

RAIL EAST

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ACCEPTING THE SRA CHALLENGE



SRA Chairman Richard Bowker has challenged the railway industry and rail users groups to be more professional. The comment came in a speech at the Rail Passengers Council meeting in London, which also marked his first year as Chairman.

He said that the SRA were now leading the industry and were setting out clearly what was required and what the SRA was prepared to pay for. He noted that the railways were unlike other privatised utilities in that they were “public service industry, publicly specified and privately delivered”. Problems within the industry were highlighted, especially where major schemes had not been fully thought through. The proposed replacement of old Mark 1 coaches was cited as an example, where the need for additional power supplies was not considered. He added that those problems were now in the past as the SRA would only devote resources to developing schemes that showed value for money and are affordable. The new focus would be on clean trains and stations, information, ease of buying a ticket and personal security. Those were the basic requirements and not optional extras that passengers expect. The speech also highlighted the need to reduce the cost of such schemes and general operating costs.

As well as calling for a more professional approach from the rail industry, the SRA Chairman also had words for rail user groups. He said “ Professional user groups are those that seek to engage, that recognise the constraints, and seek to influence from within, rather than using the megaphone outside the tent”.

The speech ended by setting out the ways in which the SRA intends to take the industry forward. These are:

- *Getting Costs under Control
- *Improve performance by reviewing the timetable
- *Prioritising developments
- *Making best use of the existing network
- *Establish a proper basis for funding
- *Making a robust case to Government for funding

How should Railfuture respond to this speech? Clearly we must ensure that we fully understand how the “new railway” works and we have to be careful on which ideas we promote. But that does not mean that we should not challenge some of the SRA’s thinking, especially when it comes to what is defined by value for money. This discussion will continue over the months and there will be a chance to have your say at the Branch AGM in Bury St Edmunds on the 22nd February.

Great Eastern rolls out new trains

The Branch was among around 50 guests invited to Germany to see the official launch of the Great Eastern's new Class 360 electric trains. Twenty-one four car trains are being built by Siemens to replace the ageing slam door stock still used on some commuter services. If all goes to plan the new trains will enter service in May 2003. The unveiling took place at Siemens' test track at Wildenrath in North East Germany. Siemens have converted a former airforce base into a state of the art test facility. A 7km oval of track on the site allows trains to be tested continuously at high speed without the disruption to train services that would be caused if normal track had to be used. All of the new trains will be tested there before being delivered to the UK. Driver training is also being undertaken in Germany. Three units are already in England for the purposes of gaining approvals from Network Rail (Railtrack) and for the training of maintenance staff.

After the usual speeches, guests were invited to try out the new trains. Site rules say that the first kilometre has to be done at low speed. Once that had been done, the train smoothly accelerated to 100mph and completed several laps of the test circuit. The ride was very comfortable and the public address announcements clear. Rather than use an actors voice to record these announcements, a local train driver has been used, so the voice is much more natural. Several guests were not sure if it was a pre-recorded voice or the train driver speaking. The overall impression of these trains was very encouraging.

The trains are part of a family of "Desiro UK" designs developed by Siemens. A modular construction speeds up the building process so that up to 84 coaches can be built per month. The modular design also enables simpler maintenance, the intention is to have 20 out of 21 units in service. Each of the trains has 16 first class and 255 standard class seats.

Sudbury Line

The Gainsborough Line is the new name for the Sudbury to Marks Tey line running through the Stour Valley. In the 1990's the line was nicknamed the 'Misery Line' because of its frequent delays, breakdowns and ageing rolling stock. Since then it has benefited from improvements such as new rolling stock, automated information systems and an all year round Sunday service (funded by the SRA). These have turned the line into one of the best performing rural lines in the country.

At the recent meeting of the Suffolk Rail Policy Group it was revealed that journeys have increased by 76% since privatisation. Since the recent improvements, customers paying full fare have increased by 148%, season ticket holders have gone up by 62% and reduced fare customers have gone up by 75%. The route provides an excellent example of how money spent on improvements will increase usage and bring in extra revenue.

Snippets

To receive e-mailed News Snippets, please send an e-mail to jerry.alderson@virgin.net.

No funding (yet) for St Ives Busway.

The Government's announcement just before Christmas of local transport spending plans did not include any money for the Cambridge-St Ives busway. The County Council had included the scheme with its application last July. The letter from the Government thanks the County for the work it has done on the scheme but indicates that it has asked external consultants to review the application. The wording is similar to that sent to Luton Council on its busway scheme, which has had funding refused for three years in a row, so it is difficult to know the Government's true feelings about the scheme. Although the County Council remains upbeat about the project, there are still many unanswered questions. For example, the exact nature of the traffic priority measures within Cambridge have not been set out, how the system will integrate with existing buses, what sort of buses will be used. There are also questions about the Council's idea to have an open access busway using multiple operators but integrated ticketing which could be illegal under the present competition act. Although these rules for bus services are daft, there is little sign that the Government intends to change them.

Chesterton Station Plans develop

Cambridgeshire County Council are progressing plans for a new transport interchange station at Chesterton in the north of the city. The £18m station would include bay platforms to allow trains from London that currently terminate at Cambridge to extend to the new station, which is close to the Cambridge Science Park. Extensive parking at the new station will help reduce the number of cars trying to get to the present station and allow some of that space to be developed for other uses. Initial analysis of the plans show that the benefits would meet the SRA's criteria for investment, so the prospects for the station are encouraging. The Branch has written to the local media welcoming the plans.

Greater Anglia Franchise

The tender date for the new franchise has been delayed (again!). Documents were due to be issued on the 15th January. The SRA has asked companies to resubmit their pre-qualification bids based on the revised type of franchise agreement. It is likely that only 4 firms will be asked to bid when the tender specification is issued in mid-April. The Branch has been in discussion with several of the potential bidders on the improvements that we would like to see during the franchise. Our concern is that in the present financial climate, the SRA will be unwilling to fund many improvements.

Anglia service improvements



Draft plans for the summer 2003 timetable indicate additional stops at Stratford on London to Norwich trains. Late night trains from London currently shown as stopping to set down only will officially accept joining passengers. There will also be two extra evening services on the Sheringham Line and more trains at the weekend between Norwich and Yarmouth.

Train Bus Integration

Turning the vision of rail/bus integration into a working reality was the theme of a conference run by the Transport Research and Information Network in York at the end of November. Examples from around the country were discussed to highlight the problems and successes. Good information and facilities at interchanges including having buses clearly viable from the station entrance were identified as the key issues. Through tickets were considered less important and the number of these tickets sold were low in most areas. Lack of information and station staff not being familiar with these tickets may be the reason for this. However, this may change when the “plusbus” ticket is introduced nationally to larger towns and cities providing a local bus fare to the normal train ticket.

Rail commuters using the bus to get to the station have provided many of the successes of rail/bus integration with the new taxi-bus service from Bicester being a good example. There are 8 routes serving the town and local villages using high quality 8 seat mini-buses. Vehicle staff although working for outside companies wear Chiltern Trains uniforms and have received training about local rail services. The station forecourt has been modified so these buses stand right outside the station building and road layout gives them priority so that they can depart before the cars. Bus fares are less than the car-park charges. Regular buses connect with peak-hour trains to/from London. Off peak, the service operates on demand like a taxi service but with lower fares!

Events

Branch AGM – Saturday 22nd February. Bury St Edmunds Library starting at 14.00. The existing committee members are all willing to stand for re-election, but there is space for additional members on the committee. Nominations should be sent to Nick Dibben by the 15th February.

The ESTA spring meeting is also on 22nd February, 14.15 at St Marks Church Hall next to Oulton Broad South Station. The ESTA AGM is on 24th May at St Johns Church Hall, Woodbridge at 14.30.

Saturday 26 April 2003 - Railfuture Conference on High Speed Rail. Birmingham
Saturday 31 May 2003 - Railfuture National Annual General Meeting. Cardiff
Saturday 4 October 2003 - Railfuture Rail Users Conference. London

Branch Officers

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