

railfuture northeast

Minutes of Committee Meeting Wednesday 30 September 2020 – Zoom on-line conference facility commencing 1800 hrs

Participants: Keith Simpson – Chair: (DS), Alison Cosgrove – representing National Board of RF: (AC), Malcolm Chainey (MC), Dennis Fancett (DF), Dave Shaw (DS), Ian Walker (IW), Tony Walker (AW), Peter Wood (PW).

1 Apologies: Peter Walker (abroad). Damian Bell and Trevor Watson unable to participate due to lack of suitable equipment.

2 Notes of previous meeting held on 29 July 2020 – approved.

3 Matters arising:

- (i) **Update on Branch Website.** DS has introduced a “latest news” section. ECML developments – he is trying to incorporate material from the Network Rail proposals that effect Co Durham esp. in relation to Stillington and Leamside. Has shortened the Leamside information log and mentioned Branch’s recent contact about the line with Council for Protection of Rural England (CPRE). DS intends to insert an advert at bottom of the campaigns page inviting readers specifically to join RFNE as well as *Railfuture* national. DF suggested the order of these adverts be reversed i.e. emphasis ought to be on getting people into *Railfuture* national and into the branch afterwards.
DS has drafted a revised piece on Ashington/Blyth for the campaigns page – will send this to DF for vetting before publication.
DS emphasised importance of him being advised by colleagues concerning developments relating to the campaigns so that the material could be kept up to date.
- (ii) **Creation of a Branch Facebook Page.** IW has a contact who would be willing to assist in designing same. Some delay in progressing, however, because of Covid situation.
- (iii) **Leamside Facebook group.** AW had contacted one of the group’s administrators, Matthew Ditch, who has agreed to RFNE placing a general invite on the group’s site asking anyone interested in progressing Leamside reinstatement to get in touch with RFNE. Accordingly AW to draft a suitable piece – this to be circulated to Committee for approval prior to it going ‘public’.

- (iv) **Further contact with CPRE.** AW has not progressed this to date – will follow up with Richard Cowen of CRPE asap.
KS has mailed both Sharon Hodgson, MP for Washington, and Mary Foy MP for Durham City in connection with Leamside. Mrs Hodgson welcomed news of RFNE interest, but so far no comment back from Ms Foy.
- (v) **Branch Bulletin.** No developments. IW thought time ripe for publication of even a very brief bulletin updating on such as Northumberland Line and Leamside. No decision how this might be taken forward though IW will give the matter ‘some thought’.

4 Branch Matters:

- (i) **Next Branch meeting-cum-AGM.** KS ruled out contemplating any face-to-face gatherings in near future given present Covid situation. MC in favour of a Zoom arrangement for either an AGM and/or a Branch meeting even though he recognised some members would be unable to participate because of lack of suitable computers or a reticence to learn how to engage with Zoom. Basically we would just have to live with this since there seemed to be no alternative.
- (ii) **Next Committee Meeting:** Again Zoom: **date Tuesday 24 November commencing 1800 hrs.** Branch members to be invited to view the proceedings (participate?). Applications to IW.
- (iii) **Note-taker for this meeting:** IW
- (iv) **Yorkshire Branch Meeting on Zoom, 26 September. Should RFNE consider similar?** Both AC and AW had joined the Yorkshire event – not aware if any other RFNE members had ‘attended’. Thought there had been approx. 28 participants. AC impressed with the organisation though AW felt content of keynote speaker somewhat ‘low-key’. RFNE should only do likewise provided a “suitable” key-note speaker could be identified to head it up. Among names suggested were Tony Baxter currently Regional Director of *Northern* but due to leave shortly. (Possibly his successor could be invited, but only after he/she had been in post for a while?) Others mentioned were Anna Weekes from *Cross Country* or Anne-Jane Hunter of *Network Rail*. (Seems Yorkshire Branch are mooting possibility of a joint Zoom session involving all the RF branches whose areas are served by *Northern*. More information awaited).

- (v) **National Branches & Groups Day – Sat 24 October commencing 1400 hrs – Zoom:** DF shared the agenda which had just been issued – will major on Rail’s post-Covid recovery strategy. DF will attend on behalf of NE Branch.

Mention made of *Railfuture* (national) webinar scheduled for Saturday 3 October, subject ‘Attracting passengers back to rail’. AC rated this an important event. AW agreed to represent *RFNE*.

- (vi) **Feedback from recent Zoom sessions with Tony Baxter, RD of Northern.** MC reported that Tony had been ‘meeting’ with reps from the three CRP’s in the NE -Bishop Line, Esk Valley and Tyne Valley. Recently he had established separate sessions with *RFNE* and the local RUG’s. A serious current problem is that driver training had had to be suspended for many weeks post- March. But due to recent agreement with ASLEF ways had been found to resume the in-cab part of the training programme, nevertheless a big back-log of work to complete meant there is a significant driver shortage right now. MC posed question: “How can CRP’s, *RFNE* and RUG’s, make best use of the meetings with Tony Baxter (or his successor rather)?” CRP’s are enjoined to be a voice for their communities. Those various voices are a mixture of the tactical, the local and the strategic. Tyne Valley having both a RUG and a CRP gives access to opinions from a wide range of sources, but how to best use that information to get results is the question?

KS reported positively on his contacts with Mr Baxter - in fact KS had been sole participant in last on-line session. He felt his contribution to the discussion had been appreciated.

DF believed that *Northern* were being deliberately cautious about promising more timetable enhancements when future situation re Covid was simply unknown. There was a fear about “ramping up” train frequencies and then having to face another major lock-down with a consequent reverse of timetable enhancements.

He forecast an increase in leisure travel in GB post-Covid, quite possibly at the expense of regular commuting together with staggering of work hours. Need for rail industry to prepare for this likely development. But DF suspected *Northern* mind-set inclined to “getting back” to the ‘old order’ pre-Covid rather than seriously plan for a future expansion in leisure travel.

Committee members expressed concern about the negative messaging emanating from DfT and Downing Street (and even some TOC's! – though not Scotrail) leading to perception that 'public transport' was unsafe re Covid infection. This in spite of regular, thorough cleansing of buses and trains, physical on-board distancing, compulsory face coverings and 'people' controls at rail and bus stations. In fact, clear evidence had been produced to confirm that travel by train was safe re risk of Covid infection, though apparently there were some variations in test results depending on carriage design and the particular configuration of air conditioning systems. Agreed that there needed to be a concerted messaging exercise from within the rail industry, and from such as *Railfuture*, to reassure would be passengers that if pubs, aeroplanes and schools are deemed 'safe' by the Government, then trains certainly are. Noted that whilst rail passenger traffic was generally down to about 30% of pre-Covid levels, car traffic seemed to be returning to near normal what it was pre-Covid.

5 Rail in the NE/local issues:

- (i) **Ramp up of local train services:** – dealt with above
- (ii) **North of York capacity enhancements:** KS referred to letter he had sent to *Modern Railways* following publication of *Network Rail* paper re ECML enhancements. Among issues he had raised were Leamside, Stillington, diversions via Coast Line from Northallerton, slow average speed of Middlesbrough to Newcastle local trains and platform extensions at Newcastle Central. DF noted that in spite of the title "North of York", the paper basically only addressed ECML issues between York and Newcastle. Mostly silent on matters north of the latter. DS asked where the ending of franchising announcement would leave Grand Central? What about co-operation between TOC's? Is this likely to happen and, if so, what sort of co-operation might we expect?
- (iii) **Update from RUG's:** nil input.
- (iv) **AB & T update:** DF generally optimistic about recent developments. He outlined some of these. Hopefully, there will be word from the Treasury around Christmas as to whether next major stage is or is not authorised. Noted that the two stations

located in Blyth parliamentary constituency are to be included in the initial programme. Also some sort of inter-ticketing arrangement between Nexus and AB & T is being mooted which DF supports. But DS cautioned in that he reckoned the bus operators likely to play “hard ball” in any negotiations involving their participation in such an arrangement.

- (v) **Morpeth to Berwick local service.** Northumberland Co Council have applied to “Restoring your Railway Fund” for a grant. If approved, however, this would only provide finance towards the early development stage of the project.

6 AOB: Review of Joint Freight & Infrastructure & Networks Committee meeting on 25 July 2020 (Zoom)

Pre-Covid this national *Railfuture* Committee met face to face. Since lockdown decided it should resort to Zoom, but on a regional basis. Its first such session had been with North West Branch (in March), this July session was programmed with NE Branch. Idea was that proceedings should cover on-going national issues, but part of the meeting time would specifically focus on matters pertinent to the particular Branch area. This would enable the national organisation to note primary current campaign strategies being pursued in each region.

Four NE members attended the 25 July session – KS, P Walker, AW and IW. Additionally there were seven ‘permanent’ members of the Committee in attendance, with four apologies including one from our own Lee Davies. And to demonstrate the technological wonders of Zoom, the meeting note-taker, one Martin Cooper, was actually sat in New Zealand! Martin subsequently produced a very readable (and informative) report detailing the session – **copies available from KS on request.**

Business included some detailed strategic thinking re the West Manchester Freight Link which has implications for Trafford Park Freight Terminal, congestion along the now infamous Castlefield Corridor through central Manchester, and cross Pennine freight paths. And when it came to considering matters specifically ‘North East’ *Network Rail* proposals for ‘interventions’ on ECML to make

it 'HS2 ready' (by 2034?) inevitably featured together with Stillington, Leamside and rail links to Washington. And not forgetting Ashington B & T about which the meeting Chair and permanent members of the committee seemed to know a great deal.

Three items of particular note:-

- HS2 – looks as though government has sanctioned the full Western arm from Birmingham through to Manchester (including the airport) via Crewe. Terminal likely to be Piccadilly. Hints around apparently that the Eastern Birmingham-Leeds arm may be under threat. Could this leave way open for HS2 Western Arm to be extended from Manchester to Leeds in conjunction with *Northern Powerhouse Rail*?
- Committee concerned about serious threats to rail freight traffic. Apparently track charges have been 'hiked', but conversely road freight is not meeting its true road costs so that there is definitely not a 'level playing field' between the two modes.
- Important that any campaigns by *Railfuture* involving infrastructure changes should not just highlight 'local' advantages of a particular scheme, but should also emphasise positive impacts that scheme might have across the national transport network.

I (note-taker AW) would recommend my *RFNE* colleagues to read the meeting report (obtainable from KS).

And finally.....our Branch Committee meeting closed promptly at 1945hrs. Thanks to KS for chairing the session and to DF for his Zoom guidance.