

North West

By Trevor Bishop

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■ ■ Better stations for Manchester

Planned improvements to stations in Greater Manchester and to passenger waiting facilities at Manchester Victoria and Manchester Oxford Road stations, all of which are expected to be completed by the end of the year, were welcomed by Greater Manchester Transport Campaign, to which Railfuture North West is affiliated.

We also welcome the long-overdue disabled access improvements at Manchester Oxford Road, also expected to be delivered by the end of the year. Only two of the station's five platforms are currently "accessible". Also very welcome is the promised extra car parking at some rail stations. We are pleased Manchester City Council and Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive are pressing for major improvements at Manchester Victoria station and that both bodies are pressing for Manchester Victoria to be adopted as a Network Rail managed station like Manchester Piccadilly.

The Greater Manchester Transport Campaign and Railfuture North West would like GMPTE to go further with its plans for heavy rail in Greater Manchester by adopting plans to reopen stations and invest in electrification in addition to that planned by the Department for Transport. We also urge the DfT to fund an adequate quantity of rail rolling stock to meet both present and likely future demand, something which it does not do at the moment.

■ ■ Opening of rail-bus interchange at Wrexham General

Wrexham General station approach was remodelled during the autumn to allow for a bus stop and shelter near the station. This Wrexham County Borough Council project involved improving the entrance off Mold Road, relocating car parking spaces and provision of a turning circle.

Meanwhile, the unstaffed Wrexham Central station has gained an automatic ticket sales machine at long last. It is hoped this will help reduce the amount of unticketed travel on this line.

Passengers want a train indicator, something Wrexham Council is keen to see at other stations on the Bidston line, though we are told "considerable obstacles" exist before this provision can be achieved.

■ ■ Rail users press for better Eccles Interchange

The North Cheshire Rail User Group tabled a question at the recent Travel Watch North West meeting about Eccles station becoming an Interchange station and offering a better service for nearby Media City, the Trafford Centre and Metrolink. The congested Deansgate-Piccadilly rail corridor could be alleviated by this proposal. Time constraints meant it was not fully discussed at the time, so the group followed up with an approach to the chairman of the Greater Manchester Integrated Transport Authority Keith Whitmore. His response was as follows: "GMITA is working with the Salford Urban Regeneration Company to deal with the transport consequences of developments at the Trafford Centre and Media City.

"A Metrolink line to the Trafford Centre is being pursued with Peel Holdings and Eccles station has an important part to play in providing a cohesive and integrated transport strategy for Media City.

"Eccles station is not being looked at in isolation. The two other Salford stations, Crescent and Central, feature strongly in the strategy. Salford Crescent will be expanded as a local station serving the University and Chapel Street and also as a key rail to rail interchange. Salford Central will include provision of Liverpool line platforms to enable trains from Liverpool via Newton-le-Willows to call there and better serve the Regional Centre, the Springfields development and the eastern end of the Chapel Street regeneration area. GMITA wishes to see development of Eccles station as an interchange for heavy rail services, allowing fast trains to call, and is in discussions with Northern Rail about this issue and also the improvement of frequencies for stopping trains."

Rail-sea-rail links lost

By Trevor Garrod

The Railfuture international committee is working on a report on ferries linking Britain to Ireland and to the European mainland, and on how well or otherwise they are integrated with train services.

Recent years have seen a decline in rail-sea-rail connections and even measures by some ferry operators to exclude foot passengers.

For example, P&O Irish Sea Ferries now only accept cars, Seafrance no longer accepts foot passengers, Norfolk Line has banned them from its Dunkerque-Dover route and in October, P&O also stopped taking foot passengers on its Calais-Dover crossings.

For cross-Channel foot passengers, there is of course Eurostar. But it is not necessarily the best, or cheapest, way for every journey.

Ferries should still cater for foot passengers and some still do that well, such as between Holyhead and Dun Laoghaire and between Harwich and Holland, with convenient, or potentially convenient, rail connections at either end.

Although STENA find the Dun Laoghaire route more expensive to operate than Holyhead-Dublin Port (which has no rail link on the Irish side) they are seeking to cut costs with a smaller vessel during the winter and have expressed con-

fidence in negotiating new harbour dues at Dun Laoghaire for 2011.

Stranraer was once a convenient interchange point for Northern Ireland, but train connections have deteriorated recently. The alternative port of Cairnryan, while giving a slightly shorter sea crossing, is not rail-served.

The international committee is keen to hear from members who use ferries, especially as foot passengers. We should like to hear both good and bad experiences.

Send your experiences to Peter Walker, 26 Devon Crescent, Billingham, Teesside. TS23 4BP or email him at pj.walker@zen.co.uk

The European Passengers' Federation has also discussed these problems with European Commission officials in Brussels, but accessibility for foot passengers is not likely to be covered by the forthcoming maritime passengers' rights.

However, EPF is also in contact with the European Disability Federation and with an association of ferry operators and may be able to achieve improvements by constructive dialogue.

Both EPF and Railfuture need to hear from as many members as possible, however, with their experiences and where appropriate their practical suggestions for improvements.

Rail links to UK airports

British airports suffer a huge variation in the quality of their public transport links.

Some like Gatwick and Stansted have a high-quality train service direct to the passenger terminals, while others have to rely on buses.

New research by Railfuture assesses each airport on the quality of rail, bus and coach links and the information given to passengers about public transport.

Railfuture highlights the difference between those with excellent all-round provision and those with a poor set-up such as Norwich.

"Clearly there's huge room for improvement," said Trevor Garrod, who helped compile Railfuture's Airport Links report.

"Naturally you'd expect the larger airports to have better links, but there are some surprises, such as Southampton coming out better than Heathrow. Gatwick is a good

example of best practice, with the rail station connected to the airport. Other rail connections have to be made via a bus or coach link, which is less satisfactory."

"In some cases, simple actions such as reorganising bus routes so that buses call at the airport and the railway station could bring huge improvements. No one seems to have taken responsibility for this on a national level. There's a piecemeal approach, and some joined-up thinking is really needed.

"It's not just the passengers who benefit from decent public transport links. We have to remember the thousands of people who work in UK airports who can also benefit, as well as the general population through reduced pollution and congestion."

The report can be viewed online at: http://www.railfuture.org.uk/tiki-download_file.php?fileId=169

£530m for Northern rail hub

Network Rail unveiled a 10-year £530 million plan in February to improve rail travel in the north of England which would allow a 40% increase in train services for Newcastle, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield. The Northern Hub plan includes extra platforms and provision for the 'Ordsall Chord' to link Piccadilly and Victoria stations. The plan should give benefits worth more than £13 billion, including allowing for six trains every hour on the transPennine route between Leeds and Manchester with journey times as short as 43 minutes.