

railfuture

Northeast

BRANCH BULLETIN – FEBRUARY 2016

Railfuture is a national, independent body that advocates a modern and effective passenger and freight railway in Great Britain.

The North East is one of twelve branches in England along with Railfuture Scotland and Railfuture Wales that make up the national organisation.

Web site: www.railfuture.co.uk Twitter: [@Railfuture](https://twitter.com/Railfuture) and [@RailfutureNEast](https://twitter.com/RailfutureNEast).

There is lots of rail news to report from the north east of England between November 2015 and February 2016.

North East News - November and December 2015

11 November 2015: Meeting at Baltic Centre, Gateshead, arranged by *Transport Focus*. Fifty delegates attended including five members of our Branch. Theme – “The North East: well-connected or out on a limb?”

The keynote addresses variously covered the role of *Transport Focus*, current strategic highway developments, rail links to and from the North East, METRO and national and local bus operations. In truth, only two of the five speakers actually addressed the matter of NE connectivity directly whilst the gentleman from Highways England will probably be best remembered for his abject grasp of northern geography!

18 November 2015: NEXUS publicly blames DB Regio, the METRO operator, for the travel chaos that occurred on the system on 13 September, day of the Great North Run. This is normally METRO’s busiest day of the year. According to the Newcastle Journal a combination of time table changes, inept driver rostering and insufficient trains led to a significant reduction (my emphasis) in capacity which in turn caused overcrowding and delays at stations. All this exacerbated by a series of power supply

“trips” caused when extra trains were thrown into service to try and rescue the situation.

At a subsequent meeting of the NECA (North East Combined Authority) Transport Committee on 24 November 2015 one Councillor talked of a METRO “meltdown” on the day of the Run. Admitted by NEXUS and DB Regio that there had been “mis-communication” between the two organisations during preparations for 13 September.

Incidentally, at this same meeting METRO’s Business Plan for 2016/17 was revealed. Priorities include:

- getting performance up
- developing good working relationships with Transport for the North (TfN) and Rail North
- modernisation in North Tyneside (track work mainly)
- completion of revamp of the METRO station at Newcastle Central
- getting the bid for new trains under way
- more efficiency
- health and safety

18 November 2015 – again! Meeting of the Branch Committee at Durham. Eight attenders including Alison Cosgrove, a member of the *Railfuture* (national) Board and also chair of *Railfuture Scotland*.

Business included review of joint meeting with *Railfuture Scotland* at Galashiels on 26 September (2015), planning for future Branch programme including the next AGM, and a proposal that our Chairman, Trevor Watson and Secretary Ian walker, would make a presentation to Aln Valley Railway Group in September 2016.

Second half of meeting used to consider a draft infrastructure “wish list” for the North East which had been drawn up by Trevor Watson. A total of sixty eight separate schemes identified. Only those relating to the ECML and Tyne Valley were examined and refined – remainder to be reviewed at next Committee Meeting on 6 January 2016.

9 December 2015 – the news we had been waiting for! The awards of the next Trans Pennine (TPE) and Northern franchises.

First Group secured TPE, Arriva Rail the Northern franchise.

Secretary of State Patrick McLaughlin declared: “We promised passengers in the north world class rail services that would make the Northern Powerhouse a reality – and I am delighted we have found two operators that will deliver exactly that”. Slightly over the top do you think? “World class” indeed! Some stretching of the imagination certainly required.

But, in truth, there are some significant steps forward promised in both franchise agreements including:-

- **Northern: Franchise runs 1 April 2016 – March 2025**
 - withdrawal of Pacers by end of 2019
 - 281 new carriages (these now ordered – mix of diesel and electric)
 - more peak hour services into Newcastle
 - new “connect” services linking Hexham, Metro Centre, Newcastle and Middlesbrough
 - later weekday services between Newcastle and Morpeth
 - half hourly service Newcastle-Carlisle
 - timetable upgrade Bishop Auckland-Middlesbrough via Darlington
 - extra services Middlesbrough-Whitby
 - free Wi-Fi on all trains by December 2019

- **TPE: Franchise runs 1 April 2016 – March 2023**
 - extension of Liverpool – Newcastle services to Edinburgh
 - hourly Manchester Airport to York service to extend to Newcastle
 - completion of cross Pennine electrification Manchester-York
 - TPE to become more “inter-city” rather than “regional” or “local”
 - 220 new carriages – probably equals 44 trains capable of 125mph
 - extra direct services from Middlesbrough to York, Leeds, Manchester and Manchester Airport
 - free Wi-Fi on all trains by 2018

Both franchises will be overseen by a joint Rail North and DfT team based at Leeds.

There is a DfT commitment to launching an integrated smart ticketing system across the north of England, though Railfuture has learnt that technical difficulties are being encountered so that the implementation date remains uncertain. According to the Newcastle Chronicle (8 February) Shadow Transport Minister Lilian Greenwood claimed the Government had had six years in which to get multi-modal smart ticketing (similar to Oyster) into being, but had failed to do so.

14 December 2015: Metro funding reduced. Revealed that Government to reduce the Metro modernisation budget by £33m.

North East News - January and February 2016

2 January 2016: Train performance. Figures indicated that performance by TPE and Virgin EC had deteriorated significantly in four week period November/December as compared with same four weeks in 2014.

6 January 2016: Meeting of the Branch Committee at Durham. Seven attendees. Business included:

- firming up of arrangements for Branch AGM on 12 March in Newcastle: guest speaker to be Toby Hughes, managing director of Transport Operations for NECA, and effectively Director General of NEXUS.
- existing Branch officers willing to be nominated to serve for further twelve months. However, Peter Kenyon, who prepares material for the quarterly publication *Railwatch*, will vacate the position end of 2016.
- Tim Burleigh of Eversholt Trains had suggested a further private meeting with Committee members – this agreed. Dated for 23 February.
- Future format and frequency of issue of Branch Newsletter (Bulletin) discussed: for further consideration at next Committee meeting.

Major business was to consider second half of Chairman Trevor Watson's NE Infrastructure Wish List document. Committee had already deliberated on ECML and Tyne Valley proposals. Now looked at Durham Coast Line, routes in Tees Valley including Darlington and Bishop Auckland and the Esk Valley line to Whitby.

Agreed that the document would be refined and suitably formatted and submitted post haste to Lord Adonis' Strategic Infrastructure Commission which was asking for specific suggestions concerning connectivity between Northern cities. Finished document duly forwarded on 8 January and safe receipt acknowledged.

18 January 2016: Durham Station. £800,000 set aside to pay for improvements to pedestrian and cycle access to Durham station.

29 January 2016: 40m METRO passengers. Number of passengers using METRO rose above 40 million in 2015, the highest number for five years. There were 1.3 million more journeys in 2015 than in the previous year.

1 February 2016: Call for DB Regio METRO contract to be curtailed. Newcastle's Council Leader, Nick Forbes, doesn't want the present contract with DB Regio extended in 2017. Co Forbes claimed that recent poor METRO performance was behind his call. Paul Baker, Secretary of T & W Public Transport Users' Group, is backing Co Forbes stating that in his view METRO service over past four years had been unsatisfactory.

9 February 2016: Virgin East Coast Stakeholder Summit at York. Total of 84 delegates including six members of our Branch.

Very much a PR event intended to bolster the image of Virgin EC. Here are just a few 'nuggets' gleaned during the three hour event:-

- ❖ so far there have been over 200 individual initiatives designed to improve the passenger experience: these included cut of 10% in anytime standard fares: station improvements such as new customer information posts: new services from Stirling, Sunderland and Leeds: phones issued to all staff: back pack vacuum cleaners means easier to keep trains spruce: social media team on duty 24/7.
- ❖ training of front line staff has been enhanced
- ❖ four (regional) general manager (leadership) posts created – intended to inspire improved staff performance
- ❖ **And the future** - 42 extra London-Edinburgh services each week from May 2016
- ❖ interiors of every EC carriage to be refreshed through 2016 and 2017
- ❖ increased station car parking including at Durham
- ❖ new ticketing technology plus better web-site
- ❖ by 2020 there will be 65 new EIP train sets leading to some faster journey times: aim London-Edinburgh 4 hours, London-Leeds 2 hours
- ❖ new services to Lincoln, Harrogate and Bradford planned.

BUT some challenges flagged up including:-

- state of ECML infrastructure – track faults and OHL defects
- congestion on network plus recent weather (flooding) factors
- the possible introduction of Open Access services between Edinburgh and London: if these happen Virgin EC may be unable to fulfil all its franchise obligations due to extraction of revenue

A lot more ground was covered, but space does not permit further detail.

Thanks to David Horne, MD of Virgin Trains East Coast, and his staff for making delegates so welcome and for taking time to set out their hopes for the future. *Railfuture* wish them well in their endeavours. It is imperative they succeed.

Finally.....hope you enjoyed reading through this Bulletin. The Railfuture North East branch committee is looking at ways of improving future editions. Any suggestions most welcome. My email:- anthony.walker@railfuture.org.uk OR tel 0191 3864534

NB remember our next Branch meeting and AGM – on Saturday 12 March 2016 at Newcastle Arts Centre, 67 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Begins at 2pm. Guest speaker is METRO boss Toby Hughes. He's well worth listening to, believe me!

Tony Walker

Our websites: www.railfuture.org.uk www.railfuturescotland.org.uk
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Registered Office:- 24 Chedworth Place, Tattingstone, Suffolk IP9 2ND