

**North East
Branch
Bulletin**

railfuture

**April
2020**

News and Views about Railways in the North East of England

From the Editor's Chair

Welcome to the April 2020 RailFuture North East Bulletin. This edition is, because of the current problems in getting it printed and distributed, only available electronically. It is being emailed to members and will be on our

website. We've added a number of links to items either on the Railfuture Website or to websites run by other local rail groups – all of these will offer more detail than we can provide in this newsletter. These links are embedded in the text so if you see something that looks like [this](#), and this link takes you to the NE Home page on the Railfuture Website, just click and you will be transported to the appropriate page on the internet.

A message from the Branch Chair



I find myself writing this from a position of 'Lockdown' at home. I, together with the rest of the committee, hope that you are all managing to steer clear of the horrid Covid-19 virus.

The current situation means, of course, that we have had to cancel our branch AGM on 25 April, we don't know whether

the current restrictions on meeting will still be in place by then, but we have to assume that they, or something very similar, will.

One further change to report is that Tony Walker has chosen to stand down as editor of this Bulletin. Tony has been a stalwart of the branch committee for many years and has given freely of his time over many aspects of our activities. He has edited the Branch Bulletin for as long as I can remember with great skill and, as he seeks to reduce his level of involvement, I should like to thank him for his work on our behalf and I hope that we, as a committee, can continue to benefit from his sageness and wisdom in the years to come.

We are very fortunate that we have modern communications, so the work of the branch has continued and, in fact, has become more relevant as train companies have brought in their reduced "Key worker" timetables. Down here on Teesside, TransPennine's service to Middlesbrough and Redcar saw a reduction to 2 trains each way daily, though these have now been increased to 4. These trains are the only ones that serve Yarm and I had been able, with the support of the Tees Valley Combined Authority, to get

TransPennine and Grand Central to agree that, during this emergency, most Grand Central trains will also stop there to give key workers a better chance of travelling to their places of employment. Unfortunately, I have now heard that Grand Central are suspending their train operations from 4 April until further notice. Just before the emergency really hit, Railfuture North East received a request from the new Sedgefield MP for a meeting to discuss the opportunities for rail in his area. I, together with Tony Walker from our committee, met up with him on 13 March and we were able to have a good discussion about our campaigns. In particular, a new station for Ferryhill, which is in his constituency was of interest to him.

Further north, there have been positive comments from government about the possibility of bringing passenger trains back to the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line, and from local authorities about funding studies for better local services on the main line north of Morpeth. Both of these campaigns are being led by our colleagues in SENRUG, to whom we wish every success.

We face many challenges ahead, not least in managing to secure any investment in the rail network as the country recovers from the financial impact of the current Covid-19 virus. However, it is imperative that we keep trying, climate change isn't going away any time soon and air quality in our towns and cities, whilst temporarily improved by the current decimation of traffic levels, needs concerted action to achieve a permanent turn around. Rail is already a low carbon transport mode and electric traction can bring this down to almost zero, depending on how the power is generated. There is progress towards alternative fuels, most notably hydrogen, where Tees Valley Combined Authority are proposing that local services there are a major test bed for this form of propulsion. Railfuture supports this, especially as the hydrogen will be sourced from an industrial by-product that is presently burned off.

The beginning of March saw Northern, the operator of our local services, transferred from Arriva to the Department for Transport's

"Operator of last resort". The problems faced by the operator, and their impact on the level of service – particularly in West Yorkshire and the North West, had led to so much bad publicity, that the move was probably inevitable. We have to now try to get some representation of the "Advisory panel" that is now being set up – or will be once the current emergency situation is resolved. At present, the make up of the panel is largely local authority based, the same stakeholders as sit on the board of Transport for the North. A voice from the rail users' sector is vitally important. North East branch is in communication with Yorkshire and North West branches to try and take this forward.

Without our members, Railfuture wouldn't exist to fight for better services on our railways.

Best wishes to all of you in these unprecedented times.

Keith Simpson
Branch chairman

Electrification and capacity priorities.

We all know that much of life is currently on hold. The likely effects on the viability of the UK's rail industry are dire in the short term but in the longer term we will return to rail growth, and to all the issues of lack of capacity on our rail network to accommodate it. In such a situation it is wise to use the current 'life on hold situation' to prepare for the future.

At a national level Railfuture has been using the time to give some thought to the issue of electrification. An early draft of the paper, that will eventually be available on the RailFuture website has been circulated to branches for comments about priorities and to ask if there are any local schemes that Ian might have missed.

The RailFuture proposal is to build on the work of the current electrification teams now nearing the end of the current electrification plan. They should complete the programme they were set up to deliver and then move on to deliver incremental programmes in specific geographic areas. A continuous programme of work will allow skills to be retained by the industry in all

parts of the country. However, just because a proposed development isn't actually in our area doesn't mean it won't be of benefit to us. We support all proposals for electrification but we particularly welcome proposals in the draft of the paper for electrifying the York to Manchester line and all of the proposals that facilitate electric haulage of freight.

As one of our committee members has said "Isn't it really a question of what shouldn't be electrified rather than what should?". On the issue of timing another member makes the point that "in the next 10 years we'll see the increasing change to hybrid if not fully electric cars. Which means road travel will leapfrog rail and become the environmentally way to travel, unless rail electrifies fast."

Your RailFuture NE Committee are responding to this Railfuture paper with the following priorities for the North East:

***Newcastle to Carlisle** where the line comes into its own, as a diversionary route, whenever disaster occurs on the ECML & WCML. It is important to note that not all current, or future, passenger stock on these routes is bi-mode. There is also the potential to route Teesport to Mossend freight traffic via this route avoiding unwired lines around the Edinburgh suburbs. When the coal mine at Whitehaven comes on stream it could be possible for electric haulage of this coking coal in trainloads from Carlisle to Teesport. Finally, there is another real local benefit: the present route has a linespeed limitation of 65mph, but cascaded electric units would be able to speed up the timings on this route with their better acceleration and ability to negotiate the uphill gradients at line speed.*

*We have suggested a number of small additions to improve local services in **SE Northumberland**. These include electrification of the reversing siding at Morpeth and, in the event that we win the argument for a much more regular local service running north of Morpeth, Newcastle to MetroCentre.*

***The Northallerton-Eaglescliffe-Teesport** route is currently being promoted by the Tees Valley Mayor for enhancement to W12 loading gauge. A short extension of this proposal, together with electrification between Leeds and York, would*

*also allow for electric stock to be used between Redcar and Manchester Airport. As a further addition to the Northallerton - Eaglescliffe line electrification of the **Stillington line** would provide an alternative route, in effect the much needed slow lines, to the ECML. These lines have great potential for capacity enhancement for both Teesside-bound services and those linking our area of the North-East with Tyneside and Scotland in general.*

***The Durham Coast:** Once the new Metro stock arrives, with its ability to run on battery power for up to 45 minutes, the Coast line's case for electrification all the way through to Newcastle at 25kv increases considerably.*

Northern Advisory Panel

A few weeks ago, we read that the new, government owned, Northern was to set up an advisory panel. Great news we thought until we saw the list of the members of the panel. In themselves they are, we are certain, all proper people to be on such a panel but there was a problem. The panel didn't include any individuals from County Durham, Tyne and Wear, and Northumberland. After some discussion amongst the branch committee we issued a press release that drew attention to this omission and asked the Department For Transport to appoint a local authority representative from the North East Joint Transport Committee, to augment the expert panel and confirm there is a level playing field across all the regions in the north. The [full text of the release](#) is available on the North East pages of the RailFuture website.

A number of local papers took up the story and it came to the notice of Richard George - Chair of DfT OLR Holdings Limited (DOHL). DOHL is the government owned company that is, for the foreseeable future, responsible for managing the former Northern Franchise. Richard George then wrote to the branch to say that he was aware of the disquiet about the make-up of the panel and that he has indicated, at the Transport for the North Board, that the issue would be revisited at an appropriate point in the future. He made reference to the present Covid-19 crisis and pointed out that meetings of the

stakeholder panel had, in the circumstances, been cancelled. He also pointed out that the context of the stakeholder panel had always been “purely advisory’ with the “governance and powers” remaining within the Rail North Partnership of the Dft and TfN. The make-up of the panel was not designed to be a representative body but was “a simple attempt to reach out for advice from a small diverse group”. Richard George finished the letter by assuring us that he has noted our concerns and that they will be revisited at an appropriate point in the future.

We’ve made some progress but now we will have to start to think about the detail of what we want. Would the simple addition of one more member from County Durham, Tyne and Wear, or Northumberland be the answer? What about the other areas of the North who also don’t appear to have member on the panel from their particular area? What will be the remit of the panel? Is there space for Rail User Groups of RailFuture? How will we find out what happens at meetings of the panel and how will we be able to influence their deliberations?

Meeting the new MPs

Paul Howell, the recently elected Conservative MP for Sedgefield, asked to meet with the North East Branch of RailFuture. He was particularly interested to get our views on the Government’s willingness to consider some reopening of rail lines originally closed under the 1963 Beeching Plan. In particular he was interested in the Leamside route from Ferryhill to Pelaw. He wanted to acquaint himself with some contemporary railway information so that he would be in a position to “bang the appropriate drum” at Westminster on behalf of the NE.

Paul hails from Ferryhill and so ‘local’ issues are of special concern to him. He is currently an elected member of Durham County Council though he is in process of resigning his seat. The bulk of his work career had been with the Blue Circle Cement organization

Tony Walker and Keith Simpson, on behalf of the branch, pointed out that rail investment in the NE had lagged way behind that in London,

the SE and Scotland and that there were no major NE infrastructure improvements currently approved and in the pipeline.

Tunnel enlargement near Eaglescliffe to accommodate larger freight boxes is supported by Paul, and Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen, but as yet no news of if and when this will happen. Most line speeds in the region had remained virtually unaltered over the past 40 years and scheduled journey time between Middlesbrough and Newcastle was 75 minutes, painfully slow and was limited to an hourly DMU service. Keith flagged up the time saving that would be achieved if the Stillington freight route was to be upgraded for passenger train use.

Tony Walker noted that there were four direct lines between Glasgow and Edinburgh (all electrified) providing regular services between those two cities. Yet the overall population of the Glasgow and Edinburgh conurbations was not vastly different to that of Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle combined. NE local services had been ‘hung out to dry’ over many years with a resultant detrimental effect on the region’s economy.



The Leamside Line as it is today. The alignment is still there but the rest of the line is just a shadow of its former self.

Addressing the particular interest in the Leamside line we pointed out that in 1999,

Railtrack had decided to press ahead

with a reinstatement scheme for Leamside on the grounds that additional capacity was required to both create more space on the ECML by diverting freight trains from it, and in order to make provision for development of local passenger service links between Middlesbrough, Ferryhill, Belmont (Durham), Washington, Heworth (Metro Interchange) and Newcastle. Durham County Council was engaged as a co-partner in this proposed reopening and given responsibility for developing a parkway station at Belmont and (possibly) a station at Ferryhill. Preliminary clearance and new fencing work got under way

during 2000. The following year *Railtrack* was declared insolvent and reverted to Government control under the name *Network Rail*. The proposed Leamside scheme was discontinued and the line left to decay.

In terms of the contemporary case for reinstating Leamside, Keith emphasized the importance of developing an enhanced local passenger network linking key settlements, especially Washington, population close to 60,000. Also, Leamside still had enormous potential in terms of its diversionary capability from ECML, particularly in event of any operational mishap on that line or, importantly, in event of any major structural failures between Ferryhill and Newcastle. Realistically, it seemed as though the major “push” for Leamside reinstatement would likely come from the North East Joint Transport Committee in conjunction with TfN.

Paul was asked what he saw as his priority in the near future. Answer -it was to flag up the need for a new station at Ferryhill. He said even in his first few weeks as an MP, a surprising number of local constituents had mentioned the need for



There is still a road sign to the village of Ferryhill Station. All we want is a station to go with the sign

this to him. Keith rehearsed some of the reasons in support of the project, such as the fairly large catchment area a new station would serve, plus the fact that it would greatly aid people wanting to travel north not only from Ferryhill itself, but from the likes of Spennymoor and Bishop Auckland. And if *Northern* did eventually deliver on the original franchise promise to deliver a new ‘connect’ service between Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Carlisle, and that service was routed via Stillington, then the business case for Ferryhill station would be further enhanced.

Keith subsequently wrote to Paul and suggested that it might be helpful for us to get together again (possibly after the country had returned

to ‘normal’) and explore further rail and related transport issues.

RailFuture North East has been campaigning for some time to re-open the [Leamside Line](#) and build a [station at Ferryhill](#). Click on the links to read more about these campaigns

Are Network Rail Getting the Message?

The plans being developed for both HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail require an uplift to 9 trains per hour on the ECML, north of Northallerton but the current ECML infrastructure cannot accommodate any more trains over and above today’s levels. To meet this future demand, we learn that Network Rail have conducted a study entitled ‘What is required to make the rail network between Church Fenton and Newcastle ready for 2030 and beyond.’ This study is due to be concluded and published by April 2020 but the North East Joint Transport Committee (NEJTC) held on March 17th was given a glimpse of the “emerging findings”.

These “emerging findings” are encouraging because they reflect many of our region’s long-standing concerns and aspirations – but does it go far enough? No doubt the branch will want to take a view on this. Also, it is important to note that the report does not represent any commitment to actually fund improvement schemes and the NEJTC comments that “all recommendations are for progression of interventions for further development, and their ultimate delivery is subject to a detailed understanding of affordability and value for money”.

So, what is in the report. The NEJTC were told that the report suggests:

- Lengthening of bay platforms at Newcastle Central to accommodate longer terminating NPR and HS2 trains
- New track near Bensham Curve to enable segregation of freight and high-speed passenger services on the approach to Newcastle station from the south. *[We ask if this could this allow the extension of a*

Berwick to Newcastle local service, currently the subject of a SENRUG campaign, to a new station at Team Valley]

- Reinstatement the Leamside line in part or full to enable the segregation of freight and high-speed passenger services and increase the number of passenger services that could use the ECML to 9 trains per hour. Freight would be fully or partially diverted via a reopened Leamside. Opening up of Leamside would also enable the opportunity for local passenger services to operate on the line.
- Options to support new services on the Durham Coast Line in the form of more local, regional or freight services along the Durham Coast south of Sunderland. North of Sunderland the Tyne and Wear Metro is seeking to run 6 trains per hour and Northern want paths for 2 trains per hour (including Northern Connect), leaving little scope for further increases. However, in accordance with Sunderland City Council aspirations for better local and regional connectivity the study identifies constraints and possible solutions. Outside of the JTC area it is noted that Hartlepool Station would require a second platform before additional services could be run.
- Freight improvements via Eaglescliffe and the Stillington Branch to enable freight to divert away from the ECML at Northallerton to re-join the ECML at Ferryhill and then use the Leamside line either in part or in full.
- Darlington, Northallerton and York, all to the south of our region, are seen as requiring significant interventions to facilitate increased number of train services to the North East.

Rail Users Groups



Saltburn Line User Group, SLUG to its friends, was formed in the late 1980s. Until then, everything had run along quite nicely, trains were essentially reliable, usually formed of

refurbished Class 101 diesel multiple units, mainly in 2 coach formations, but occasionally 3. A few years previously 4 car units weren't

uncommon. Then, in 1986, the Pacers arrived (the Class 143s that are now in South Wales and the South West). Regional Railways hailed them as a new dawn, the timetable was rewritten, on the basis of all trains between Darlington and Saltburn stopping at all stations and taking 55 minutes, conveniently giving a 5 minute turn back at both ends of the line. It gave little scope for recovering from delays – and then the Pacers showed that they weren't very reliable. The service reliability thus fell off a cliff and the passengers voted with their feet. Sometimes 2 or 3 consecutive services were cancelled, often with no information available as to when a train could be expected. Around this time a report was published suggesting that all railways east of the East Coast Main Line had a questionable future. A number of regular users, most of whom had an interest in railways, came together and out of this SLUG was born.

Over the years, SLUG has tried to work with the train operators to publicise the line – and to tell them when things aren't right and, generally a good rapport has grown up. A number of years ago, we even promoted railtours from Saltburn to the Settle and Carlisle line (With Green Arrow), to Chester and to Fort William. This activity became separate and still operates as Saltburn Railtours.

In recent years we have seen various improvements to the service offered on The Saltburn Line, for many years there was a break in the 2 trains/hour service in the morning peak with a full hour between services, this was corrected in December 2018 and since December 2019 we have had TransPennine services extended to Redcar Central. There's more to be achieved, particularly better early and late services, and better connectivity from the line to elsewhere. In short – there is still work to be done!

RailFuture North East works with

- [The Saltburn Line Users Group](#)
- [North East Coastliners](#)
- [SENRUG](#)
- [Tyne Valley Rail Users Group](#)

All groups are welcome to contribute to this bulletin.

Tees Valley Strategic Transport Plan – A summary



The Tees Valley Strategic Transport Plan has been published after a consultation period.

The plan takes an overarching view of transport in the Tees Valley area (The 4 former County Cleveland authorities

and the Borough of Darlington), which forms the southern end of the area of primary interest for Railfuture North East and looks at the years 2020 to 2030.

The plan has much to commend it to those of us interested in the enhancement of the rail system, both for passenger and freight use.

There are aspirations for a minimum of 2 trains per hour on all routes contained within Tees Valley, additional main line connectivity on the Durham Coast line, and additional through services from the Redcar and Saltburn area. The plan calls for line improvements between Northallerton and Eaglescliffe. Gauge clearance and provision for future electrification would obviate the need for further structure modifications in the future

It is well known that the Tees Valley Mayor has brought Teesside International Airport back into local ownership. There are plans to significantly increase the number of flights operating and he has expressed a desire to bring the railway station back into regular use, it currently 'enjoys' one train towards Darlington on Sundays only. To make that viable, there will have to be some sort of transport arrangement between the station and the airport terminal.

There are plans for new industrial and commercial facilities on the former steelworks area between Middlesbrough and Redcar. These will be progressed under a South Tees Development Corporation and will be co-ordinated with the facilities at Teesport, which has the deepest berths available for shipping on the east coast of England. It also has a significant logistics and distribution role with considerable container traffic through the port. Rail is seen as a significant contributor to the

connectivity here, both for freight movement and, potentially, for commuting. Whether or not the currently mothballed station at British Steel Redcar will prove to be in a viable position for such use remains to be seen, otherwise there could be a totally new station built.

The plan looks to developing alternative fuels for transport, particularly hydrogen, which is available locally as an industrial by-product. There are proposals for a fleet of 10 trains to be modified to run on this fuel, with a fuelling facility at Lackenby. The prototype trains will be converted from electric multiple units, with hydrogen fuel cells generating electricity to feed traction batteries.

All in all, the plan seems to have a positive attitude towards rail, and we look forward to engaging with Tees Valley Combined Authority in its implementation.

Local Government changes, and the introduction of Mayoral Authorities, mean that there are only two 'Transport Authorities' in our region. As well as Tees Valley we have a North East Joint Transport Committee that includes representatives from both the North East Combined Authority and the North of Tyne Mayoral Authority. Transport Authorities have to produce a strategic plan – and must consult with the public before the final version is produced. The Tees Valley Plan has now been published and the North East Joint Transport Committee [covering County Durham, Tyne and Wear, and Northumberland] are about to start their consultation process. It should be available for comment between July and September. Further details will be available on the North East pages of the Railfuture website nearer the time.

Rails in Weardale

And now some great news. The Weardale Line, an 18 mile stretch of railway from Bishop Auckland to Eastgate, has been bought out of administration and the new owners have some exciting plans.

Up until recently the line was owned by Iowa Pacific and trains on the line were operated, albeit only seasonally, by a combination of the Weardale Railway Trust and Weardale Railways Community Interest Company. Passenger services have been operated by a Heritage diesel unit which provides excellent views of the outstanding Dales scenery and the multiple river

crossings – and don't forget that this is an area of outstanding natural beauty.

So, who are the new owners? On their Facebook page the Auckland Project describe themselves as “a heritage, arts and faith destination located in Bishop Auckland in North East England” with “a mission to revitalise the future of this former industrial town through employment, training and educational opportunities.” Amongst their initial ambitions was to “transform Auckland Castle, once a private palace for England's only



A Class 37 terminates at Stanhope in the very early days of the preserved railway.

Prince Bishops, into an internationally significant destination, which will draw visitors from across the UK and abroad”.

They aimed to “oxygenate the surrounding region and bring

with it the means to invigorate Bishop Auckland, increasing opportunities and aspirations for both local people and businesses alike”. They say that their purchase of Weardale Railway will be a further catalyst for change and will add to their overall investment of £200m in the area and will create around 50 new jobs.

The Auckland Project already operates Auckland Castle and Gardens, runs the Kynren show on summer evenings, and presents great art at the Mining Gallery – and will soon be going international as they open a new building devoted to Spanish art. Not only do they already offer a great day out, but the daytime activities are already accessible by rail from Darlington.

The project intends to improve rail services to the town by working with partners, including the dedicated team at the Weardale Railway Trust and an, as yet unnamed, train operating company with the aim of ensuring that “an immediate impact is felt right across the Tees Valley and throughout County Durham.”

The Project has the support of local MPs and the Weardale Railway Trust.

What would RailFuture North East like to see happen under the new management? First thoughts are that we'd like to see a half hourly service from Teesside up to Bishop Auckland – and possibly beyond. We'd like to see an evening service that would allow easy access to the Kynren shows that, as we know to our cost, are really only accessible by road transport. We'd like to see trains into the upper dale and AONB running from the 'main' station in Bishop Auckland – and not from a separate platform some hundred metres up the line, a platform that has no shelter and requires a walk across a car park and down a tree lined footpath that can sometime feel slightly threatening. No doubt there will; be other suggestions we will want to make and we'll be talking to our colleagues on the [Bishop Line Community Rail Partnership](#).

For more general information about the area see the [Auckland Project](#), who have a comprehensive website with lots of ideas for activities, and a recent [SENUG Newsletter](#) that includes an article on a day out in the area.

We are always looking for photographs to illustrate articles in this bulletin. Any photographers out there who would like to share their local railway pictures – please get in touch.

Railfuture is a national, independent body that advocates a modern and effective passenger and freight railway in Great Britain.

The North East is one of twelve branches in England along with Railfuture Scotland and **Railfuture** Wales that make up the national organisation. Web site: www.railfuture.co.uk. Twitter: @Railfuture and RailfutureNEast.

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