

Minutes of Railfuture North East Branch Committee Meeting held Wednesday 22nd September 2021

In attendance – Keith Simpson [KS], Damian Bell [DB], Tony Walker [AW], Dennis Fancett [DF], Dave Shaw [DS], I Walker – note taker [IW], Dai Hawkins [DH] – guest

1) Apologies

Received from A Cosgrove, M Chainey, P Wood, P Walker, T Watson, P Rice and C Hawkes.

2) Notes of the previous meeting held on Thursday 15th July 2021

Already circulated and accepted by all as a true record.

3) Matters arising

i) Updating on ECML timetable issues

General relief within RFNE that any recast of the timetable by LNER / XC / TPE has now been deferred until at least May 2023. Concern expressed, however, that the same plans may simply re-emerge then. Noted that there appeared to be little support for the changes from local stakeholders. ‘Levelling up’ within the NE is not simply about more services to London. Rather there must be greater emphasis on maintaining (and expanding?) a diversity of services in and between the principal English regions.

DF of SENRUG highlighted the need for calls at intermediate stations within Northumberland to be coherently regularised, possibly by introducing a semi fast / stopping service. Noted that the start-up in December of a TPE service five times a day between Newcastle & Edinburgh (just announced) would go some way towards meeting DF’s hopes in the short term. But disappointment expressed that it will only be a standalone service having no extensions south of Newcastle.

Northern plans for a significant reduction in cross conurbation services with many trains in the future to start / terminate at Newcastle & Middlesbrough respectively viewed with alarm. Would result in lengthening of journey times and a risk of missed connections. Neither Newcastle nor Middlesbrough are laid out to accommodate more terminating trains. Reference made to objections published by Alan Williams of Esk Valley CRP in which he had explained how the Northern proposals, if implemented, would seriously impact rail provision in the Esk Valley.

Agreed that a small working party should be set up to look at RFNE wishes regarding future ECML services between York and Newcastle. KS to progress (?)

ii) Branch Website

This has been updated by DS mainly with information from SENRUG & North East Rail & Metro Strategy Steering Group with which he has direct involvement. DS advised he could do with more information from RUGS about their activities.

iii) **Branch Facebook Page**

We now have a 'blank' page which requires filling. IW will attempt to do this using information from the website. DH (guest) was able to make some suggestions about privacy of the site and generally how to manage it.

4. **Branch Matters**

i) **Next Branch Meeting (AGM)**

Suggested that Tobyn Hughes (NEXUS) & Alice Gillman (Viva Rail) be approached by IW re providing a keynote input. Agreed that any meeting would utilise Zoom format.

ii) **AB &T / Northumberland Line Update**

Generally positive update by DF in spite of some concerns about station design and the distance they will be from other public transport connections. Also some anxiety regarding possible gaps in the financial provision for progressing the Northumberland Line project. DF advised he had been able to travel on one of Northern's recent press and publicity services over the route.

iii) **North East Rail & Metro Strategy Steering Group Update**

DS reported that the recent North East Joint Transport Committee (NEJTC) had been told that the Transforming Cities money for Sunderland Station had been agreed and that the final business case for the Northumberland Line had been submitted to the DfT.

Progress was being made regarding proposed Enhanced Partnership between the NEJTC and the Bus Operators with assurances secured that it would include the need to integrate bus and Metro/Rail services. Funding had been agreed to support Metro until the end of the financial year but, unless passengers returned to pre-Covid levels there would be problems in the future.

The NEJTC had welcomed the postponement of the proposed ECML timetable changes. It applauded intended new services from TPE and LUMO. Engineering studies had suggested that the proposals to re-open lines in the recently agreed transport plan were all feasible, but the next stage would be developing the respective economic cases. The final draft of the Rail and Metro Strategy would be available in October and would then go out for public consultation.

In their submission to Government prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review the committee had, amongst other priorities, emphasised the need to start work on the first phase of re-opening the Leamside Line. ***A full report on the recent proceedings of the NEJTC is attached to these minutes.***

iv) Railfuture Branches and Groups Day – 14 October 2021 (via Zoom)

KS had received details from Chris Page. RFNE required to be represented. He (KS) was scheduled to attend an LNER stakeholder event that day at York so could not be available for the B & G event. AW volunteered to sub for KS who would forward details to him.

v) Date of next Committee meeting & note taker

1815 Tuesday 16th November. This will be via Zoom. Note taker: I W.

5. Rail in the North East

i) Billingham Station Upgrade

Noted that there are plans for better access to Billingham Station. (Since this meeting IW has learnt from a TVCA source that the go-ahead has been given for work at Billingham to commence in March 2022 with completion by November that year).

ii) Changes to Booking Office Hours

LNER indicating it is looking to reduce opening hours of booking offices at Darlington, Durham, Newcastle, Alnmouth and Berwick. Likely that there would be some staffing reductions involved. DF concerned about possible implications of the LNER proposals. He acknowledged that whilst there might be some case for staffing levels in the actual booking offices to be reviewed, it would be retrograde to take staff away from platform duties. A platform staff presence was essential to ensure passenger safety and to provide assistance particularly to people with physical disabilities. Action required from RFNE?

6. AOB

It was agreed with DB / KS that the branch budget for 2022 would be discussed at the next Committee meeting.

This meeting closed at 2000.