being opened in October 1987, and the remaining

Jewellery Line stations being opened in September 1995.

50 Years In November it will be 50 years since the Railway Development Association was founded and Railfuture is now hoping to mark the occasion with a modest celebration which will also acknowledge Frank Hastilow's long service and our debt to founder Owen Humberstone Prosser.

Blockade From 10 August to 8 December the West Coast main line will be blocked for engineering works at weekends and all passengers will travel in road coaches between Milton Keynes and Hemel Hempstead. A Silverlink electric shuttle service will operate to and from Euston incurring an additional hour or more travel time. Members will of course be aware that alternative services Midlands exist in the form of Midland main line and Chiltern Railways.

Metro conflict The branch is seriously concerned about proposals to give the Wednesbury-Brierley Hill Metro extension two tracks at the expense of the existing railway which would be restricted to single track for five miles. This severely hinders the ability of this NE-SW railway to carry increased freight and passenger traffic in the future. Railtrack will allow only one freight train per hour on this route. However because the route has generous widths we have been able to show Centro and others, in detail, how far more twin track can be accommodated. Our scheme calls for two bi-directional metro lines of 870 and 760 metres and we note that the successful Croydon metro network has many bi-directional lines varying from 500 to 1,100 metres in length.

Not only does the Midland Metro extension bring restrictions to the existing railway but official plans also show that the Metro would unnecessarily obstruct space available for future twin rail tracks by misaligning tram stops and tracks across the potential rail formation and by widening cuttings and bridge spans sufficient only for three but not four tracks. These permanent obstructions are quite unnecessary. They reveal a disregard for any long-term future development of the heavy-rail route and a very blinkered intent to maximise provisions for Metro at the expense of the longer distance and cross-conurbation railway.

Although space exists to secure a strategic twin-track railway, our exhortations to the passenger transport authority, council-

lors and Centro to modify the Metro plans have so far been ignored. It seems that the strategic rail route and a much-needed 30-mile rail service is being knowingly sacrificed to give monopolistic dominance to a local metro. Is the Brierley Hill Metro scheme so precarious that a vital and invaluable existing double-track railway asset has to be sabotaged and permanently obstructed by a supposedly far-seeing transport authority? What, you may also ask, is the SRA doing to protect the longer-term capacity requirements of this rail route?

London

By Richard Pout
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Crossrail consultation This almost seems to be a foregone conclusion with the Strategic Rail Authority having set out certain routes and eliminated others, like the High Wycombe line, favoured by both London and Thames Valley branches. Our concern is that some options now proposed are adding hundreds of millions to the cost, and this could again jeopardise the project if another

downturn hits the economy. The commitment to Shenfield is welcome, but if services on the Great Western main line beyond Hayes are now dependent on six-tracking, this plan could encounter problems in the Ealing and Hanwell areas. Six tracks over Brunel's grade one listed Wharncliffe viaduct is fraught with problems!

West Anglia The West Anglia route modernisation programme is slowly moving on to the Lea Valley line. Despite strong lobbying from local authorities and users, the scheme is still not finalised. There are plans to review train working at Cheshunt, with most Southbury loop trains terminating there and not continuing to Hertford, avoiding conflicting moves at this busy junction. Peter Stapleton of National Express London Lines group is now working on an rail passenger partnership bid for the project, based on our "back of an envelope" sketch!

Our campaign to restore services to Lea Bridge and Stratford is now regarded as fundamental to easing capacity

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at Liverpool Street in the short to medium term. The £18million scheme to reinstate the Chingford link via the Hall Farm curve and reopen Lea Bridge station awaits a funding commitment from the SRA.

Hertford loop Following the Potters Bar crash, Hertford line passengers again suffered the loss of virtually all weekday trains while the main line was cleared. We plan to work with the users group and other interested parties, including support from pro-rail consultant Reg Harman, to develop a Hertford Loop upgrade package.

Along with signalling and line speed improvements, passing loops, at least 300 metres, and maybe up to 1 kilometre long are possible within existing railway boundaries at Gordon Hill, Enfield. Moorgate services which will come into London Metro can terminate there, while other trains use the new "through loops" following the line of existing bay platforms. All platforms could then be extended to 250 metres to take 12-car trains. Eventually the Hertford loop might come into the Thameslink network. Loops are also possible at Hertford North. This could provide much-needed extra capacity south of Hitchin, before Thameslink services come on stream, hopefully by 2007, and ahead of the long term upgrade planned at Welwyn.

Yorkshire

By Peter Davies
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Leeds Work has now finally been completed on the Leeds First scheme and the new roof provides a much lighter environment for passengers. New escalators have been provided with lifts for the disabled. A new footbridge gives access to all the main platforms, and delays on the approach to Leeds from the west are now hopefully a distant memory.

Pacer The Pacer continues to be with us. West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority has authorised the refurbishment of the existing Class 144 units. The seating is very much improved but the vinyl floor will make the surface dangerous in wet weather. The bulkheads by the entrance doors do not allow the conductor to see who is boarding and alighting at the stations. Eventually, all the train companies will see sense and seek the opinion of passengers before embarking on any refurbishment schemes.

Mirfield Fears are being



Photo: Paul Sampson

A seat was unveiled at Halesworth station on the Ipswich-Lowestoft line on 22 April in memory of Ian Carter who died last year.

As well as being Railfuture East Anglian branch treasurer for many years, Mr Carter had also been a founder member of the East Suffolk Travellers' Association whose chairman Trevor Garrod organised the project which raised over £800 to pay for the elegant Victorian-style seat.

The East Anglian branch contributed £50 towards the cost and other contributors included the town council, Barclays Bank and several local voluntary bodies as well as many individuals.

ESTA celebrated the 125th anniversary of the Felixstowe branch line and the 30th birthday of the East Suffolk Travellers' Association (Felixstowe) with a special

train. Thanks to a co-operative attitude from Anglia Railways, a Grand Tour of East Anglia was put together with a three-car Class 170 train on Sunday, 26 May. It called at Felixstowe, Trimley and Derby Road and

Ipswich, and then ran non-stop via Ely and Thetford, bypassing Norwich to

Cromer, where the train reversed before finally calling at Sheringham. All seats were sold. The train carried a headboard and most passengers chose Cromer as their destination. Several took a tour on the North Norfolk Railway from Sheringham to Holt. The return journey was via Norwich and Ipswich.



expressed that the station may have to close for a lengthy period so that the island platform can be provided with a ramp to allow disabled access.

Bradford The public inquiry inspector's Report into the proposed new shopping centre is awaited. A submission was made by the Yorkshire branch requesting that consideration be given to a direct rail link between Bradford Interchange and Bradford Forster Square.

A future rail strategy for Yorkshire The strategy document has been submitted to the Rail Passengers Committee for North Eastern England for consideration, together with a submission from the North East branch of Railfuture with regard to the North of England franchise.

It is intended that both documents will be combined and submitted to the Strategic Rail Authority.

Arriva conductor's dispute One-day rail strikes are continuing to affect rail services in the Yorkshire area, and it understood that the dispute may con-

tinue until the expiry of the franchise in February 2003.

Branch meeting The next branch meeting will be held on Saturday 21 September at the Trinity Methodist Church, Powell Street, Castleford, starting at 13.00.

Thames Valley

By Chris Wright
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We are still waiting The rail authorities are failing to get their act together on the East-West rail link which British Rail was about to reinstate 10 years ago. The class 159 diesel units which were earmarked for the service in 1992 went instead to South West services. The latest episode in the saga in 2002 saw another rail passenger partnership bid for funds go to the Strategic Rail Authority, this time for an Oxford-Bedford service. SRA chairman Richard Bowker has said this link may have potential for reopening.

The South East Regional Assembly has more faith in the rail link. It should be a regional priority because orbital move-

ments are currently overly dependent on the private car. In the assembly's transport strategy, Milton Keynes is seen as an area for further population growth. Railfuture remains frustrated that a key reopening scheme costed at £31million has not yet been given the go-ahead. The failure is an indictment of both the SRA and the Government.

Thameslink West The SRA and the Government have also both failed to protect the Thameslink-style service to Milton Keynes which now has a population of 250,000. The Rugby-Brighton service was cut back to Watford in June, provoking protests from 400 rail users.

Kidlington Another long-running campaign is awaiting official action. Reopening Kidlington station was first found to be feasible in 1986 at a cost of £350,000. Now another study is being carried out with a view to a funding bid. Costs have escalated to £1.4million. Railfuture and Oxfordshire County Council continue to press for the station and the county council has allocated



£400,000 for Kidlington and a station at Grove-Wantage Road.

Chiltern vision The reinstatement of double track from Aynho Junction to Bicester North should be completed this month after a £60million project promoted by Chiltern Railways which has impressed both Railfuture and the public with its forward thinking. Its Bicester taxibus also looks like being a success. Now Railfuture would like to see Chiltern commit itself to operating an Aylesbury-Milton Keynes service as part of its new franchise.

Busway Railfuture's hopes of a rail service returning to the Bourne End-High Wycombe route are threatened by proposals for a busway on the trackbed, which is being suggested by the Wycombe Society and some councillors.

South Wales

De Cymru

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Wales & Borders franchise In April the Strategic Rail Authority issued its guidance on what it is looking for and how it will assess the bids. For what is termed *The Enhanceable Franchise*, it puts forward a baseline proposal (the existing timetable) to which various increments can be added.

The enhanced base proposal: This proposal requires bidders to provide at least the same mileage as at present. However, having met the Passenger Service Requirement and the Additional Service Commitments, they can "re-deploy" the remaining part of train mileage "if they can thereby increase overall passenger benefit". A definition of this, and how it will be assessed, is not offered. ASCs are mainly confined to the Cardiff Valley lines.

To some extent this has already been happening, as seen by the present operator's service cuts west of Cardiff (see previous *Railwatches*) while increasing services on the Marches Line. The latter gains from a level of service well in excess of the PSR (but which is not protected under ASC). This hardly augurs well for development of services in the more rural areas in the west of our branch. We question whether the right balance can be achieved in this way between the understandable (and welcome) desire by the train operator to develop and expand services on the main inter-urban



London's Docklands Light Railway, which started life with a dubious reputation, is now on the expansion trail.

The latest £115million extension, from Canning Town to London City Airport and North Woolwich will provide a 22-minute link between the City and the airport. Work will start later in the year.

New stations will be built at West Silvertown, Pontoon Dock and King George V (North Woolwich).

Now the DLR has applied to the Government for a Transport and Works Order for a further extension under the River Thames to Woolwich Arsenal, where by 2007 it will provide links to mainline services.

Other possible new projects include a line from Canning Town, north to Stratford International, and from Gallions Reach north-east to Barking Reach.

routes, and the need for the more rural services to develop their full potential.

The flexed base proposal: In this proposal, bidders can offer suggested enhancements which can be achieved for the same overall franchise payment line (our emphasis).

The enhancement options proposal: Here, bidders can suggest enhancements which they would commit to if additional funding becomes available. However, they must provide for two specific enhancements: Ebbw Vale reopening and the South Wales integrated fast transit consortium proposals for the Valley Lines network. The latter are essentially for improved train frequencies to take advantage of infrastructure enhancements being provided mainly at public expense.

This is good news, but it is emphasised that the SRA will

only "purchase" these enhancements if they pass a test of value for money and if funding is available. The lack of mention of the Vale of Glamorgan service does not worry us unduly as it has been awarded rail passenger partnership funding. Under the baseline proposal bidders are required to commit to continuing any RPP schemes already approved, and to price for their continuation after the end of the support period.

Aspirations: Bidders are invited to set out proposals for further enhancements which they might wish to develop later in the franchise term (15 years).

The closing date for bids was 12 July and a shortlist of three is expected to be announced later this year. We will continue to monitor developments closely, but it is difficult to be optimistic. It sounds very much like the mixture as before, with the 1994

timetable – quirks and all – still enshrined as the basis for another 15 years!

Other franchises The baseline option for Wales & Borders (see above) requires bidders to allow for a future expected reduction of Cardiff-Penzance through services as a result of timetable changes planned by Virgin Cross Country. The branch committee will be evaluating the Virgin changes when the winter timetable is published and we can see the full effects of what Virgin is doing – including the effect on other services. Also mentioned is the possible future transfer of Cardiff-Waterloo services to "another operator". We would prefer this not to be the same one as runs the main Swansea-Paddington service, First Great Western. The Waterloo route, apart from being a convenient way to reach various destinations in southern England, provides limited competition with the Paddington service, such that in return for less comfortable trains and longer journey time one can enjoy lower fares – and can reach London earlier on weekdays at an affordable fare. A further point is that the existing Waterloo service includes through trains to and from west Wales. Neither these nor any other cross-Cardiff workings are specified in the existing PSR. We will certainly be pressing the "other operator", whoever it turns out to be, to extend its trains westwards from Cardiff – in much the same way as South West Trains extend some Waterloo-Exeter services to other destinations in south Devon.

A Railcard for Wales & the Borders We have had some reasonably encouraging responses to the report mentioned in *Railwatch 92*, though there is a fair element of "it's a good idea provided someone else pays" – a mantra so common in the rail industry. But a couple of the W&B bidders have been more positive, as have some politicians. Lack of commitment to support the proposal by the National Assembly so far is a disappointment.

Light rail for Cardiff The branch has set up a working group to lobby for a light rail system for Cardiff, to help meet the city's growing transport needs. As development proceeds apace in Cardiff Bay, a rail-based link between the city centre and the bay is essential to supplement or replace the stub of the Valley Lines that penetrates to the Bay. Cardiff County Council is infatuated with Ultra



– a guided driverless taxi system, which as mentioned in previous issues of *Railwatch*, is more suited to be a fairground ride than a solution to the city's transport problems. It is not capable of carrying significant numbers of people. We intend to produce a leaflet for *In Town without my Car Day* – 22 September, extolling the virtues of light rail, before going on to lobby the National Assembly of Wales at the elections in May next year.

Class 180s at last The limited introduction to service of First Great Western's Adelante units has allowed some of the gaps in the intended half-hourly Cardiff-London service to be filled. A welcome development is that Super Saver tickets can be used half an hour earlier than hitherto, so Paddington can now be reached for a reasonable fare just after mid-day – but still half an hour later than Waterloo via the alternative route (see above). The Class 180s have comfortable and well laid-out seating with good leg room – the Achilles heel of many modern diesel trains – but are noisier than an InterCity 125 and not an adequate replacement for them.

South West

By Stuart Walker

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Following the decision to run year round Sunday services on the Gunnislake and Falmouth branches, Railfuture has learned that tentative enquiries are being made about restoring Sunday services to the St Ives branch in the winter. We also understand that Wessex Trains are making a Rail Partnership Funding application to fill the two-hour gap between 16.00 and 18.00 in services from Truro to Penzance.

Cornish track The *Western Morning News* has been running a campaign over the state of the permanent way in Cornwall. Although the line is probably safe sections of the Cornish main line need to be renewed so speed restrictions can be lifted and passengers obtain a smoother ride.

Objective 1 progress The scheme to re-double Burngallow to Probus on the Cornish main line and install a passing loop on the Falmouth branch took a further step forward when the county council agreed to allocate £290,000 from its own budget.

Okehampton stations In addition to the Summer Sunday

µThis leaflet, packed with special "three nights for the price of two" at hotels and bed and breakfasts, and free entry coupons to tourist attractions in Settle-Carlisle country, has been published by the line's business liaison group, with help from the Regional Development Agency and Business Link. For a copy of the leaflet, phone 0879 240 3966 or log on to <http://www.go-dales.com> At the same time, the Friends of the line are trying to get train services improved by setting out their franchise aspirations for the future.

They want a return of Anglo-Scottish services, more early morning trains, services to Manchester Airport via Clitheroe, better trains and information services and lower fares. Throughout Britain Railfuture branches and rail user groups have been putting their ideas forward.

One of the most impressive documents, aimed at the Merseyside Electrics franchise, was produced jointly by the Ormskirk, Preston and Southport Travellers Association and the Wigan Rail Users Group.

They stress the importance of the service improving, reopenings and more electrification as well as operating as an integrated part of the national network, but also the importance of consultation, public toilets and good information. The Strategic Rail Authority should take notice.

Contact: John Blinkhorn. Tel: 01695 575323

Exeter to Okehampton service (provided by Wessex Trains), Dartmoor Railway operates a weekday tourist service over five miles of the line between Sampford Courtenay, Okehampton and Meldon.

Passengers can alight at a new platform built adjacent to Meldon Quarry and this summer should also see the reopening of Sampford Courtenay station. When it becomes possible to run a full weekday service

from Exeter to Okehampton, Railfuture believes North Tawton would be a more convenient railhead.

North East

By Peter Wood
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Influencing events A most welcome development in the past few years is the opportunity branch members are enjoying to help influence events. Recent examples include:

■ Participation in the Railway Advisory Committee's second public meeting, in York, concerned with rail safety

■ Discussions with First Group about their bids for both the Transpennine and Northern franchises (with meetings on both Tees and Tyneside for the latter)

■ A submission to the inquiry by the Transport Subcommittee of the House of Commons' Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee

■ Involvement in the discussions leading to Faber Maunsell's *Regional Transport Strategy for the North-East* report commissioned by the North-East Assembly.

We look forward to the next stakeholders' meeting to be held by Arriva Trains Northern (ATN) in Newcastle in October.

Durham Coast line Durham County Council and other local authorities, with ATN and the Countryside Agency, are working to improve the county's local rail network. We happily support the proposed Community Rail Partnership, a key element of which "is to involve local communities with their railway, to encourage more people to use the train and to make the case for extra services and better passenger facilities". An initial meeting was held in early July at (rail-less) Peterlee.

A1 and A69 studies We have been involved in discussions surrounding the A1 (north of Newcastle) multi-modal study and the A69 route management strategy. As a result we are hoping for better rail services in Northumberland (see below for examples). The development of a better rail alternative west of Newcastle (paralleling the route of the A69 towards Carlisle) is also an aim with better stations, more commuter services (to Carlisle as well as Newcastle) and development of more cross-Newcastle journeys

Northern franchise Having concluded our representations about the Transpennine fran-



chise (three cheers for Jim Beale, chairman of the north-east RPC, for publicly questioning the wisdom of establishing a separate Transpennine franchise), our main concern currently is with the proposed Northern franchise.

We are seeking meetings with all the bidders (see above) and preparing a paper in consultation with user groups and the regional RPC setting out the views of passengers.

We want stiff targets for punctuality and reliability (99% and 100% respectively), guaranteed connections; good integration with other modes as well as clean, comfortable and frequent services.

There should also be refreshments available on all longer journeys with greater security on trains and more staff, for longer periods, at stations.

Better information is needed together with regular clockface departures and trains running early until late (06.00 to 23.00 Monday to Saturday) and a better Sunday service.

Better trains are also needed – no Pacers – with spare units to cope with breakdowns and strengthening at busy periods.

Among the specific service improvements wanted are more frequent local services on the East Coast main line, more

inter-city services stopping at Berwick, Alnmouth and Morpeth, passenger services restored to the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne, Leamside and Stillington lines (the latter for a fast Tyne-Tees service) with new and reopened stations and much better Chester-le-Street services.

Finally congratulations to branch member Peter Kenyon on his election to Railfuture's national executive.

East Midlands

By Anthony Kay
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M1 Multi-Modal Study The branch's response to the multi-modal study for the M1 corridor between Leicester and Chesterfield has made the following points:

■ We welcome the idea of a Passenger Transport Authority for the East Midlands, to be responsible for a comprehensive transport strategy for the region

■ We support the proposals for frequent local express services within the Nottingham-Derby-Leicester triangle, and for improved services from Leicester to Sheffield, Manchester, Matlock and Worksoop – but it is not clear how it is intended to ensure that the train operators actually provide these services

■ We support the proposal for a light rail system in Leicester, with connections to the heavy rail network at a new Blaby station and an upgraded Syston station

■ We consider the most serious defect of the report to be the absence of any mention of electrifying the Midland main line north of Bedford.

■ We are also disappointed by the insufficient emphasis on moving freight from road to rail – there is space for two tracks to be devoted to freight all the way from Bedford to Trent Junction. The Central Railways proposals are also given insufficient support in the report

■ The report echoes our own concerns about the lack of capacity for MML trains at St Pancras following construction of the Channel Tunnel rail link. With only four platforms available, future improvements in services to the East Midlands will be jeopardised.

Slower trains more punctual MML has been struggling to meet punctuality targets recently. The summer timetable shows many journey durations from Nottingham or Derby to Leicester lengthened, in some cases by as much as eight minutes. Surely this isn't a tactic to improve punctuality records?

No trains to National Forest The forest visitor centre, built on

reclaimed coal-mining land to the west of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, has been a huge success and is expecting more than a quarter of a million visitors this year. There is a railway line running very close to it, which at one time was scheduled for reopening to passengers in 1995.

The railway remains closed, while the local authorities continue to debate its financial viability. Meanwhile, traffic on the local roads continues to increase.

Support for Central Railway David Tredinnick, Tory MP for Bosworth, has strongly supported the Central Railway proposal for a freight link to the Continent via Leicester. Meanwhile, the Country Land & Business Association has asked for a full environmental impact assessment of the proposal.

No-one could object to that, but let's hope the assessors notice how much less land the railway will take than any motorway.

New hope for Desborough There are plans for massive housing developments totalling more than 1,000 homes in Desborough and Rothwell. Land would be reserved for a station car park at Desborough, and the arguments for re-opening the station would be reinforced.

WESTMINSTER WATCH

Electrification

Dundee East's Labour MP **Iain Luke** raised the importance of electrification in the House of Commons on 26 June.

He said that as a member of the all-party rail group, he knew electrification was an investment priority across the United Kingdom rail network.

He said he was contacting SRA chairman Richard Bowker to ask him about rail improvements in the north-east of Scotland and about the priority the SRA is giving to electrification.

He added: "On two occasions since my election last year, I have had the dubious pleasure of making a 12-hour car journey from Dundee to London. That is a course of action that I would not recommend to my worst enemy." **Mark Lazarowicz** (Lab, Edinburgh,

North and Leith) said many other improvements were needed on the East Coast main line north of Edinburgh.

Transport Minister **John Spellar** showed that he has swallowed Railtrack's half-baked arguments on electrification and dismissed its importance.

He said: "The performance characteristics of modern diesel trains have improved considerably and they are now at least as good as equivalent electric units."

(Editor's notes: He obviously hasn't travelled on enough trains lately or even stood in a station next to a diesel train.)

Disappointingly he added: "We are anxious to improve the route from Edinburgh to Aberdeen, but do not regard electrification as the most effective solution in the short

to medium term." During an earlier debate on 13 June, Reading East Labour MP **Jane Griffiths** had also called for the Great Western main line to be electrified. She said the SRA should implement a programme of electrification "without delay" and that the Government's attitude took no account of environmental benefits.

On that occasion the Government wheeled out transport minister **David Jamieson** to rubbish the argument for electrification.

With "PR men" like this bolstering their arguments, profit-hungry private companies can continue to rely on short-term thinking.

Investment

But a dose of common sense came during the same debate from **Gwyneth Dunwoody**

(Lab, Crewe and Nantwich) who said the Government ought to be prepared to invest more public money in the railway. She said: "The Treasury must accept reality and stop arguing that somehow or other there is a magic formula – that other people can be made to pay.

"The reality is that for those who need to use trains there are very few alternatives."

Buses were not a real alternative.

She also criticised train operators for putting up fares and undermining railcards. She added: "People need and want to use railways."

George Stevenson (Lab, Stoke-on-Trent South) said he was worried the handover from Railtrack to Network Rail would worsen the blight of fragmentation.

EDITED BY MICHAEL WEINBERG and LLOYD BUTLER