

Future franchises

Railfuture chairman Mike Crowhurst submitted a brief response to the Department for Transport's consultation on future rail franchising in April.

He referred the DfT to the comprehensive response to the East Coast franchise consultation submitted on behalf of several branches by Martin Murphy, Railfuture's North East branch chairman.

Martin's submission covered issues relating to all franchises, as well as fares and rolling stock.

Points specific to East Coast (or their equivalent) would also apply to other inter-city franchises.

Mike stressed the following issues:

Franchise length

While there are arguments both ways, on balance we favour longer franchises, albeit with break points, as we see benefits particularly for major investment.

More flexible franchises

We favour giving as much discretion as possible to franchise holders to improve their product and to go after additional traffic if they see the potential to do so and have or can obtain the resources, but we would want to see minimum standards and levels of service specified in the franchise, as now. We are therefore broadly in sympathy with the approach proposed by the DfT, assuming that franchising is to continue.

Savings

The franchise consultation document could be read as encouraging

franchisees to make savings by cutting services. While Railfuture supports train operators making savings through increased efficiency, this must not be by cutting services or other facilities (for example, booking office hours). The department must be able to veto such moves. Franchises should be clearly worded to make this clear.

Enhancements

The franchise document specifies "greater weight on ... level of output and any innovative proposals" which Railfuture welcomes.

However the document reiterates that "The franchise would be awarded [as now] to the lowest cost deliverable bid." Railfuture believes this is inconsistent.

A bidder might submit the lowest tender for the basic minimum spec, but a high tender for enhancements of either type, while a competitor submits a lower overall bid. It should be made clear that the latter bidder would be more favourably considered.

Railfuture would also urge the restoration of co-signatory status to local transport authorities.

In the longer term Railfuture would urge an in-depth review of the role of franchising, to consider whether or not it operates to the benefit of the customer, the taxpayer or indeed the industry.

Railfuture is not convinced that it does. In the meantime there may be advantages in retaining one or more franchises in the public sector as comparators.

money for Railfuture. But Railfuture's contact with a dealer has been lost. If you know of a dealer who will pay for stamps and rail tickets, please contact *Railwatch* co-editor Ray King.

❖ Deutsche Bahn has offered a special national rail card to football fans with a free month for every round the German team remain in the running for the World Cup. The Fan Bahn Card gives 25% off rail tickets.

❖ Paper tickets became a thing of the past in Amsterdam in June as the national public transport smart card which is already valid on trains extended its reach to buses and trams. More information: www.ov-chipkaart.nl

❖ Northern Ireland's public transport operator Translink has launched its iLink smart card which is valid on buses and trains.

❖ A smart card ticket may be introduced in some British cities within five years if the Department for Transport's £20 million grant is not cut by the coalition Government. London's Oyster card was introduced in 2003 for bus and Underground but some train operators failed to fit readers at stations until this year.

LOCAL ACTION

North East

By Peter Kenyon

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■■ Action report to members

The branch AGM was held in Darlington in March. The existing committee and officers agreed to carry on for another year. Robert Whitehouse, the recently appointed heritage line community rail officer, gave an overview of the state of the Darlington-Bishop Auckland route. Originally built as a coal line, some of the stations are not well situated for the communities they serve, but overall passenger numbers are increasing. Robert has a keen eye for development potential which augurs well for the future. Durham County Council has included a £1 million upgrade for Bishop Auckland station in its preliminary budget proposals.

■■ Network Rail and Northern plans

Branch representatives attended the Network Rail presentation in Leeds concerning the Northern rail utilisation strategy, and a meeting with the Network Rail senior route planner. The branch has also been involved in the studies associated with the *Delivering a Sustainable Transport System* project funded by the Department for Transport.

■■ Weardale Railway serves the community

Following the recent link-up with the Network Rail line at Bishop Auckland, the Weardale Railway proposes to run between four and seven daily community services between Stanhope and Bishop Auckland operated by a 141 diesel unit. The company has advertised for staff to work alongside volunteers. For details see www.weardale-railway.org.uk

■■ Northern stakeholders meet at Carlisle

Members of the branch and users groups attended the stakeholders event at Carlisle. Northern aspirations are limited by a lack of adequate rolling stock and the strictures of the national timetable. The rapid response in Workington after the floods proved what can be done when funds are available and ingenuity is used to meet an emergency.

■■ Rail transport centre stage at Morpeth

In January a wide-ranging meeting was held with representatives of Northern Rail and Passenger Focus which revealed both goodwill on the part of the operator and lack of action on matters first raised in 2006. A lively public meeting in Morpeth Town Hall in March, organised by South East Northumberland Rail User Group, was addressed by Conservative, Green, Labour and Liberal Democrat election candidates. All candidates supported the group's objectives, especially the reopening of the Ashington Blyth and Tyne line to passenger services. Charters continue to penetrate this freight preserve, notably with the visit of Tornado in April, K1 62005 in May and a projected visit by Jubilee 5690 Leander in October, hopefully to be followed by the group's own diesel charter. For further details see www.senrug.co.uk

■■ Beer and briefing in the Tyne Valley

Together with the Campaign for Real Ale, the Tyne Valley rail users group has produced a second edition of *Whistle Stops*, a colour guide to pubs along the Tyne Valley line. As well as featuring hosteleries at open stations the leaflet promotes Plus Bus tickets available from Prudhoe and Hexham stations which bring pubs in such places as Allendale and Bellingham within reach. The group circulated a briefing to all parliamentary candidates in constituencies along the line. This should provide the basis for further dialogue with successful candidates.

IN BRIEF

❖ The Railfuture 2006 Stoke conference report has been updated to reflect progress since then. A new booklet has been produced in the same A5 format as the more recent London 2008, Northallerton 2009 and Corby 2009 reports, the last of which was circulated to attendees and others who ordered it, at the end of April. We apologise for that delay. The revised Stoke 2006 report and copies of Corby 2009 may be ordered at £2 each from Railfuture Reports, 67 Guildford Park Avenue, Guildford GU2 7NH.

❖ The Railfuture leaflet aimed at visitors to tourist attractions and heritage railways has continued to generate responses. Comments about local train services have been passed to Railfuture branches. On 17 April, at a meeting of the publicity team, all responses received in the previous six months were put into a bag and one drawn out. The lucky winner was Mr J Lees of Wolverhampton, who has received a £25 gift voucher as a prize.

❖ Used postage stamps and old rail tickets can be collected to raise