

Why are we waiting?

By Chris Wright

Nearly £80million is sitting at the Strategic Rail Authority unspent.

The Government set up the Rail Passenger Partnership Fund to secure rail developments over three years to 2002.

Most remains unspent, seemingly locked in bureaucracy and bean counting.

Two lines are to reopen – Alloa-Stirling (Scotland) and Cardiff-Bridgend via Rhoose (Wales). None in England. Is this a case for an English Parliament?

Three stations are to reopen while there are about a hundred possibilities. The SRA has stated that some stations are ineligible for reopening grants, for example Grove and Kidlington in Oxfordshire.

Sheffield station redevelopment has been subject to a RPP fund because of delays at the SRA.

The lengthening of platforms at the halts on the Cotswold line was to be subject to a RPP bid but councils became concerned that the cost of putting in a bid would be wasted if the bid failed. How many other RPP bids have been lost because of the cost of bidding?

The biggest scandal is the delay to proposals to reopen the Varsity Line between Oxford and Cambridge, parts of which were closed in 1967 before the new city of Milton Keynes was built.

Anglia Railways wanted to start a service in June 2001 between Oxford and Milton Keynes.

A final bid for funds was made in April last year after several revisions to the funding bid following the intervention of accountants.

A bid for Norwich-Cambridge trains was also sent back. Does the Strategic Rail Authority want a strategic rail link?

Meanwhile, a plethora of East-West Road links are being developed. Does New Labour equal New Roads?

How strategic is the Strategic Rail Authority?

Since 1996, the East West Rail Consortium has worked on proposals to re-establish the "brains trains" between Oxford and Cambridge.

The SRA received the bid in April 2000 and has been requesting further information ever since.

We must ask why, with the support of 30 councils, two

Government Regional Offices and most local MPs (including Dr Phyllis Starkey actively seeking to move things along) is nothing happening?

More lines and stations reopened under the last years of Tory rule than under New Labour.

Labour's rail strategy is in a mess. It has not been able to sort out the privatised muddle of the Tories. Its response has been to rely on the SRA, which at its worst can be dismissed as just a quango.

It is certainly a slow moving body. Milton Keynes still has no service to Oxford.

It is set to lose the service to Gatwick and Brighton, lose some of the fast trains to London and the Bedford line remains in a time warp.

The link to Aylesbury is merely subject to a study by 2005.

How is it that Sir Alastair Morton, chairman of the SRA, could oversee the building of the Channel Tunnel link to link two countries but cannot secure a 31-mile rail link which only needs upgrading to link two counties?

The SRA Annual Report 1999-2000 reports that 120 inquiries were made and 43 proposals ensued with just seven approved, to the value of £11.3million. The target was £20million.

Ten were approved in 2000-1. £18million spent out of £105m! The funds were to be spent over a three year period to 2001-2. RPP is an excellent idea but the SRA has failed to maximise its use and potential. It is worrying that so few schemes have been progressed.

The SRA contributions to schemes in 1999-2000 were:

£2.8million over three years for Anglia Railways's new service from Chelmsford to Basingstoke via the North London line.

£800,000 over three years for extra stock for Wales & the West to serve Filton Abbey.

£805,000 by 2003 for contribution to introduction of new service on Edinburgh's CrossRail.

£2.5million for improved Northern Spirit services Sheffield to Hull and Bridlington and Scarborough.

£1million for doubling frequency of Northern Spirit Durham Coast Services (Sunderland-Hartlepool).

£3.4million for extra stock for Northern Spirit Leeds Metro

services between Leeds-Bradford and Bradford-Ilkley.

£72,000 for Northern Spirit Esk Valley Line winter Sunday Services.

Proposed contributions for 2000-2001 include:

£51,000 Silverlink winter Sunday Services Gospel Oak - Barking.

£75,000 for Wales & the West for Tamar Valley station upgrades.

£56,000 for Anglia Railways cycle facilities.

£100,000 for Northern Spirit Thornaby station upgrade.

£383,000 for Witham, Essex, station interchange and safety work.

£84,000 for Beaulieu, Scotland, station reopening.

£90,000 for Haverfordwest interchange facilities.

£4.1million for Vale of Glamorgan-Cardiff-Bridgend passenger service on freight line by 2003. Wales & the West.

£1.3million for Corsham station reconstruction to be served by Oxford-Bristol trains.

£84,000 for Bodmin Parkway station improvements.

Contributions for 2001-2002 got off to a promising start:

£955,000 was awarded to Anglia Railways for extra trains between Ipswich, Cambridge and Peterborough, the Cromer line and winter Sunday services on the Felixstowe line.

£4.2million was awarded to Anglia in a related bid for direct services between Norwich and Cambridge, from October 2002.

These SRA grants could be the basis of an East Anglia to Oxford service. Oxford to Milton Keynes (and Bedford) should be the next grant if the SRA is thinking strategically.

By May 2001, £28million of RPP money has been spent while £77million is still left.

Yet £32million has been spent by councils and other agencies since 1996 to develop the East-West rail link, with the SRA and its predecessors being consulted. The SRA response: "The case is not straightforward."

■ Chris Wright is chairman of Railfuture's Thames Valley branch and secretary of the Oxon and Bucks Rail Action Committee. OBRAC has campaigned for rail services from Milton Keynes to Oxford and Aylesbury since 1986.

Railfuture new home

This month Railfuture moved into new offices in London, sharing with another active transport group, Dial A Ride Transport, otherwise known as DART.

We hope to develop a good working relationship with DART who can teach us a thing or two on how to access secure sources of finance. They have several project workers funded by grants.

The building – Rowney's old colour factory in Dalston – has been renovated by Bootstrap Enterprises.

For people coming by rail, Dalston Kingsland station, served by Silverlink trains on the North London Line, is less than five minutes away.

By bus:

30 from Marble Arch Tube, Baker Street Tube, Euston, King's Cross, Highbury and Islington WAGN, Hackney Downs WAGN

38 (Routemaster) from Victoria station, Green Park Tube, Piccadilly Circus Tube, Tottenham Court Road Tube, Holborn Tube, Angel Tube, Essex Road WAGN

56 from St Paul's Tube, Barbican Tube, Angel Tube, Essex Road WAGN, Hackney Downs WAGN

67 from Aldgate Tube, Stoke Newington WAGN and Wood Green Tube

149 from Waterloo, Liverpool Street, Stoke Newington WAGN, Seven Sisters WAGN, Edmonton Green WAGN

242 from Tottenham Court Road Tube, Holborn Tube, St Paul's Tube, Bank Tube and DLR, Liverpool Street

243 from Old Street WAGN, Stoke Newington WAGN, Seven Sisters WAGN, Wood Green Tube

277 from Canary Wharf Tube and DLR to Highbury and Islington Tube.

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