

North East

By Peter Kenyon
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■ ■ Tomorrow's railways

Bernard Garner, director general of Nexus, had some promising news for 25 Railfuture members at a meeting on 18 September. A meeting is planned with Government representatives and local MPs to try to persuade Network Rail to commit to an evaluation of Leamside line reopening. We were also told that money saved by subsidising only one Northern train an hour from Newcastle to Sunderland had been used to fund improvements to Sunderland station. Smart card ticketing technology is expected to be of future benefit on both local and Metro services. Future regional transport grants will have scope for rail as well as road schemes.

On the Metro reinvigoration scheme, Mr Garner emphasised the need for the complete investment package, approximately £500million over 16 years. The 30-year-old system needs infrastructure improvements and a new image both in stations and rolling stock.

An important stage in this process began on 3 November when "expressions of interest" in a contract to run the operations side of Metro were invited by a notice in the Official Journal of The European Union. The seven-year contract will begin on 1 April 2010, with an additional two years if performance is good. The contractor will be responsible for delivering the train service, fleet maintenance and modernisation of the existing fleet of 90 Metrocars, and day-to-day station management. An in-house team will put in a bid. One of the reasons for the success of Metro has been the unitary nature of the operation but under present expectations competitive tendering must take place to obtain the "best value". Revenue control, station cleaning, landscaping and the delivery of capital projects are already subcontracted by the Metro management. The success of this process depends on the efficacy of the supervision of contractors by central management, as we have seen nationally in the case of Railtrack and Network Rail.

Bernard Garner also observed that amendments to the Local Transport Act now in progress through Parliament might lead eventually to closer bus and Metro integration.

He stressed that a similar plan for upgrades by Network Rail and investment in new rolling stock for Northern (especially on Morpeth and Hexham services) were needed if the railway was to meet its full potential in the region.

■ ■ North York Moors Railway

The branch moved to Darlington on Thursday 6 November to hear a stimulating talk by Phil Bustardon on this very successful preserved railway, now benefiting from through running to Whitby. There were crowded trains this summer during the operation of A4 Sir Nigel Gresley, which hauled the train to Grosmont where the service loco took over for the run down the valley. The NYMR railway contributes millions to the local economy by attracting tourists.

■ ■ Morpeth and beyond

Affiliated group SENRUG reports that Northern Rail will again run Sunday trains in December from Morpeth to the Metro Centre calling at Cramlington and Newcastle. Two services will extend northward to Alnmouth, calling at Peggwood, Widdrington and Acklington. At Alnmouth, connections with services to and from Scotland can be made. The group is campaigning for a regular Monday to Saturday service to Alnmouth in addition to the existing two daily local services.

No meaningful dialogue has been established with Arriva about the reduction and retiming of CrossCountry train services at Morpeth.

National Express MD David Franks recently attended a public meeting in Morpeth where better service by East Coast main line trains for and improvements to Morpeth Station were advocated.

Publication of the Network Rail GRIP 3 study into the prospects for passenger services on the Ashington Blyth and Tyne line is expected in December.

Life after Ruth

Before Ruth Kelly gave up being Transport Secretary in order to spend more time with her family, she made a speech extolling the advantages of electric trains over diesel ones.

Unfortunately there seems little chance of her words becoming deeds. One only has to think of the lines crying out for electrification, the Great Western from London Paddington to Bristol, the Midland from St Pancras to Leicester and Sheffield and, on a smaller scale, the Barking-Gospel Oak line in London.

On the line out of London Liverpool Street one has the anomaly of diesel trains to places like Peterborough and Lowestoft running "under the wires".

As for ever having an integrated public transport system in the UK, such as that as described by Malcolm Bulpitt in Switzerland, I wouldn't hold my breath.

Here in Chelmsford, although the new bus station is next to the railway station, one still has to go into the street, across a road and under a bridge to get from one to the other.

The bus station is a disgrace with no waiting room, a lack of toilet facilities and half the buses have to stop in the street outside.

Also, public transport on Sunday is infrequent to say the least.

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Canadian lessons

I travelled on L'Ocean train from Halifax to Montreal recently and the journey gave three systems that could be taken up by our train operating companies.

The timetable had a preface: "The train - a green choice". It went on: "The train represents an ecological and responsible means of transportation - a green choice - with the potential to play an increasingly important role in our efforts, as a society, to steer towards a greener future. We must all do our share and set an example."

Standard class is called "comfort class". Obviously train operators using Pacers would still be classified as "standard" if this change was adopted.

Substitution always gives a refund.

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Wider case for rail

I have recently read an article by Jim Steer repeating what is becoming a bit of a cliché, like the "years of under-investment".

He claims that nobody thought, at the time of privatisation, that we would need a 50% capacity increase, and then another. But that is just what organisations like

Your letters



Railfuture have been banging on about for years, while patiently promoting local improvements, urging reopenings and opposing building projects on potential rail lines-of-route.

In fact, many voices were crying in the wilderness at the sheer folly not only of privatisation, but this particular botched privatisation, looking as it did towards a contracting rail industry.

And with good reasons. Anyone looking at the future of energy could see that an electric railway is at least one possible, and probably the best, solution to oil running out, and we had already experienced one petrol crisis.

There was no great appetite in government or opposition for a massive new bout of road-building, but congestion was becoming an issue, and traffic forecasts were going up and up, and experts and business leaders were worrying about loss of international competitiveness due to poor transport infrastructure. More people needed transport to get to work. The population of Britain was showing no sign of decreasing.

Somebody, sometime, was going to have to do something about the tragic continuing loss of life on the roads. Again, more travel by rail is at least one answer.

Looking abroad, the successes of high-speed trains in Japan, France and Germany were already clear. There was a new Channel Tunnel, just ready to bring large numbers of passengers from France, and the European Union had policies for encouraging increases in rail travel, both passenger and freight. In fact almost everybody everywhere wanted to see more freight go by rail.

By the time of Sir Robert Reid's lean, mean railway it was obvious that many people were travelling by choice on a comfortable, clean, fast rail service, if they got the option.

Chris Green's Network SouthEast demonstrated this with vigour. Rail must have been taking more than 50% of journeys on some routes.

But InterCity was torn apart just as it had got itself together and was making good profits.

"Other Provincial" became "Regional" and made a good financial case for re-equipping with new modern stock which

quickly became packed. It was accepted that rail reopenings or improvements always generated far more extra usage than government experts had forecast.

Rail traffic during the Lawson-Thatcher boom clearly showed the kind of general increase which could be expected in good times, and the Lawson-Thatcher recession wasn't going to last forever.

Nor would it have been so expensive to have increased capacity at that stage, given the funding that has been thrown at the railways at and since privatisation.

Taking all the above into account, it was obvious to a growing body of people, experts and just ordinary citizens with common sense, that, at some point, and maybe quite soon, a big increase in rail capacity was going to be needed.

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Tram trains

I read the article in *Railwatch* 117 by Trevor Bishop with interest.

As far as tram-train is concerned, Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority did put in a bid to Government for the Chester-Altrincham-Manchester line to be used for a tram-train trial. Failing that we wanted the Marple line to be considered. When I was chairman of GMPTA from 2001 to 2008, we did agree to put the East Lancashire Railway in the Transport Innovations Fund bid for commuter services to Manchester. As far as I know this is still the case and if people vote "yes" in the referendum, then it should happen.

I have recently been appointed director of the North West Rail Investment Campaign based at Manchester Airport. Our main objectives are: Manchester Hub, additional rolling stock, station refurbishment, improved rail services between Liverpool and Manchester and high-speed rail.

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What is it?

Trevor Bishop's North West review (*Railwatch* 117) talks of "train-trams" being tested on the East Lancashire Railway. But could someone please tell me what a "train-tram" is, as I appear to have missed something?

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Editors' note: A new concept for Britain. See page 13

Revenue possibilities

I refer to the Severnside Local Action report in *Railwatch* Novem-

ber 2008 which refers to the potential for running regular services from Taunton to Minehead over the West Somerset Railway.

I think that the idea of the WSR running their own trains into Taunton is really a "red herring" for a number of reasons.

The WSR company is undoubtedly right to say that such a free-standing operation would require significant subsidy.

As was pointed out many times at closure proceedings during the Beeching era, branch lines to seaside resorts earned their keep on the basis of the revenue they contributed to the national rail network, not from ticket sales for journeys solely over the particular branch line.

The costs of providing rolling stock, upgrading the infrastructure and operating the trains as a public service are very unlikely to be covered just by people buying tickets between Taunton and Minehead - and are certainly not affordable by a small private railway company.

On the other hand, the argument that trains are not needed because people in West Somerset have bus passes, completely misses the point. There are around 20,000 people living along the route of the WSR - but perhaps 20 million living elsewhere in the country within reasonable travelling distance of Minehead. The majority of potential passenger miles (and thus potential revenue) to and from Minehead is thus likely to be in the form of long distance journeys from other regions. It is true that there is a connecting

bus service from Taunton station to Minehead, but this is likely to be capturing only a very limited proportion of the total travel market. And, let's remember, the bus service is also heavily subsidised by virtue of the large number of its passengers who are travelling on concessionary passes.

If regular trains are to run between Taunton and Minehead again, the appropriate public authorities need to take the initiative and commission feasibility work to examine issues such as who should run the trains, capital and revenue costs, socio-economic benefits and, very importantly, the potential for contributory revenue to the national rail network.

Such studies may in fact show that the contributory revenue would be so large that trains to Minehead could actually be provided at no net cost to the public purse. But until the appropriate studies have been undertaken, we shall never know.

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Wessex

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■ ■ Portsmouth line

Passengers on the Portsmouth line continue to suffer from a diminished service in terms of comfort. When Stagecoach Rail arbitrarily removed popular class 442 'Wessex Electric' trains from service in 2006 soon after being re-granted the South West Trains franchise, suburban-style class 450 trains were deployed to many services on the Portsmouth main line. Arranged with 2x3 seating in standard class and 2x2 in first class, these trains have little luggage space and no fixed buffet. Journey times on the line are longer than they were 50 or more years ago. The branch is working with local groups to press for a better deal for these passengers.

■ ■ Rolling stock to match the old Wessex Electrics

It is probably unrealistic to expect that the Wessex Electrics will ever return although some are being refurbished for the new Gatwick Express. But there could be a partial solution if some of the much-heralded and as yet unordered 1,300 new coaches were to be deployed by SWT to the Portsmouth line. Although it is rumoured that all those earmarked for SWT will be based on the 20-metre class 450 design, 18 four-car trains could be built to full mainline standard with 2x2 seating in standard class and other features such as luggage/bicycle space.

■ ■ Overcrowding

We reported in *Railwatch* 117 that the issue which most concerned those who attended the Salisbury conference was overcrowding, in its many forms. Although relevant statistics are not yet available, rail travel appears still to be on the increase despite the impending recession. Many trains leaving Waterloo on a Saturday evening are overcrowded for the full length of their journey. For example, the 17.50 to Salisbury has only three crowded coaches. On a weekday it has six. Why can't it be formed of six coaches on a Saturday?

■ ■ Open day

TravelWatch SouthWest is organising a stand at Bournemouth Station on Thursday 8 January and Railfuture plans to be well represented. Our aim will be to publicise plans for the further development of rail services in the Wessex area, with a by-product of recruiting new members to Railfuture.

■ ■ AGM in Bournemouth

The branch annual general meeting will be held in the United Reformed Church Hall near Bournemouth Station on Saturday 21 March 2009.



WELL REMEMBERED: An SWT Wessex Electric unit pictured at Brockenhurst in January 2007
Picture: Mattingham/Flickr.com