

railfuture northeast

Minutes of the branch committee meeting held on Tuesday 18 May 2021, by Zoom, beginning at 1803 hrs.

PRESENT: Keith Simpson (KS), Dennis Fancett (DF), Dave Shaw (DS), Ian Walker (IW), Peter Walker (PJW), Tony Walker (AW) and Peter Wood (PRW).

Keith Simpson, Branch Chair, welcomed everyone.

APOLOGIES: Alison Cosgrove and Patrick Rice.

NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING: The notes of 23 March 2021 had been previously circulated and were agreed to be a correct record.

MATTERS ARISING:

- (i) Branch Website – update:** DS advised that minutes from last meeting had been loaded up. Also three of the Branch’s campaign projects had been re-drafted and were now live. Ferryhill Station and Gilsland will go live on 19 May.
- (ii) Creation of a branch Facebook page:** IW is due to meet with his “adviser” on 24 May. Has decided that in its early days the page will operate without comments being permitted.
- (iii) Compulsory reservations on LNER:** Alison Cosgrove had contacted IW to say she was trying to impress on LNER her opposition to its proposal. But right now the company was preoccupied with the Azuma crack problem so Alison felt she was not making much headway. Apparently Yorkshire Branch has a meeting arranged with Mike Ross of LNER with compulsory reservations on the agenda. Committee members felt strongly that LNER was seriously misguided in attempting to pursue a compulsory reservation scheme. Its thinking was described as ‘London Centric’ and there was suspicion that the idea was emanating from DfT rather than LNER. Fact that the company was presently under government control added to committee suspicions. Evidence shared to show actual operation of the scheme at busy ECML stations in the North East would be problematical since effectively LNER was providing commuter type services at such stations – realistically compulsory seat reservations

would be a nightmare to implement effectively. “LNER has taken leave of its senses” was one opinion expressed.

Does Railfuture National have a ‘corporate’ view about the matter? Committee not sure – KS agreed to enquire. Concern that Railfuture National had been slow to respond to the issue. Mention made of email received by IW a month ago from a Dr Paul Evans of Durham who travelled daily to Newcastle where his surgery was located. He strongly opposed the LNER proposal and had spelt out clearly why from a commuter’s perspective the idea was flawed. His original email had been acknowledged by KS who undertook to now advise Dr Evans that RFNE was making active representations on the issue. Suggestion that RFNE should prepare a media release towards end of May so as to make situation known in the North East. No local media publicity had been noted to date. DF (our Press Officer) to action.

BRANCH MATTERS

- (i) Next Branch Meeting – AGM:** IW had received word from Rachel Forsyth-Ward and Derek Gittins of Transport North East who had indicated willingness to provide inputs. Likely date 19 June (reserve date 3 July) on Zoom. Start time approx. 11am. IW and KS will try to meet with speakers ahead of event. DF agreed to host and be responsible for technicalities. Two hour duration suggested. Attenders to be on mute unless invited to make specific contribution.
Agreed RFNE make financial contribution to Dennis’ church in respect of use of its Zoom facility.
- (ii) Review of Meeting of Branch Chairs via Zoom on 13 April 2021:** DS reported. Meeting lasted approx. 90 minutes. Main concern related to attracting passengers back to rail post-pandemic. Thought local/leisure trips would pick up quickly especially at w/ends. Business/commuter journeys – prospects much less certain. DF attempting to draw up a charter for winning people back to the train. This to include review of railcard regulations, use of ‘loss-leader’ fares, special attraction features and an overhaul of rules relating to use of railway owned car parks – suggested

these could be made available to non-rail travellers if there was surplus space available. (Or possibly car parking could be discounted against fares?) Other items included issues around local democracy, Local Government re-organisation and devolution of decision making. Also some discussion concerning ECML developments – DF considered it imperative that Railfuture be involved in future deliberations re these developments.

- (iii) **AB & T (Northumberland Line). Any implications from local council election results?** DF updated. Tories now in control of Northumberland County Council (NCC), so DF hopeful there will be no disturbance to Northumberland Line progress. Preliminary preparation work under way and planning applications going in. Not all the money required has yet been committed by Government, but DF believes there will be a major announcement in October 2021 when he expects the remainder of the finance to be confirmed.

Update for Committee: Transport & Works Order submitted in May 2021. See <https://www.senrug.co.uk/Re-open-AshingtonBlythTyneLine-posts.php> (and scroll to last entry).

DF concerned that NCC making mistakes over station design, eg in relation to car parking provision. But he is resigned to NCC and SENRUG having to ‘beg to differ’. Apparently the PM’s transport adviser Andrew Gilligan has been ‘leaning on’ NCC to incorporate some cuts in funding for the line such as to agree some single track sections for the route, to cut out Bebside Station and an hourly as opposed to half-hourly service frequency. In spite of these various hiccups DF confident Government will not abort the project, but he said he is sad about the apparent lack of vision by transport planners both within DfT and NCC.

- (iv) **Branch participation in North East Rail & Metro Strategy Steering Group (NERMS).** DS reported. RFNE had been invited to nominate a rep for NERMS and DS had accepted KS’s request to fill the role. The Group comprises a wide range of relevant transport stake-holders and should provide opportunity for the Railfuture voice to get some hearing within an influential body. IW thought

Transport NE may have decided to approach us on the back of content of our branch web-site. We wished DS well in his forthcoming endeavours. First meeting of the NERMS Group to be on 8 June when members will be asked to identify three priority matters for initial consideration. DS requested committee colleagues contact him asap to help him decide which three issues to flag up. DS already has the initial background papers for the first meeting and will distribute same to RFNE committee colleagues.

- (v) **XC North East & Scotland stakeholder conference: Zoom 1300-1500 Wednesday 9 June 2021.** IW and DF had both been invited to attend (KS will cover for IW if work commitments prevent his participation).
- (vi) **Date of next Committee Meeting:** Thursday 15 July via Zoom commencing 1800 hrs. **(Unlikely DF could host the call).** Note taker: IW. Aim will be to have the September meeting “live” rather than virtual. Dependant on the national Covid situation of course.

RAIL IN NE/LOCAL ISSUES

- (i) **NE Branch response to NPR via RF national:** Our Branch response had been posted on the RF national web-site. Chris Page had contacted KS for some clarification re Leamside. Seems NPR view Leamside primarily as an opportunity to enhance general service provision on ECML whereas Transport NE see it as a means of expanding Metro services including into Washington: and there is talk of a ‘South Tyneside Loop’. Use of battery power (viz the new Metro trains currently on order) will be a crucial element in utilising new route opportunities afforded by a reopened Leamside line. Under the NPR approach to Leamside seems that enhancement of Stillington line may be under review. KS will keep Committee advised of developments.
- (ii) **May timetable changes and Azuma situation:** The hope of getting LNER, TPE and Northern services back to ‘normal’ from the same point in May had been thwarted by discovery of structural defects on some of the LNER and TPE Hitachi built trains, plus Northern had been hit by underfloor issues affecting some of their

units in North West. This had resulted in temporary transfer of Northern units from NE to NW leaving gaps in service provision here. It looked as though X Country had escaped the problem zone! In addition the major track alterations undertaken over last few months at Kings Cross had inevitably impacted LNER services. Reported that the new Open Access operator East Coast is expected to start services from October. There appeared to be uncertainty about whether TPE services between Newcastle and Edinburgh would ever resume. The loss of TPE services north of Newcastle would mean significant opportunities to provide better outcomes for passengers using the route would not be realised. And a sense among RFNE Committee colleagues that Northern was not currently giving a good account of itself. Examples cited, for instance, of the company being slow to secure paths for new or restored services and of poor communication with its customers. Difficult to know how RFNE might respond to all this – some genuine despondency evident among us!

- (iii) **NE Freight Partnership Meeting 24 March - feedback.** KS and AW had attended this virtual event. Three keynote addresses all of which conveyed a fairly upbeat outlook for freight by rail. Theme of de-carbonisation permeated each of the talks. David Young of Network Rail advised that plans for the Northallerton to Eaglescliffe gauge enhancement to W12 were well advanced. Final designs should be ready by early 2022. Funding was being sought for similar W12 enhancement on Stillington branch, but no mention of any passenger upgrade. So far as Trans Pennine upgrade concerned (also to W12) evident that there is still a lot of preliminary planning to occur, not to mention the production of a convincing business case. David made passing reference to Leamside and emphasised need for a good business case to be drawn up. Second speaker was Geoff Clarke from transport consultant AECOM who provided some figures to show that overall rail freight in Europe appeared to be “on the up”. Seems that 17% of freight there is moved by rail. Geoff also dealt with some aspects of new power sources for trains. Third speaker Mike Hogg of the Rail Freight Group (RFG) emphasised that with the UK national target for being carbon net zero by 2050 meant that Rail

Freight now looked on more favourably than even a year ago. Electrification would be a crucial element in achieving the target – he flagged up in particular need for electrification to Teesport and across the Pennines.

- (iv) Darlington station plan. Branch input?** Public consultation closes on 30 May. KS will try and do a review on behalf of Branch and make a submission. PJW concerned about some of the plan's proposals – he will liaise with KS to assist him in preparing that submission

AOB Nil.

MEETING TERMINATED AT 1955 HRS.