

European conference

By Trevor Garrod

35 delegates from nine countries assembled in Leipzig on 13 March for the annual general meeting and conference of the European Passengers' Federation.

Railfuture was represented by David Allard, Eddie Stock and Trevor Garrod.

Rufus Barnes reported on the European Commission's Third Railway Package, which he described as "rather encouraging" from the rail passenger's point of view.

Many of the views of EPF on information, engineering work, liability for delays, performance monitoring complaint-handling and facilities for cyclists and people with reduced mobility had been incorporated.

Rian van der Borgt reported on ROVER's concerns about Dutch Railways' plans to rely mainly on internet and ticket machines for international ticketing.

This had been referred to the Transport Coimmissioner by a Dutch MEP. It was also reported, in this context, that some British train operators were threatening to stop selling Eurostar tickets.

The conference was addressed by Tobias Richter and Karl-Heinz Meinel on the reinvigoration of rail services in the area comprising northern Bavaria, western Saxony and the western corner of the Czech Republic.

This included the franchising of many local passenger services to a private company, Laenderbahn, the extension of local trains into the town centre of Zwickau on its tramway network and the rebuilding, with help from the European Union, of a bridge on the German-Czech border destroyed in 1945. A zonal ticket was available and experiments were underway with ordering tickets via mobile phones.

The third speaker was Dr Thomas Leimgruber, secretary of the Swiss-based CIT (International Rail Transport Committee) who explained how the agreements between the railways of 24 European countries had been overhauled and new arrangements, with greater liberalisation, were due to come into force in 2005.

The conference subsequently discussed international long-distance services and contacts with international operators such as Eurostar and Thalys.

A four-page report of the conference is available, in English, from Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1RQ.

Picture: Nick Dibben



Suitable candidate? A train at Sudbury on the line from Marks Tey which is proposed as a "community railway"

Community rail concept

By Nick Dibben

The Strategic Rail Authority has issued a consultation document on the future for railway branch lines. It is remarkable as it is the first report in perhaps 40 years that does not mention branch lines and closures in the same breath.

Instead, the report looks at ways of creating a sustainable future by developing the concept of the many successful community rail partnership schemes that are already in place around the country.

The aim is to encourage passenger and freight growth while keeping costs under control. The report notes the important role played by branch lines both to their local communities and as feeders to the rest of the rail network.

Although scare stories about line closures appear from time to time, many branch lines have seen considerable growth in recent years. For example, the Anglia route from Norwich to Sheringham, has a community rail partnership. The partnership involves many local bodies such as local councils, the tourist industry and rail user groups. They have worked together to promote the line and it has had good results. Passenger numbers have increased by 140% in five years!

When it comes to keep-

ing costs under control, the report notes that many Network Rail standards for equipment installation and maintenance used on main lines may not be applicable to many branch lines. Work is already under way to develop a separate set of standards for branch lines without affecting safety or journey times.

The report lists a number of routes around the country that might be suitable for community rail status.

Such routes are defined by meeting a number of criteria such as speeds below 75mph, a single passenger operator running services at hourly frequency or less.

A number of these routes will be selected as pilot projects to develop the idea of community rail. Some lines may become separate micro-franchises with their own management team that would also be responsible for the track and signals.

In responding to the report a motion was passed at the Railfuture AGM in Newcastle that generally welcomed the report. There are however concerns with some aspects.

Given the intention to cut costs, Railfuture does not see the need for fare increases so that the trains are more expensive than the local buses.

Nor do we accept cuts in off-peak services and replace-

ment by buses. Bidders for the Greater Anglia franchise showed that the cost savings are minimal and that the replacement bus is seen by passengers as less attractive and a disincentive to using public transport.

In some cases Railfuture disagrees that the route should be given community rail status, for example where lines may be used as diversionary routes or where there is scope for future expansion.

Despite these reservations, this is a very positive step forward and the concept should be welcomed by all Railfuture members.

One of the surprising candidates recommended for community railway status by the SRA is the electrified St Albans-Watford branch which the SRA admits is "more urban than rural".

Because it is self-contained, the SRA says it could be operated with "simple signalling and control systems which together with local management, could allow a more regular and frequent service which, when integrated with feeder bus services, would allow it to fulfil its potential as an effective and reliable service in an area of high traffic congestion".

The local users group ABFLY is keeping a careful watch on the ideas, and was planning to submit a response in time for the 28 May 2004 deadline.