

Railfuture North East

Minutes of Branch Committee Meeting held on Tuesday 15 March 2022 (via Zoom)

Note taker: AW.

Participants: Keith Simpson - Chair (KS), Damian Bell (DB), Dennis Fancett (DF), Dave Shaw (DS), Ian Walker (IW), Peter Walker (PW), Tony Walker (AW)

1 Apologies: Alison Cosgrove, Malcolm Chainey, Patrick Rice and Peter Wood.

2 Minutes of previous meeting - Tuesday 18 January 2022 – previously circulated: Approved.

3 Matters arising:

- (i) Social Media – offer of assistance:** Ryan Hogg , a member of SENRUG, had offered to assist IW in establishing a Branch Facebook page. DF advised that Web Sites were now “old hat” (and increasingly expensive to set up) whereas Face Book was free.

Agreed that if we progressed a Face Book page, essential to appoint a competent administrator to oversee its operation. **Action:** that DS and IW jointly explore the matter and, if appropriate, liaise with Mr Hogg. Will report back to Committee.

- (ii) ECML Timetable (2023) - branch paper and awareness campaign:** Malcolm Chainey and Patrick Rice had met with Liz Twist MP on 11 March. (Short written note from Patrick about this). Liz Twist herself seemed supportive of LNER being permitted to operate an additional London train but not at the expense of NE local services. Apparently LNER currently mounting a campaign with Parliament to try and gain MP support, confirming the 2023 plans have not gone away. Malcolm himself believes that the LNER demand for an additional London train per hour can realistically only be met if the full length of Leamside comes on stream. Ms Twist supports Leamside reinstatement.

KS had received five responses to the timetable mailings he had sent out, all reasonably supportive. Included one from Ben Houchen, the Teesside Mayor, who indicated his agreement with *RFNE*.

AW had received acknowledgement from Paul Howell, MP for Sedgfield. Plus contact from Kevan Jones' (MP for N Durham) who had offered a personal meeting with AW on 4 April. AW had asked for Leamside to be covered as well as timetable issues. (Agreed). AW will be accompanied by KS (who agreed to try and arrange a further meeting for himself and AW with Paul Howell primarily to update on Leamside and Ferryhill Station).

- (iii) **Leamside:** DS had attended a meeting of NEJTC today. Last part of this concerning Leamside had been held "behind closed doors" which meant DS and Press were excluded.

However, position appeared to be that several reports on future of Leamside had been commissioned by Transport NE. These will cover both the engineering work that would be required for any re-opening and the likely economic value to the area. Initial work has focussed on northern end of Leamside, but with attention now turning to other sections of the line. Appears that Victoria Viaduct in its present state of repair, was sufficient for METRO use with a possible service running between South Hylton and Pelaw via Washington. But it might require extensive work before heavy rail trains could use it.

The JTC seems to be moving towards a phased re-opening with the Northern end of the line coming first and being used initially by METRO. This would allow Washington to be connected to METRO as well as provide the basis for a South Tyneside - Sunderland "loop" service. Seems to be strong support for this across all areas and all political parties, possibly because of the notion that Sunderland has been "short-changed" over the years with claims the City has had to contribute to funding wider Metro developments that have been of little benefit to itself. This is not to say that giving initial priority to a Metro development means there is not extensive support for full restoration of the Leamside route and its use for a local passenger service, freight services that might include a NE intermodal terminal and ECML diversions.

Central Government is indicating it is not going to sanction direct finance for Leamside, but apparently accepts that if a single Mayoral Authority were to be formed in the area, the resultant City Region funding could be used for this purpose. An initial complication is, aside from the fact that despite on-going discussions there is still no agreement about the

formation of a Mayoral Authority, there will be many other local projects competing for the same money. However, the current JTC members seem to see Leamside as a high priority. A second complication is that Durham County Council may be planning to leave the NE Combined Authority and seek a separate county funding deal with Government.

iv) Branch Website: DS has updated the project pages following publication of the public consultation draft of the NE Rail and METRO Strategy, but has been unable to successfully load minutes of the Branch's recent Committee Meetings. Will investigate and seek advice from Chris Page. DS also wants to upload some recent strategy papers including those sent to North East MP's re the 2023 East Coast Timetable proposals.

4 Branch matters:

(i) Last Branch Meeting 19 February. (Zoom) Speaker Dennis Gittins – Head of Heavy Rail at Transport NE

The presentation generally found helpful though some concern re his piece about possible future infrastructure interventions on ECML in that this omitted any reference to Durham Station which some thought might require further line capacity.

Disappointment re low number participating – only 15. Perhaps future such Zoom sessions could be advertised to people outside of RFNE? No objections to friends of members being “tipped off” and invited to participate. Also was a Saturday a suitable time to hold the meeting?

(ii) Branch response to NE Rail & Metro Strategy. (DS)

Our comments need to be in by 11 April. DS advised little point in commenting on the general points set out at beginning of the strategy paper since they are largely non-contentious. But important we urge better marketing of the whole system. Also we might want to comment on certain of

the proposals, suggesting amendments etc. But DS believed we should urge the adoption of some “quick-win” measures e.g. the local service in Northumberland and the quick service from Tyneside to Teesside (via Stillington). Both measures could be activated quickly. Early delivery of measures would have good public appeal. We must say clearly we want local services retained on ECML and not all passed over to LD operators.

- (iii) **Next Committee meeting ZOOM** – fixed for Tuesday 24 May 2022. Notes by KS. To commence 1815 hrs.

5 Rail in the NE.

a) The proposed “Connect” Newcastle - Middlesbrough service now definitely “dead”. Pessimism expressed regarding likely current intentions of DfT. Cutting back of services definitely seems likely. Present operational difficulties in the NE rehearsed (including Covid issues, industrial actions) – leading to frequent service gaps at the very time when reliability desperately needed.

b) **Northumberland Line (DF)** Optimism that Northumberland Line will proceed to completion. Contract for new signalling recently awarded.

c) **Branches & Groups Day – Live face to face in Derby on 11 June.** IW offered to attend along with a second person from the Branch. Possibly DF?

d) **Zoom apparatus for RFNE to share with SENRUG?** Likely cost £7.50 a month each. DB did not have finance papers to hand but thinks it should be OK. AW proposed that RFNE proceed on the shared basis idea– approved.

e) **Branch AGM.** IW will liaise with KS re ideas for this in next few days.

ENDS