

railfuture northeast

Minutes of committee meeting, 17.45 to 20.10, Tuesday May 26 2020, held online by ZOOM link provided, and presided over, by Dennis Fancett (DF).

The earlier start enabled those wishing to take part to link up with the main ZOOM app, for which a special 2-hour slot had been arranged rather than the more usual 40 minutes. DF guided each committee member into place, as it were, and all were ready by 18.10.

Now read on.

1 Present:

Malcolm Chainey (MC), Dennis Fancett (DF), Patrick Rice (PR), Dave Shaw (DS), Keith Simpson (KS, chairman), Ian Walker (IW), Tony Walker (AW), Peter Walker (P JW, note-taker), Peter Wood (PW).

2 Apologies:

Received from Damian Bell (DB) and Trevor Watson (TW).

In view of the unusual nature of the proceedings, the meeting unanimously agreed to DF's suggestion that this meeting be recorded throughout.

3 Notes of previous meeting (January 29th, Newcastle):

PR had not received a copy of these, so arrangements were made to send him some later [the first and only instance of a long-distance link preventing the usual remedy for this, a spare copy being passed along the meeting-room table]. None of those who had received a copy found anything in its contents to complain about.

Matters arising from these notes:

3(i) Update on branch website (DS): creation of a branch Facebook page (IW): DS continues to add to Website, especially photographs. The section on Ashington, Blyth and Tyne is next for revision. IW has managed little on this yet, but much interest has appeared on it about the Leamside route. DS thinks that now is the time to contact some of the Facebook groups that have been set up about Leamside, so as to work with them where possible.

3(ii) Review of last branch Bulletin (DS): No feedback has reached DS yet - many confessed to difficulty remembering what was in it! - but MC and IW did remember that it had been a good piece of work. AW had asked when the next Bulletin would appear. This led to a long discussion on the best frequency to aim at; after DS said that reverting to 4 per annum rather than the present 2 was feasible, a long discussion hovered between 3 p.a. for now, moving to 4 p.a. later (KS, AW), with DF suggesting less material per issue but greater frequency. Allied questions - how many members did RfNE now have, and how many still relied on a paper copy - produced 'c.70' and 'c.10' respectively.

3(iii) Review of Conference call, KS and IW with Tony Baxter (Northern Rail):

(a) IW opined that this had been useful. Tony Baxter, the new regional manager, still being a learner on many matters (his background had been Royal Mail) but he is very willing to meet our group as such. Tony had asked for RfNE's advice on which gaps in the timetables we recommended as needing filling, as well as sympathising with complaints about ticket-machine shortcomings.

(b) Grant Shapps (transport minister) is to make a statement on June 4th, the 100th day of Northern's 'special measures' takeover, so particular attention will be needed then.

Meanwhile, the strong rumours of much more splitting of service-lengths throughout the North-East from this December led to discussion in various directions, not least over the exact nature of what Pete Myers is expected to do! DF wishes we had a Permanent Regional Director for the North-East, as stipulated by Northern Franchise requirements. (The last two directors have been temporary - Anna Weeks has now moved to Cross-Country, for instance).

3(iv) Update from Tyne Valley line (MC and PR): MC lamented the original downsizing of the Tyne Valley line timetable. 3 trains an hour became one express, Newcastle-Carlisle, since the Hexham locals (TCs from Nunthorpe as a rule) had been cut off west of Newcastle. Some modifications followed, usually by added stops to the one remaining hourly train. PR mentioned several CRP initiatives, including one involving working with special needs schools along the line and another to find out why those who could travel by train do not do so. There is a consultation on Carlisle station in connection with re-modelling of the whole area around it. There will also be an Avanti-led conference on June 2 about services at the west end of the Tyne Valley line. MC then mentioned TVCRP's preparation of a revised version of the "REAL ALE TRAIL" leaflet that had included local pubs along the line and had, earlier, attracted some traffic that Northern would have preferred to do without, but.....

This led on to a general discussion about present and future approaches to potential rail passengers - after PJW had briefly referred to Grand Central's delayed comeback probably due in part to potential passengers obeying the all-pervasive "don't travel by rail" propaganda, and IW had pointed out how many kinds of retail outlet would be returning on and from June 14. Before mentioning DF's general remarks on discouraging rail use, PR and others had mentioned lack of refunds available for season- ticket holders, where operators had varied and often contradictory policies. On the longer-distance journeys, LNER had a 'reserved-seat only' policy, and Avanti had wanted something of this sort for all lines and services. However, it had transpired that such a policy could not be applied when many passengers were changing on to LNER or Avanti services from others e.g. TransPennine who did not insist on reservations. Reverting to more local matters, PR assured us that Northern (contrary to earlier rumours) *does* have a scheme for refunds on unused season tickets. DF's basic complaint that nobody at the higher levels of Railfuture's hierarchy had protested against government's constant vigorous discouragement of any use of public transport was generally agreed with, KS urging that the policy might have been justifiable in the short term but now needed replacing with, if nothing else, a campaign to show that Rail was no more dangerous (and often considerably safer) than alternative modes of mechanised travel, not least a private car.

AW described present government urgings as simply encouraging the road lobby when, on environmental grounds alone, a different approach was called for. He added that Britain should follow the examples now set in France and Germany, where, as long as passengers wore masks when aboard, far more than 10% - our continuing proposed limits - of seats could be occupied safely.

After DF mentioned that NEXUS intended to provide *more* trains to ensure that returning commuters could be carried, and KS that he had suggested to Pete Myers that some "warm-stored" 142s could come back to augment existing 156s for a similar reason, it was resolved that Keith Simpson will **write** to Railfuture's Passenger committee, alias Allison Cosgrove, copied to Chris Page to draw attention to our grave and increasing concerns about so much deliberate down-playing of public transport in general and rail in particular.

3(v) SENRUG news: Update on Ashington, Blyth and Tyne (DF): (a) An on-line article in N/c Journal, May 3, by Baroness Vere stated that the government remained committed to the scheme. The following week several local newspapers reported that a contract had been let to AECOM/SLC

Rail for “detailed design, which DF was hoping was the equivalent of the Network Rail GRIP 4 stage. However, still no word on how the scheme would be funded.

(b) SENRUG has had quite a positive report on the (Newcastle) - Morpeth-Berwick local services plan - even a proposal for electric units on them.

(c) DF reported that he was in touch with East Coast Trains (the new Open Access operator owned by Firstgroup), and had been advised that their plans for the London-Newcastle-Morpeth-Edinburgh service, due to launch in Autumn 2021, remained on track, not with-standing the current suspension of other Open Access operators’ services during the COVID-19 crisis, and notwithstanding Network Rail’s electrical supply problem in the Chathill - Scottish Borders area which would appear to prevent East Coast Trains’ electric- only services from running, and which is not due to be remedied until after the launch date.

3(vi) RUG news: Coastliners (PJW):

As well as Grand Central problems (cf. **3(iv)** above), and probable division of Coast Line services at Newcastle and Middlesbrough rather than running through, as from this December, main news concerns Horden station. This is largely completed but needs more electrical fittings. Opening expected "early this summer".

4 Branch matters:

(i) Response to NIC consultation: after reminding us that this concerned infrastructure above all, rather than service-patterns, KS had adjusted the circulated earlier draft version to include mention of RfNE’s seven rail enhancement schemes (as on green leaflet). He invited comments from one and all on his later version. DF suggested that we advocate the diversionary possibilities of all three revived lines - Stockton-Ferryhill, Leamside line, and AB&T - where appropriate, taken together - as part of our response. The closing-date for this is now June 12, so work on it will continue.

(ii) next branch meeting-date: October?

IW has quite a few possible speakers lined up, notably Tony Baxter. 2 months’ notice need to be given before publicity for a meeting starts, and Newcastle’s Arts Centre seems our best bet to ensure that rules for legal “distancing” can be observed.

iii) AGM substitute: election of 2020-2021 officers?

All present indicated willingness to remain in post, at least for this year. Martin Murphy had indicated his wish to step down as Branch President, and Tony Walker was prepared to succeed him (“a difficult act to follow”).

(iv) Aln Valley model railway exhibition, September 5th/6th:

Unclear yet whether this show would still be on, but volunteers to staff it (including TW and DF) would be forthcoming. Our new Railfuture NE “banner” would be ready to collect and use at the show.

(v) Next Committee meeting:

Assuming that a Zoom format would still be feasible then, Wednesday July 29 was agreed on for this.

5 Rail in the North-East:

Some items listed here had already been covered (GC delay, Horden).

Other matters under this heading:

(i) Meeting (March this year) with Paul Howell, new MP for Sedgefield; his assistant had asked Railfuture (North-East) about finding money from either the “new stations” or “Beeching Reversed” funds, to get a station put back at Ferryhill. Branch Chairman Keith Simpson (KS) undertook to reply with details of how Railfuture (NE or wider) could help, and assurance of our support for the project. Paul had mentioned when Railfuture met him in March that, as a native of Ferryhill, he was also keen on the Leamside project. He added that, as he was in the same party as the present government, his membership could count for more in winning government support for a Ferryhill station.

(ii) Some branch members had had a letter from Gillan Gibson (CPRE) who is also keen on Leamside; AW agreed to reply to her on RfNE’s behalf.

(iii) On May 20, the MP for NW Durham, Richard Holden, had publicised his wish to see Metro (or heavy rail) extended to Consett. Several local bodies had been consulted, but not RfNE yet. PR, though in favour of such a scheme, urged caution over the route that such a line would take. Among many detailed arguments against the MP’s suggested Derwent Valley trackbed (now a very busy walkway), he advocated a different line, which would meet the ECML at our proposed site for a Team Valley station, and whose route could also include Beamish.

(iv) AW mentioned that the Weardale Railway had now been bought by the Bishop Auckland Project. He feels that this is welcome news.

(v) DB, talking to IW before our meeting, had urged the need for a general resilience to be built into all rail provision, so that (e.g.) motive power should be hybrid rather than diesel or electric only, etc. DF reminded us that current supplies north of Morpeth are at present inadequate for all demands made of them in the full May timetable, yet to be operated.

(vi) As part of a general discussion about how (far) rail traffic demands may alter, arise or disappear when lockdown has finally come to an end, DS opined that rail services may include fewer really long-distance runs, hence making room for more local, shorter provision instead. AW had earlier mentioned some of LNER’s proposed revised services on and from December 2021; at present, even with these suggestions firmly in mind, the only safe advice seems to be that we will have to wait and see. But, to conclude these notes slightly out of sequence, MC has assured Tony Baxter that the region’s rail user groups will do all they can to encourage more traffic on to trains generally, to counteract the present “Don’t Travel” message.

The meeting closed at 20.10, but not before general thanks were given to DF for so ably setting up, and presiding over, the technicalities of a ZOOM gathering.

Billingham, Wednesday 27 May; revised 5 June 2020. P J WALKER, note-taker.