

Your letters



Mail on rail is back, so *Railwatch* has brought back our train logo for *Your Letters*. Let's hope the trains help to improve the poor service the Royal Mail is currently delivering. Good luck to GB Railfreight which will be running trains from December for a limited period between London and Scotland. Railfuture will expect the mail trains to be made permanent and for the rail mail service to be extended to other areas of Britain. Railfuture members should keep up the pressure.

Electric shock

I read *Railwatch* 101 with my usual interest, and am particularly delighted to see you banging on about electrification once again on the front page.

We are constantly being told by the Chancellor that the British economy is the healthiest it has been for aeons, yet still scheme after scheme is cancelled, whether it be main line electrification or the four recently frozen light rail schemes.

If that is what happens when the economy is healthy the mind boggles at what will (or will not) happen when it is unhealthy! Truly the Treasury is that never-failing nemesis which constantly retards inspiring new developments here.

Take another piece of news, which has yet to make its way into your pages.

I see in another magazine, that the North Berwick branch is to be dieselised. Readers will recall that this branch off the East Coast main line is the sole electric commuter route from Edinburgh; the four and a half miles were electrified as an "add-on" at the time of the ECML scheme.

Now in a sane country no effort would be spared to provide an electric multiple unit for this branch, even if that meant ordering extra Desiros from Siemens, with the current de luxe West Coast main line stock and locomotives being used to hold the fort.

Or again, money would be set aside to, say, electrify the Bathgate branch in order to create a cross-Edinburgh electric service and thus begin the task of giving that city an electric network.

But no, this is Britain. So Scotland's capital city is, it appears, to lose its

one electric suburban route because no one has the wits or the nous to organise replacement electric units. We can travel from Edinburgh to Vladivostok by electric train but North Berwick is beyond us – no stock you see! Printable words to describe this state of affairs fail me.

Of course this is a situation created by the system of privatisation foisted upon us by our politicians. It is also, however, a situation where we can now look to the Scottish Parliament to step in with vision and say, "no – find yourselves electric stock without further delay!"

We shall see what transpires but I am not holding my breath. The wire removers will doubtless creep in to dismantle before long, whether overtly or covertly.

In Britain privatisation has elevated the "quick fix" to icon status, and the only authority with powers to think and act beyond the politicians' five year time span is being disbanded as I write.

John Gilbert, Ranalt, 27 Pixiefield, Cradley, Herefordshire WR13 5ND

Power priority

The article on the front page of *Railwatch* 101 argues for electrification of the North Wales coast line – with which I agree – but also the Midland and Great Western main lines.

Surely if only for the sake of practicality, we should prioritise our aims and I think filling strategic gaps, for example the Liverpool-Manchester-Preston triangle, in an existing network would give a better return financially and operationally.

In contrast, Great Western is an efficient and self-sufficient diesel network – apart from the dedicated Heathrow shuttle – whose outer reaches could barely justify the cost and may even become vulnerable

to closure if the core part of the GW network were to be electrified.

And I would ease the Midland's worst curves before electrifying.

But obviously, yes, we should have a rolling programme of electrification and soon, before we lose the expertise!

John Davis, 41 Fairmead Avenue, Harpenden, Herts AL5 5UD

Electrify now?

In an ideal world, main line electrification could give our railways a wonderful boost, as well as helping with targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Personally I am in favour of developing sustainable power sources to reduce dependency on oil, but how might people react to wind turbines along the north Wales coast to power these trains (*Railwatch* 101)?

Also the "sparks effect" of the original West Coast electrics and the later East Coast scheme brought new service standards and more passengers. But just electrifying the main lines is the fundamental problem of the present set-up.

There are too many gaps in the existing network that should be filled in first before we start on major new schemes. Electric networks are needed to minimise diesel use in electrified territory, which does not happen here in Birmingham where diesel trains are still predominant.

In the Midlands, the Strategic Rail Authority finally realised the benefit of electrifying the Crewe-Kids Grove line, even though there is no regular electric train service. There are many similar links around the UK. This strategic thinking still seems lacking at senior management and planning levels.

Electrifying a route like Walsall-Rugeley has three benefits: an improved passenger transport executive-sponsored electric local service, an essential electric diversionary route – crucial during the Trent valley line rebuilding – and a freight route from Bescot to the north.

Extensions to local electric networks are equally important, and would make existing networks around Liverpool and Glasgow more effective. Woodchurch, Neston, and Shotton into Birkenhead and Liverpool is one route where considerable road traffic could transfer to rail.

Routing the Whifflet and Mount Vernon service back into Glasgow Central Low Level which it served until closure in the early 1960s, also seems sensible.

Has Railfuture any specific policy either nationally or locally on promoting these smaller schemes?

H Forsyth, 23 Highmore Drive, Birmingham B32 3JY

CrossCountry reply

Peter Cousins and Peter Hughes report on the changes to Cross-

Country services at Tamworth and Burton on Trent in the September timetable (*Railwatch* 101 Local action Midlands).

We well understand the value of direct trains, and through services have been maintained from these stations to and from Edinburgh and Plymouth. The basic two-hourly pattern service is however provided by Bristol to Newcastle trains.

In the evening peak there is a need to ensure seats are available from Birmingham for passengers wishing to make long-distance journeys. In a joint initiative with the Strategic Rail Authority and Central Trains, CrossCountry calls in the peak hours were withdrawn, with additional capacity provided by Central Trains, the local operator. As part of this package of changes, CrossCountry is running an extra train at 18.09 from Birmingham to Derby, and an 07.51 from Derby to Birmingham, serving intermediate stations.

CrossCountry cannot provide for every traffic flow along its routes, and following successful implementation of the £200million route upgrade scheme which substantially raised line speed between Birmingham and Sheffield, needs to exploit that with attractive journey times between the main centres. This we are now doing with the Plymouth-Birmingham-Leeds-Edinburgh hourly service. It makes limited stops and is already winning customers from road.

Yes, Solihull calls were withdrawn last year to create a performance margin on one of the most congested rail routes through the West Midlands. In an ideal world we may well make some stops at Solihull, but we could not contemplate doing so at the expense of punctuality on the critical Reading-Birmingham-Manchester route. Our future plans on this route will be determined by the soon-to-be published West Midlands Route Utilisation Strategy.

Chris Gibb, managing director, Virgin CrossCountry, 4th Floor West, Meridian, 85 Smallbrook Queensway, Birmingham B5 4HA

Colne-Skipton

I am writing on behalf of Homeloan Management Limited, a wholly owned subsidiary of Skipton Building Society, employing 1,200 staff.

HML have recently opened a new site in Padiham, North East Lancashire and will be redeploying a substantial number of our employees to the new site.

A number of staff have asked whether we, as an employer, will support the campaign to reopen certain railway routes, which of course we do if it means easing the travel burden for our employees.

In addition to HML, the parent company, Skipton Building Society employs around a 1,000 people locally, many of whom travel from Colne

(and surrounding areas) to Skipton. Could you please factor this information into your considerations regarding which routes to re-establish and which may be financially viable?

*Terry Dean, Human Resources Executive, Homeloan Management Limited, 1 Providence Place, Skipton, North Yorkshire BD23 2HL
Terry.Dean@hml.co.uk*

Trams and heavy rail

Following the article in *Railwatch* 101 (page 13) on the issue of putting a Metro extension alongside the existing heavy rail Wednesbury-Brierley Hill track, Railfuture's Midlands branch is pleased to reassure members that we accept that both light rail and heavy rail can be accommodated along some single-line sections.

The over-riding factor is the strategic need to retain a through heavy rail route from Stourbridge via Dudley, Wednesbury and Walsall to Lichfield and Burton upon Trent initially for freight and with potential for passengers. The Strategic Rail Authority and others have ruled out extending trains over the Stourbridge Junction to Brierley Hill and the Wednesbury to Walsall heavy rail tracks.

We objected to Metro having maximum twin tracks at the expense of the existing heavy rail tracks when a re-design of unnecessary Metro obstructions, the widening of a cutting and the construction of three new road bridges sufficient to span four (rather than three) tracks, and a modest increase in single track for the Metro would (as advocated by Martin Smith) enable both a 10-minute Metro frequency while retaining a much greater proportion of twin heavy rail track necessary for future capacity requirements.

The Metro promoters were only prepared to allow up to four freight trains per hour and their pathing calculations for negotiating two lengths of 3,270 metres and 1,990 metres of singled track relied on the very unrealistic presumption that "the freight trains will run to a strict timetable to allow the trip movements to fit in with through trains".

Our proposals called for the Metro to increase its single track by 1,255 metres to 1,630 metres overall and to reduce heavy rail single track by 4,810 metres to 450 metres (at Dudley Port). Although singling part of a through route would be a retrograde step we feel the compromise length of 450 metres is tolerable.

Alan Bevan, 12 Morris Field Croft, Hall Green, Birmingham B28 0RN

TGV drawbacks

Regarding the campaign for new high speed lines (*Railwatch* 101), I would urge Railfuture not to be too hasty in joining those who hail the French TGV network as "the best thing since sliced bread".

Geographically, France is a very different country to the UK. For example, it has a smaller population, but a land area four times greater. As a result, the population is far more



Green mail service

Luton council is helping to cut pollution by using Green Link Couriers for some of its local mail. The scheme was championed by Mayor of Luton Michael Dolling, and set up by Chris Hamm who has run similar schemes in York and Leeds.

Mr Dolling said: "With council offices spread around the town centre, it's not always possible for staff to hand deliver internal mail in a reasonable time. But it seems madness to stick on a stamp and wait for the Royal Mail, with the inherent costs and damage to the environment and traffic congestion from transporting mail, for the sake of getting post just a few hundred yards in some cases."

Green Link Couriers manager Chris Hamm said: "I want to ensure that the council, followed by other businesses, gets an appropriate and cost-saving service tailored to their needs."

You can contact Green Link Couriers on 07812 114 491.

Earlier in the year Luton council hosted a bikers' breakfast in an attempt to persuade more people to cycle to the rail station. Thameslink also staged an event at the station, opening new cycle stands.

Councillor Clive Meades said "We believe encouraging people to cycle for short journeys, or as part of a longer journey by public transport, can help to reduce traffic congestion and pollution in Luton, and generally contribute to improvements in people's health."

Despite this initiative Luton council is still pressing ahead with its short-sighted policy of converting the Luton-Dunstable rail line into a busway.

A public inquiry into the Translink scheme begins on 15 February at Luton Town Hall. A basic rail service could be running on the line for under £10million but the council loves its big-spending scheme which will swallow at least £78million.

dispersed, and average travel distances between large cities considerably longer. The case for very high-speed, long distance trains is much weaker in the UK, where most of the population lives within 200 miles of the capital city; indeed a significant proportion lives within 100 miles.

The UK has one of the highest population densities in Europe – second only to The Netherlands, I believe. Even parts of the south-west, traditionally thought of as a rural region, seem remarkably built up compared with much of France. As an illustration, in the course of its 300 mile journey, a train from Penzance to London typically makes at least 10 stops. By contrast, a train from Strasbourg to Paris is likely to stop just once or twice.

The TGV may give a seductive impression of French railways to foreign journalists and politicians, but it is not representative of the system as a whole, on which service frequencies are generally lower than in Brit-

ain. Furthermore, where high speed lines have been built, communities on some of the by-passed "classic" routes, such as Calais – Paris, have actually had their services reduced. "Couldn't happen here", you say. Oh yes it could, and indeed historically it has – remember the running down, or even closure, of so-called "duplicate" main lines in the 1960s?

Long-established population trends in the UK mean that more and more people find themselves living in smaller towns (some of which, like Witney, Clevedon, and Sidmouth, are actually now quite large). At present, the car is the only real option for inter-urban travel in these areas. Unless there is geographical expansion of the rail network in line with demographic trends, it is hard to see the UK ever moving towards more sustainable patterns of movement. Railfuture has often pointed out that there is currently no cross-country rail route for 100 miles north of London; similar unfavour-

able comparisons can unfortunately be made all over the country.

If I were to look to Europe for a model, it would not be to France, Spain, or even Italy, but more probably to The Netherlands or Belgium, both of which have dense networks of medium-speed, regular interval, electrified trains. Running a handful of high-speed routes with a small number of intermediate stations may appeal to profit-oriented private rail companies – after all, who wants to bother with "loss-making" local trains when people can be asked to drive miles to a parkway station? But quite apart from conflicting with priorities such as sustainable development and tackling obesity, the cost of building high-speed lines would probably rule out major investment elsewhere on the rail network for years to come.

Philip Bisatt, 11 Bracken Edge, West Quantoxhead, Taunton, Somerset TA4 4DH

CrossRail scope

I live in the West Country, and I wrote a letter in response to the CrossRail invitation for comments in the London *Evening Standard*. It appears that CrossRail proposes a potential link from a westerly limit of Reading on the First Great Western Line, via Paddington station through to Ebbsfleet in Kent, and so allow the significant commuter traffic a faster and more direct route from west of London to Essex, with a link to the Channel Tunnel at Ebbsfleet.

I wrote to CrossRail and asked whether it was possible to make further suggestions to an already promising plan, which could perhaps be extended in scope.

1. Allow greater use of the CrossRail Link by allowing Great Western Passenger and Rail Freight services to exploit the facility and so enable passenger and freight traffic from the M4 corridor to take a direct rail link to the European network. Costly. Yes, but if you are going to spend that amount of money on improving the cross London infrastructure, then make best use of the extended scope, and alleviate some of the pressure from the M4 and M25. CrossRail responded favourably but it seems the problem is how to increase loading on an already overloaded Great Western Line between Paddington and Bristol.

2. Extend the Heathrow Express link to Reading. A Western spur on the Heathrow Express link, joining the Great Western main line at Reading directly into Heathrow, so that customers from the south west of England could catch a train directly into Heathrow, without the need to go through Paddington first. This would take a substantial loading off road and rail services from Reading to London and Heathrow.

These seem sensible to me as a regular and often standing commuter from Chippenham to London and then to Heathrow, and I ask whether you know of any plans for such a scheme?

*P. Wrenn, 236 Oxford Road, Calne, Wilts SN11 8AN
air2wave@aol.com*



Railway deserts

In the East Midlands Local Action section of *Railwatch* 101, you refer to Corby & East Northants as the only constituency in the country without a railway station.

A recent railway political map produced by Ian Allan for the Railway Forum shows that, actually, this is not the case. I wasn't quite sure exactly what you meant by "the country", but even excluding such Scottish constituencies as Western Isles, Orkney & Shetland, Banff & Buchan, Tweeddale/Ettrick & Lauderdale, Midlothian, and Edinburgh South, there are a range in England too. Just for the record, these appear to include Blyth Valley (Northumberland), Houghton & Washington East, Leeds North East, Louth & Horncastle, Norwich South, Stoke North, Wolverhampton NE, Aldridge-Brownhills (W Mids), Dudley South, Coventry NW, Swindon South, Bristol Kingswood, Wells . . . so we've clearly all got more work to do in bringing railway accessibility to the population. In the meanwhile, keep up the campaigning for Corby!

Dr Nigel G Harris, managing director, The Railway Consultancy Ltd, First Floor, South Tower, Crystal Palace Railway Station, London SE19 2AZ nigel.harris@railcons.com

Threat to urban rail

Mike Crowhurst (*Railwatch* 101) is correct in identifying the threat to urban rail networks in the provinces implicit in the Government's White Paper. The warning signs have been showing for several months now. More than one Strategic Rail Authority policy document has bewailed the levels of subsidy required by the provincial network, and its stakeholder briefing for the Northern Trains franchise identified quite specifically the requirement that the successful franchise bidder will spend the first two years of the franchise in collaborative planning with the SRA with the prime objective of reducing the subsidy requirement.

Add that to the admission in the Community Rail Partnership document that previous branch line

closures have almost certainly saved little if any cost, and Richard Bowker's statement on record that, to make the sort of savings necessary, it will be necessary to look hard at the expensive urban networks, and you have sufficient warning of what is to come.

The mechanism is clear. The White Paper claims passenger transport executives, and their authorities, will be required to face the real cost of the services they specify. It also, inaccurately, claims they have been able to up their subsidy take in the past by simply specifying more services. Not so. However, the future is more ominous. The cost of supporting local rail networks rose massively with privatisation. Before privatisation, the passenger transport authorities and executives supported local rail services under Section 20 of the 1968 Transport Act. In Greater Manchester alone, the cost of Section 20 support annually amounted to £34million. The creation of Railtrack, and the introduction of track access charges, lifted that cost instantaneously to £90million, and all of the PTA/Es faced a near-trebling of their rail support costs.

Being unable to meet that increase, they did the only thing they could, by giving due notice of their intention to cease Section 20 Support, leaving the burden with the newly created Strategic Rail Authority. To bring the PTA/Es back on board, the government of the day introduced the Metropolitan Railway Grant (later to be the Special Railway Grant), which compensated them for the increased costs of the privatised railway. It is that grant which is now under threat.

But apart from government grant, the PTA/Es have only two sources of income. There is the revenue from the farebox or over the booking office counter, and the levy they impose on their constituent Metropolitan district councils. Now that levy has to compete within district council budgets with essential spending on education, social services, and highways, some of which is ring-fenced anyway. And the authorities themselves are charge-capped, so they are neither

able nor willing to countenance a massive increase in the levy to support local rail, and their members on the PTAs will not vote for one. A large increase in fares will simply drive their existing passengers back behind the wheel of their cars, thus contributing further to highway congestion. Nor is the freedom to spend rail savings on bus substitution of much use. For much of the day, urban highways are heavily congested, and it only needs one traffic accident on the M60 motorway which rings Manchester to bring gridlock, not only to the motorway, but to large parts of the primary highway network adjoining it.

Bus substitution will not work. A train from Stockport to Manchester Piccadilly, with up to two intermediate stops, is allowed twelve and a half minutes. During the recent Stockport blockade, the substitute bus service took just over 30 minutes for the journey, and sometimes longer. That sort of journey time will not attract passengers back on to public transport. It is essential that those of us who genuinely believe that the urban rail network makes an indispensable contribution to public transport provision lay aside, for the time being, our private dreams of reinstating the Burscough curves, or the Cocker-mouth, Keswick and Penrith line, and mount a vigorous campaign in defence of the rail network we have now, and its proper development. Otherwise, you can guarantee that Beeching Mark II will be upon us.

Peter Johnston, 8 Kendal Road, Bolton, Lancs BL1 4DS peter@johnston3936.fsnet.co.uk

Another interchange

The comment in *Railwatch* 101 on the importance of West Hampstead as an interchange between the Jubilee, North London and Thameslink lines prompts me to ask why the potential value of stopping fast Metropolitan line trains there rather than at Finchley Road has never been recognised and is not included in the proposed changes for 2016.

MJ Leppard, 20 St George's Court, London Road, East Grinstead, Sussex, RH19 1QP.

Party politics

On the subject of political parties, while I agree with your comments at the end of the letters in *Railwatch* 101, there is rather more to it. As you point out, within all the main parties there are MPs who are supportive and not supportive of the railways. In our system of voting, it is individual candidates we vote for, not the party as a whole. Railfuture members might choose to take into account the attitude and record of their local candidates. It certainly won't do any harm to check them out and, if necessary, write and ask them in advance of an election. Let them know that this is an important

issue. Also, politics is not confined to the Westminster parliament. Important transport and planning decisions are taken by local and regional government, and the European union.

Turning to the debate over the Green Party, it is certainly not the "no hoper" Simon Norton implies in his letter, at these levels of government. It has significant representation in the Scottish Parliament, London Assembly, and on some city councils, albeit only a few. The power structure at these levels of government often allows individual members, or smaller party groupings, to have significant influence, especially if their members have some specialist understanding. In that respect the Greens are particularly fortunate. The Green MEP Dr Caroline Lucas has made herself the European parliament's expert on sustainable transport and seems to be, from the amount of press and TV coverage she receives, Britain's most active MEP. She is an adamant supporter of modal shift to railways from road and air. In addition, at the last European election, Professor John Whitelegg, one of the country's leading public transport experts, came close to winning a seat in the European parliament for the Greens in the North West constituency. I doubt the cause of sustainable public transport could have had a more able spokesman had he been successful. As I said, there are rail supporters in all the parties, and every member must make their own judgement of the attitude of their local candidates, but it would be foolish to rule out the only party that is unequivocally pro public transport, just because it is still only small.

Chris Padley, Walesby Road, Market Rasen, Lincs LN8 3EY nicola@hagett.freeserve.co.uk

TV horror

I was horrified to read Tony Smale in *Railwatch* 101 saying that Central Trains are introducing TV entertainment screens in their carriages! It's bad enough to have our journeys spoiled by the noise coming from mobile phones or computers, but this really is the last straw.

Don't rail companies realise that one advantage of car travel is the fact that passengers can cut themselves off from the outside world? To be force-fed a diet of "Eastenders", "Richard & Judy" or an England soccer international each time I travelled by train would only lead me to consider making my next journey by any other transport than rail.

Tim Mickleburgh, 33 Littlefield Lane, Grimsby DN31 2AZ timmickleburgh2002@yahoo.co.uk

TV come-uppance

I don't know whether Tony Smale had his tongue in cheek when he

The official watchdog

wrote his article (Reward for Loyalty, *Railwatch* 101) in which he describes the television entertainment screens being introduced by Central Trains as an "attraction".

I cannot imagine anything much worse than being forced to suffer a continual diet of "entertainment and adverts" from TV screens on a train. Televisions are notoriously difficult to ignore and this is a seriously backward move in ruining what should be the most civilised mode of transport.

I read that Central Trains may be broken up as a franchise. If they persist in inflicting televisions on their hapless passengers the sooner they go the better.

John Savage, 16 Lakeside, Tring, Hertfordshire HP23 5HN

More trams

I agree with almost everything Martin Smith said in his article on light rail in *Railwatch* 101.

Like him I am a member of the Light Rail Transit Association and I want to see the return of trams to every town and city which had them before.

Almost all are now considerably larger than in the 1930-50s period when most tram services, which simply needed modernising, were scrapped by short-sighted councils. Isn't it strange this didn't happen to anything like the same extent in Europe? Perhaps continental councils had more intelligent people on them.

We should be campaigning for the return of light rail, trams, call them what you like, on environmental grounds.

In Britain, public transport usually means diesel-engined vehicles and diesel exhaust contains the most cancer causing compound ever discovered.

Colin Rose, 5 Wood Stanway Drive, Bishops Cleeve, Cheltenham, Glos GL52 8TL

Tram debts

Sheffield taxpayers face many years paying off the debt of Sheffield Supertram, according to Peter Rayner in *Railwatch* 100. This is not the case.

The Government is in fact paying

off the debt through the standard spending assessment.

This shows up on South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority's account as being paid by Sheffield City Council but the funding actually comes from the Government.

I fail to see what the involvement of Stagecoach has to do with this. Stagecoach's management of the system has been excellent and they have turned what was a loss maker into a system which makes a small profit. It would of course be far better if buses and trams were integrated but this would not preclude operation via a private company. In French cities like Grenoble and Nantes, buses and trams operate as an integrated system but the trams are still operated by a private company, Transdev.

It is not surprising passenger numbers on the Sheffield system are below those predicted. Labour and Liberal Democrats competed to see who could be most negative so the Blue Line was never built to Stannington where a large number of people live.

Peter Fox, former member of South Yorkshire PTA, 3 Wyvern House, Sheffield S2 4HG

Cheaper way

The illogicality of fare structures is well recognized by most rail travellers. I came across another one recently. To travel from Wellingborough to Nottingham return off-peak costs £17.20 Saver Return. However you can get Cheap Day Returns from Wellingborough to Leicester and from Leicester to Nottingham for a total of only £15.20.

As it is normally necessary to either change train at Leicester or to wait while a connection is made, there should be time to nip out and buy a ticket for the second stage of the journey!

Peter Fleming, 23 Lovers Walk, Dunstable, Beds LU5 4BG peterffleming@yahoo.co.uk

Railfuture and *Railwatch* welcome letters, news items and articles on the railways.

The opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect Railfuture policies.

Leaving money to a good cause

Railfuture fundraiser Peter Harris writes:
As part of my fundraising research I have collected examples and contact details from a number of charities and voluntary organisations including suggestions about how people can include their favourite causes in their wills. For example, leaving money to a good cause can help people stay

below the inheritance tax threshold. If you would like a summary of this information along with some useful contact details, please drop me a line or give me a call: Peter Harris, Membership Promotion and Fundraising Officer, Room 205, Colourworks, Abbot Street, London, E8 3BP, 0161 798 8661. Email: peter.harris@railfuture.org.uk

Railfuture prides itself on being the independent voice for rail users.

But there is also an official watchdog – the Rail Passengers Council and its associated committees in the regions.

The council and the committees have been funded by the Government, via the Strategic Rail Authority.

But now the official watchdog is being prepared for a shake-up.

In September Railfuture president Peter Lawrence, vice-president Michael Caton, user groups officer Tony Smale and chairman Mike Crowhurst met with chairman Stewart Francis and director Anthony Smith.

Mike Crowhurst writes: We had a very useful discussion and came away with a much clearer idea of their plans.

We expressed our reservations about the planned centralisation and abolition of the regional committees, and received some reassurance.

They did accept that it was essential that they retained contact with local grassroots opinion, and we agreed that we could help them in this.

In that context they suggested that we press for regional transport forums in all English regions, and I have written to the Government urging this.

Branches should press Regional Assemblies on this point, where such forums do not already exist.

One rumour which proved to be true was that they are setting up a national call centre on the national rail enquiry service model.

This will be located in Warrington. We were assured that they intend to learn the lessons of NRES and remain customer-friendly. All the new numbers will be cheap rate ones.

In future the RPC can be contacted as follows:

Tel: 0845 3022022. Textphone: 0845 8501354. Fax: 0845 850 1392.

Email: info@railpassengers.org.uk
Website: www.railpassengers.org.uk

Post: Rail Passengers Council, Freepost WA1521, Warrington WA4 6GP.

Local and national RPC offices will henceforth have numbers in the form 0870 336 6xxx, thus: Central Council 6000, Eastern 6065, Midlands 6075, North East 6085, North West 6095, Scotland 6105, Southern 6115, Wales 6125, Western 6135.

The RPC sees its role as twofold: to look after consumers, and to influence policy.

After abolition of the SRA, the RPC will be accountable directly to (and funded by) the Department for Transport, as a "single, freestanding public body".

Different arrangements will apply

in Scotland, Wales, and London. The possibility of RPCs covering other modes such as buses in the long term would depend on the elected regional assemblies – and need to be funded by them.

Finally, we were assured that the RPC intends to continue the Directory of Rail User Groups, and a new printed edition is under consideration.

I mentioned in *Railwatch* 101 that I would be writing again to the Minister, Dr Kim Howells.

No sooner had I done so than there was a reshuffle, but to my surprise a moderately encouraging reply was received from the new minister, Tony McNulty, within a week of his appointment, offering us a meeting in due course.

I have already replied taking up that offer for sometime around December or January, and taking the opportunity to make the point about the need for regional forums as mentioned above.

Tony Smale adds: The RPC has been given the freedom to shape its own future, has consulted numerous bodies and has employed an "organisation change" consultant to provide an independent opinion.

Stuart Francis said the clear message from passengers and others is:

■ The RPC should focus on becoming a first class consumer organisation

■ There is a need to work more closely with other organisations such as Railfuture

■ It should base its arguments on research and survey evidence rather than rely on anecdotal evidence

■ It must empower consumers, providing advice via its website and other means (ie be active, not just reactive)

■ It must seek to influence policy.

It remains to work out how many offices will be required in the new setup, and where they were to be located.

There is a need for the RPC to formulate national policies on issues such as bikes on trains (implying that it needed to transfer resources to national issues and be less bogged down in local campaigns).

Anthony Smith agreed that spiralling costs need to be brought under control, and commented that decision makers at the DfT can be persuaded more readily where evidence is given that past investment has brought tangible improvements to the railway.

It will be the duty of the RPC to give evidence of passenger response to recent investments.

Major reopening schemes are unlikely to find favour in the immediate future, and campaigners would therefore do well to concentrate on incremental developments building on recent successes.