

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, SEPTEMBER 2016

General

This has been a quiet year for transport in the East Midlands, certainly for rail, compared to new franchises, new rolling stock and strikes elsewhere. Devolution of powers (including transport) to combined local authorities may be going ahead in places, but here local authorities can't agree to combine.

In last year's report I mentioned "no announcement about the route of HS2 phase 2". That still applies! However, Midland Main Line electrification has been "unpaused".

While there are no plans for formal organisations on the lines of Transport for the North, Midlands authorities and government are working on schemes for "Midlands Connect". We attended the launch of this. Initial suggestions are that priority should be given to the Derby-Stoke, Derby-Birmingham and Coventry-Leicester corridors.

Internal

From our Steering Group, we have lost a couple of co-opted members. For the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT), both Keith McNally and his successor as Regional Manager, Richard Godson, have moved on. We hope to welcome a new representative. Jim Bamford's talents have been recognised by Rail North, and he has moved to them from Nottinghamshire.

As ever, my thanks go to all Steering Group members for their efforts on our behalf.

We have held four Steering Group meetings during the year and I would like to thank Nottingham City Council, East Midlands Trains (EMT), Kettering Borough Council and East Midlands Airport for hosting them.

The routine part of our meeting at EMT was followed by a session with John MacQuarrie, the DfT officer responsible for a franchise extension Direct Award for Cross-Country Trains, during which we expanded on our written consultation response. He commented that DfT had received a much greater response than for similar consultations for other franchises, almost all of which had criticised the lack of stakeholder engagement, as well as operational shortcomings. He promised that improvements in engagement would be written in to any Award.

As we have come to expect, Colleen Hempson from EM Airport gave us an update on activities there during the meeting that she hosted, covering both surface access and changes to the airport fabric and destinations served. There continues to be slow growth in passenger numbers, both on aircraft and buses, but faster growth in parcels traffic. A major extension to the buildings of the dominant operator, DHL, is under construction.

We have not held a public meeting this year.

However, we do get out and about. I attended a TW North-West conference mainly concerned with the new arrangements for rail services in the north.

We continue to be represented on a number of groups not directly involved with providing public transport. These include the EM Rail Forum; Leicestershire and Northamptonshire Rail Action Committee (LANRAC); EM Airport Surface Access Forum; Greater Nottingham Light Rapid Transit Advisory Committee; Notts' Bus Forum and the EM Transport Activists Round Table.

There has only been one formal meeting of the TravelWatch Chairs' National Liaison Group, which I attended. This was in the offices of Transport Focus in London and included an update as to their activities and their views on recent events. TW South-West referred to the consultation work they had done in relation to franchise extension at Great Western.

I would like to thank EMT for their help with travel to these meetings and to other events held near stations on their network.

We continue to deal with a steady flow of enquiries from individuals, mainly via our website, and from the media when transport is in the news. On a national level, letters from members have been published in "Modern Railways" and "Buses" magazines.

Rail

At our last AGM, improvements to the Midland Main Line (MML) had been paused, and the details of the Direct Award to EMT were awaited.

MML improvements have now been unpaused, although significantly delayed. Work between Kettering and Corby requires the current blockade, but dates for major work further north are well in the future. However the realignment scheme at Market Harborough appears to be going ahead, we attended an exhibition of plans and the work is scheduled for late 2017 through to early 2019. Electrification was meant to follow the finish of work on the Great Western, but this is falling further behind schedule. The new, post-Brexit, government has yet to make its investment priorities clear.

We were disappointed with the Direct Award to EMT, which contained some customer benefits but very little in relation to improved train services. Presentations at EMT's stakeholder conference, which many members attended, tended to confirm this view.

One piece of good news is the improved service between Nottingham and Lincoln, which now applies on Saturdays as well as Monday to Friday. Steve Abbott supported EMT's bid for a National Rail Award for the Lincoln line improvements, the outcome is awaited!

East Midlands Councils are hoping to emulate the success of their colleagues in the north in obtaining a much improved service following refranchising. The officers thought that the authorities need to agree what they would like to see in the East Midlands franchise and campaign for it. Consequently a draft prospectus was launched at a meeting in April in Newark attended by many of our members. We had a hand in drafting it, and generally agree with its call for improved inter-urban and inter-regional services.

Although the Invitation to Tender is some way off, one potential bidder has already shown interest, and has met stakeholders, including ourselves. Their representative was amenable to most of our suggestions.

As noted above the direct Award franchise for CrossCountry is awaited.

The ORR has approved paths for the Virgin Trains East Coast two-hourly Kings Cross to Lincoln service from 2019.

The only announcement in the past year about HS2 phase 2 has been that the line will not run through Meadowhall but further east, with Sheffield served by a branch or loop. There has been nothing further said about the Birmingham – Yorkshire section.

In October, we produced a call for a rethink on the value for money of the scheme, particularly “our” section. We believe that the route as currently planned does not adequately serve the “three cities”, and that improvements to the East Coast and Midland lines would be more effective and cheaper.

The many improvements included in the new Northern franchise include a new fast service from Lincoln to Sheffield and Leeds, to be introduced in 2018.

Buses (and Trams)

The government’s “Buses Bill” is currently going through parliament. While it does allow local authorities to franchise services, if they meet conditions, it is expected that most authorities would form partnerships with commercial operators. In our area, partnerships of varying kinds already exist, so I would expect these to be developed further rather than major changes. In the meantime, most changes to bus services are local and are dealt with by our constituent groups, though important developments are discussed by the Steering Group.

Some cuts to rural services have taken place, though not (yet) to the extent they have in some other parts of the country. Some local authorities have withdrawn subsidy for all non-school services, and Derbyshire is considering joining them. We await developments.

Derbyshire has had for over 25 years a bus/rail day ticket valid on all bus services in the county. While the ticket still exists, it is no longer accepted on High Peak’s commercial services, a real loss to visitors to the Peak District.

The other major change to fares during the year has been Nottingham City Council’s unilateral decision to cease reimbursing concessionary fares on the “Red Arrow” express service to Derby, using a loophole in the regulations that the consultation paper introducing them suggested was meant to apply to tourist and special services. Objections had no effect. I fear that it sets a precedent.

We now have a database of information on what facilities are available at bus stations and equivalent around the region, but have not done much with it yet.

The extensions to Nottingham's trams opened just before our 2015 AGM. They have now settled down to be an integrated part of the city's transport network. Both new routes are well used, but as expected, the Beeston route has attracted more passengers than the Clifton one.

Jim Froggatt

15.09.16