

North East

By Peter Kenyon
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■ ■ Ashington Blyth & Tyne

The charter trains in June sold out and displayed the potential of the line. Government's response to the thousand signature online petition stated that its chief priority was to increase the capacity of the network. However, where, as with the Blyth and Tyne line, local and regional authorities are prepared to take the lead in drawing up a proper business case for reopening a particular line or stations and identifying funding, the Government will carefully consider the case.

Early in July Tom Harris, the former rail minister, made a special visit to the area to visit station sites along the route and was briefed at Ashington's Woodhorn Museum, site of a possible future station, where campaigners stressed the modest £4.1million cost of the scheme. He concluded his visit by saying: "I want to see a positive business case submitted and then I am going to bat the ball back to regional politicians to look at their resources in terms of rail and road schemes."

The possibility of extending local and regional transport schemes to rail projects is welcome, but no extra funds are promised.

■ ■ Tyne & Wear Metro investment

Metro development and a new road crossing of the Wear at Sunderland were the features of a new funding package announced by the Department for Transport at the end of July. The Metro funding is expected to cover the second phase of the work, which will cost £300million and last for 20 years.

Details can be found on the DfT website www.dft.gov.uk and the Nexus website www.nexus.org.uk. Phase 1, described in my article in *Railwatch* 114, is now in progress. Refurbishment of the 90 28-year-old Metrocars, last cosmetically restored some 10 years ago and now showing their age, will begin in 2010 with Phase 2.

I understand that after removal of the superstructure, a rigorous and minute examination of the frames and running gear of one of these cars showed that they are capable of refurbishment. Modernisation of the overhead power lines will also be included at this stage. Government has made a second significant commitment to underwrite the operating costs of the Metro up to 2019.

New trains and a new signalling system will have to wait until Phase 3 in 2019, which will be subject to further negotiations with Government and is expected to cost a further £300million.

■ ■ News from Coastliners

Discussions have taken place with personnel from the Tees Valley regeneration unit on the possibilities for a Tees Valley metro service, which could replace some passenger units with a tram-train operation. The basis of the scheme is Network Rail's intended upgrading of most of the rail lines in the area, which with enhancement, possibly electrification, could transform the rail services. The development would not outlaw heavy rail workings on the Teesside network.

Committee members met Northern Rail management representatives in May and explored the effects of forthcoming timetable changes. Scotrail timings also affect the Newcastle-Carlisle trains some of which originate over the border.

Eastwards from Newcastle the same trains travel down the coast via Sunderland and Hartlepool to Middlesbrough (and on occasion to Nunthorpe on the Whitby line).

When this gargantuan task is completed, the request for a last departure from Newcastle down the Coast line at 21.00 may at last be realised by a revision of the Middlesbrough crew workings, fully 12 years after the users group first asked for it.

The geographical span of train workings from Newcastle to Nunthorpe has prompted discussions about a possible new Community Rail Partnership for the coast line, which could link up with the existing Whitby line partnership.

Better way to run a railway



BUS: Chur's new bus station built on a deck over the railway

By Malcolm Bulpitt

Imagine a small city of around 35,000 people, a local administrative centre with a main line railway station located immediately adjacent to its historic and commercial core.

This station is the terminus for inter-city services and the interchange point for a network of local rail services.

Over the platforms and tracks there is a massive ultra-modern bus station. Its soaring glass roof covers the vehicles working on scores of services that fan out to serve the city and its hinterland.

The buses all connect with the main line and local trains, and passengers with their baggage can move easily between the modes whatever the weather.

This is not, as you may well imagine, a location in our country.

Here the very idea of governments – local or national – investing large sums to make public transport work efficiently in a comparatively small community is so far from reality as to be sadly laughable.

It is Chur, in south-eastern Switzerland, and in this small nation of just seven million people it is not really anything special.

It simply represents one modern take on the concept of integrated transport that is considered the norm across the whole of the country. Some perceptions are that Switzerland's transport is simply mountain railways, cable cars and funiculars to wonderful views, chair lifts for well-heeled ski enthusiasts, specialist services in the Alps just to gain the tourist franc. Far from it.

The Swiss see an integrated network of efficient public transport facilities as a necessary part of running one of Europe's more dynamic economies.

Tourism does generate income but it is on engineering, chemicals, banking, insurance and developments in the electronics area that the country thrives.

These are principally city-based operations and the Swiss know that their urban economy (as well

as their more remote areas) cannot succeed unless it has appropriate public transport links.

While British politicians have prevaricated over London's Crossrail for 30 years, Zurich has been putting elements of its full size suburban rail network into subterranean links under its centre for years – and they are still in the throes of expanding this network of tunnels.

Major city-centre stations like the Hauptbahnhof and Stadelhofen have been rebuilt. Trams link the suburban and inter-city routes to both inner city areas and out into the suburbs. As the UK experiments with tram-trains, the suburban Forchbahn has been operating into the city centre that way for decades.

Zurich's fleet of double-deck suburban trains, some built as recently as 1997, is now up for replacement under a £1billion capacity improvement investment programme.

Across the whole of Switzerland almost every station has at least an hourly service that connects into a national timetable plan giving clock-face links into all other routes and modes.

Trains and buses do not compete for the same traffic – the Swiss see this as a waste of financial and other resources.

The base network is standard gauge heavy rail into which local trains (often metre gauge), trams and buses link at all levels of station, not just at the major interchanges like Chur.

In larger cities road transport is municipally operated, elsewhere SwissPost (or their franchisees) run all the services. There is no wasteful competition.

Given this integrated network the Swiss, who own more cars per capita than we do in the UK, choose to use them far less, basing much of their movement on the well-funded provision of public transport. They also use cycles for some 10% of all their trips – but that is another story.

The Swiss ticketing system also encourages the public transport network to be used. In addition to the usual range of discounted sea-

Pictures: Jakob Jager



BIKES: And a tram-train outside Zurich's Stadelhofen station



RURAL SERVICE: A Matterhorn Gotthard Bahn train at Segnas

son and zonal tickets, over 300,000 people have a national all-modes (rail, bus, tram, boat) travel card that costs just £1,500 a year.

Over two million Swiss pay around £70 a year for a half-fare card, again covering all transport modes, while other competitively priced ticketing also boosts ridership.

All this costs money, but it is seen to be a good use of public funds.

Switzerland is also investing heavily in the future of trans-European rail links with billions of francs going into alpine base tunnels to take truck traffic off their mountain roads and help conserve their fragile alpine ecosystems.

Many British observers see the Swiss railway system as a state one, compared with the arcane private enterprise system that we have been saddled with in recent years. This is not so.

Less than 50% of the Swiss network is owned by the SBB, the federal operator. There are over 80 private companies working together to provide the integrated service, although many are now linked in local groupings to obtain efficiency savings in areas such as purchasing, marketing and maintenance.

Some smaller railways are locally owned, with the cantons (Switzerland is a confederation of 26 mini-states) and communes having financial stakes that help ensure local policies and requirements are understood and catered-for. Unlike Britain, all the operators are vertically integrated. They own every-

thing they use – the track, rolling stock, buildings, signalling system and workshops.

It is obvious to all, except possibly British politicians and their civil servants, that this is the most efficient and cost-effective way, of running a railway.

If something goes wrong the operators have only themselves to blame. There is no scope for buck-passing.

In practice, because of this tried and trusted system, little does go wrong. No money is wasted with different layers of management, and the national office that administers the system is minuscule compared with its British equivalent.

There is none of our Department for Transport's notorious micro-management around in Switzerland.

The Swiss system costs money, subsidies are large, but pro-rata they are not as massive as the ones our Government pays out to keep our non-integrated, internally competitive, transport system running.

In Switzerland the money all goes into ensuring that this small nation has one of the most efficient and integrated transport systems in the world.

■ Malcolm Bulpitt, a transportation safety engineer by profession, is editor of *Swiss Express*, the journal of the Swiss Railways Society.

See <http://www.swissrailsoc.org.uk> for information on how to join and learn more about transport in Switzerland.

Wessex

By John Friedberger
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■ ■ Conference travel survey

The main activity this summer was the organisation of Railfuture's national summer conference in Salisbury on 5 July. We asked those attending to complete a questionnaire and 69 forms were returned. 58 people travelled principally by train to Salisbury with 12 separate operators, including London Underground, and on about 100 different trains. South West Trains and First Great Western, as the companies serving Salisbury direct, were the majority of these. Overall journeys were rated: Good 48, fair 9, bad 1. All trains were reported on time or within two minutes except one delay of 15 minutes due to a points failure. So on this Saturday, with no engineering work reported, punctuality was 99%.

Respondents rated their most important concerns as: Overcrowding (including leg room) 30, fares 10, timetable issues 8, information (or lack of) 6, rolling stock 2.

Saturday 5 July was clearly a good day as this snapshot reveals a more favourable situation than the recently published and comprehensive National Passenger Survey. A few years ago reliability or punctuality would have been the major concerns. Now we urgently need more carriages on many of our trains and we seek a fair deal on fares.

■ ■ Ticket office opening hours

Railfuture contacted Passenger Focus over a new issue to affect rail travellers and potential passengers, the plan by South West Trains to reduce the hours of ticket office staff at over 100 of their stations. Of these stations, the number with no Saturday opening will increase from eight to 47 and those with none on a Sunday will double. We also note that some stations not listed appear to have fewer staff on duty, although this is impossible to quantify.

Passenger Focus has received many objections and we hope the Department for Transport will pay heed before allowing the company to proceed. SWT says no review of opening hours has taken place for more than 10 years and there are now far more opportunities for buying tickets at machines or on the internet. We accept there may be instances where an office is open with few passengers about but these are rare. The changes proposed are not minor but represent a fundamental diminution of the service offered at a time of rising use of the railways, particularly off-peak and at weekends.

SWT makes much play of ticket vending machines at every station, and an increase in their number, as a justification for shorter ticket office opening hours. Machines are useful but only if the passenger is fully familiar with the machine and knows the exact type of ticket to be bought. But as the number of people wishing to travel by train is increasing and many of these are unfamiliar with the system they need to speak to a person – particularly when undertaking an unusual journey at a weekend. A machine, which does not provide the full range of tickets, is of little use. When strangers to the railway try to use one, it can take time and cause annoyance to others in the queue.

If, as we fear, much of the plan is allowed, it is essential SWT is made to re-install "permit to travel" machines at all its stations so that passengers unable to buy a ticket can board a train without fear of a penalty fare.

■ ■ Isle of Wight venue

The branch meeting on 26 April was a visit to Brading station where we were briefed by Bobby Locke on the Isle of Wight Community Rail Partnership.

