

Ulster rail expansion needed

The future of Northern Ireland's railways may be decided in November.

All the major political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly have rallied to the railways' defence. Ulster Unionists, SDLP, Sinn Fein, DUP and the Alliance have found common cause.

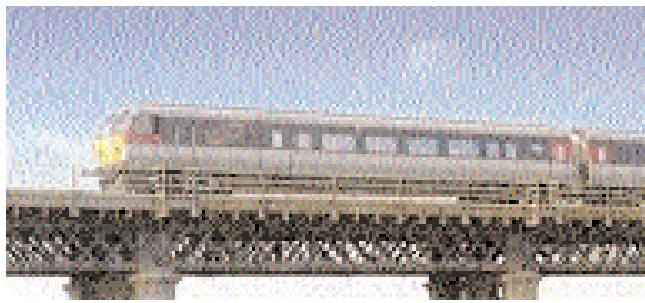
After 20 years of failing to invest in the system while spending money on motorway building, the Government indicated that it would not be worried if the system closed down.

Thousands of people however have signed a Save Our Railways petition organised by the *Belfast Telegraph*, Northern Ireland's largest circulation daily newspaper.

"Rather than closing down the rail network, the Government should be concentrating its efforts on providing the funding necessary to provide Northern Ireland with a public transport network worthy of the 21st century," said the *Telegraph*.

"At a time when the roads are becoming more congested than ever, axing what is left of the railway system would be nothing short of folly."

But the Government has sat on its hands while railway operator Translink was forced to close the six-mile Coleraine to Portrush branch line on safety grounds over the summer, depriving the seaside resort of its railway in the holiday months of July and August. A



Northern Ireland needs more not fewer trains – like this Dublin-Belfast Enterprise train.

The Enterprise service was expanded in June with the inauguration of a Derry-Belfast service at Londonderry station in June as the North Atlantic Express. Some of the trains will travel through from Derry to Dublin allowing gaps in the existing Enterprise service to be filled.

"This new service highlights just how absurd it is for the Government to consider closing any part of the network," said Friends of the Earth's John Woods.

"The future lies in a public transport system with a first-rate rail service at its core. Instead of cutting the network, we should be cutting ribbons on new services like this one."

series of public meetings was organised in June and July by the Railways Task Force which was set up by the Government to look at the "options".

Northern Ireland Railways has said it needs £183million to address urgent safety issues and a further £60million to invest in better services.

Relaying 123 miles of track will cost £55million, new rolling stock £72million and installation of the train protection and warning system £26million. Rail workers have pledged to fight tooth and nail to save the system and Transport 2000's Liz Fawcett

called for expansion of the rail network, rather than any thought of closure.

Eight local councils have joined together to form the Northern Corridor Railways Group to oppose closure.

John Woods of Friends of the Earth said that if £30million from the roads budget was redirected towards rail, it would have the potential to trigger £90million of structural funds from Europe.

One improvement would be to build a station near Aldergrove airport which is less than a mile from the main Belfast-Londonderry

(Waterside) line. A new station could cost as little as £150,000, says RDS member James Robinson. A minibus could take passengers from the airport to the new station or the reopened Millar's Bridge Halt.

Northern Ireland Railways have seen a series of attacks. Rather than repair war damage, the Ulster Transport Authority withdrew rail services from Newcastle, Downpatrick, Ballynahinch, Comber, Newtonards and Donaghadee in the 1950s, including tearing up the line between Belfast and Dundonald.

In 1957 the Government forced the Fermanagh lines to close. The in 1965 accountants encouraged the Government to close Warrenpoint, Newry, Dungannon, Strabane, Omagh and Londonderry (Foyle Road).

For a while it looked as if the Government had learned its lesson. The Dublin line was upgraded in the 1990s and there was a promise of funding to upgrade the Bangor line and reopen Bleach Green-Antrim.

As Michael Collins pointed out in the *Telegraph*: "Now a new Labour government that is telling us to abandon our cars and use public transport is proposing to close most of what is left of our railways."

Railways in Northern Ireland receive funding of 5.5p per head of population, compared to 33.2p for Britain.

Integrated transport lacking at Croydon

By Dennis Fancett

Railwatch was wrong in reporting that London Underground is planning to extend the East London Line to East Croydon.

If this was true, we would genuinely be starting to see integrated transport in South London. In fact, LU's plan is to run to West Croydon.

When asked to justify this, both LU and Railtrack say smugly that Croydon Borough Council is quite happy with the plan.

And there we have the problem of integrated rail transport planning in miniature.

Croydon Council's remit is to look after the interests of the people of Croydon and not people who are simply travelling through it, who don't vote for

Croydon councillors. West or East Croydon makes admittedly little difference for people starting or finishing their journeys in Croydon (though RDS members attending the society's annual general meeting will recall being unimpressed at the lack of integrated facilities between tram and train at the West station.

But consider the demand for people travelling from Highbury, Dalston, Whitechapel or Shadwell to say Gatwick or Brighton.

The inability to change from the extended East London Line to a fast Thameslink or Connex service at East Croydon is likely to make this journey route unviable.

Such people are unlikely to want to change twice and will no doubt continue to travel via the

congested Tube into Central London stations such as London Bridge, Blackfriars or Victoria and then back out again.

RDS calls for LU and Railtrack to see sense and upgrade the capacity at and approaching East Croydon station so that there is room for extended East London Line services as well.

Alternatively, a new passenger interchange between slow and fast lines should be established somewhere between New Cross Gate and East Croydon to allow passengers to change between the East London Line and fast South Coast Services.

A suggested site is Brockley, where, at the same time as new island platforms, high level platforms could be created as well on the South London Line to provide integration between

north-south and east-west routes. Orbital rail links such as the extended East London Line have significant ability to relieve congestion both on central London Tubes and the central London Railtrack terminals but to release their full potential, the orbital routes must be fully integrated with the radial ones.

At Croydon, we have a great opportunity not to repeat the mistakes of today's North London Line where the orbital stations are often 50 yards down the road from the station on the radial route, making use of the line for through journeys nightmarishly complicated to all but the hardened rail enthusiast.

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