



Easy-to-read timetables

Much clearer timetable posters are being displayed at 30 stations operated by Arriva Trains Northern, thanks to careful re-design work by the company's Janice Burns, left. She checked out best practice elsewhere and came up with a good, easy-to-read format.

Indecipherable timetables are one of the biggest obstacles to people who are new to rail travel.

"Converting the information was a complex process and Janice worked very hard," said ATN managing director Ray Price.

This is an area often neglected by train operators, particularly on stations without

staff. Good clear information should be a basic requirement. But in some areas the customer information systems are hopeless.

■ On the Shrewsbury-Chester line, Wales & Borders managing director Chris Gibb is trying to get Railtrack to replace the existing system with "Project Inform" which would allow automated announcements to be made at stations all down the line if trains are late or cancelled.

The Shrewsbury-Chester Rail Users Association is calling for urgent action – and a regular interval timetable.

Sunderland shows the way

The opening of the Sunderland extension of the Tyne and Wear Metro by the Queen in early May could herald a new dawn for both heavy and light rail.

The 12-mile line allows both traditional "heavy rail" trains and "light rail" Metro trains from Newcastle on the same tracks.

Previously mixing the two types has been banned in Britain.

The authorities have always been worried about the consequences of a collision between the two different types of vehicle. A light rail vehicle would be smashed to pieces.

But in Germany there have been highly successful schemes where light rail vehicles have been allowed into traditional heavy rail stations, and to run on heavy rail tracks. This is really integrated transport and in Britain has great potential for bringing closed branch lines back into use.

In Cambridge for instance, if the authorities abandoned the idea of a busway, light rail vehicles could run into the existing station from Huntingdon and St Ives and continue into the city centre as street-running trams. The branch line itself could still also be used for longer-distance heavy rail trains – from the east-west rail link for instance – and for rail freight.

The £89million Sunderland extension is a public private partnership between Railtrack and Nexus – the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive – and attracted funding from the Government and the European Union's regional fund.

The link was built quickly in under two years. The route runs for eight miles over the existing Railtrack-owned track from

Pelaw to just beyond Sunderland Station. It then runs for three miles east-west along the alignment of the former Sunderland to Durham line between Sunderland Civic Centre and South Hylton.

The Metro services between Pelaw and Sunderland share the route with heavy rail traffic, the first time this has been done in the UK in the modern era.

Eight new stations have been built. They have passenger information systems and emergency communication equipment. A CCTV security system has been provided for platforms



and public access areas including car parks.

Car parking is provided at Fellgate, East Boldon, Stadium of Light and South Hylton Metro stations. The sites will be landscaped and include specially commissioned works of art.

Arriva Trains Northern continues to provide an express service with diesel trains every half hour between Newcastle and Sunderland in addition to Metro trains every 10 minutes.

The extension – which included fitting 1.5kV DC overhead line equipment between Pelaw and Sunderland – is expected to boost the number of passengers

carried from 33 million passengers a year to 43 million. Large corporate discounts are offered to companies who purchase MetroSaver Season tickets for their employees.

New signalling between Pelaw and Sunderland includes Railtrack's train protection and warning system and the Metro "train stop" system.

Elsewhere in the north of England, travellers have been beset by a long-running pay dispute between train guards and Sunderland-based Arriva Trains Northern.

At the same time ATN, which



A Tyne and Wear Metro train, left, and a Trans-Pennine possible, above

was severely criticised for widescale cancellations because of staff shortages, has been trying to look to the future. It is bidding for the new Trans-Pennine Express franchise which starts next year and has produced a four-page glossy leaflet explaining that it plans to invest £275million in a fleet of 125mph new trains, like the Virgin Pendolinos, to provide higher speeds, more services and spare trains to cover emergencies.

"We aim to boost the image of the north of England with a quality service between its major towns and cities," said ATN managing director Euan

Cameron. ATN is talking about providing an on-train fixed buffet rather than a trolley service, and fold-down seating so cyclists, wheelchairs, and luggage can be carried more easily.

There is a commitment to study the possibility of reopening Woodhead Tunnel (after 2011) to improve services between Manchester Airport and Sheffield. Farther into the future, reopening of Chinley-Matlock, reopening Swinton-Cudworth-Normanton, and upgrading the Calder Valley line would be considered.

These are all welcome schemes which passengers should not have to wait that long for. The Strategic Rail Authority should be more active in pushing these plans which would enlarge the network's capacity and make it more flexible for passengers.

Isn't it time people from the East Midlands were able to travel to the north west by rail? The Midland Railway's route through Matlock still exists. It should never have been closed. Let's reopen it now.

Other bids for the Trans-Pennine franchise include a joint one from First Group which already has three rail franchises and Keolis which is part-owned by French Railways. The third bidder is Connex.

Perhaps it is the widespread dissatisfaction that has prompted the House of Commons transport committee to launch an inquiry into rail services in the north of England. The committee, chaired by Crewe MP Gwyneth Dunwoody, will consider the SRA's plans for re-franchising, the need for additional network capacity and the impact of rail services on economic and social development.

RAILWATCH WEBSITE: <http://www.railwatch.org.uk>

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