The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland

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East Coast Franchise

Over the past few weeks doubt has been raised as to whether National Express East Coast (NXEC) will continue with the franchise to run the East Coast Main Line. The media has reported on various aspects of this and on 1 July the Rt Hon Lord Andrew Adonis, Secretary of State for Transport, spoke in the House of Lords.

"My Lords, with leave I will make a statement about rail services on the East Coast main line. The House will understand that, because of the imperative for the Government to respond immediately to the trading statement made by National Express when the markets opened this morning, it was also essential for me to make a Written Ministerial Statement earlier.

"For some months now National Express have been seeking to renegotiate the terms of the franchise agreement to operate services on the East Coast main line between London, West Yorkshire, the North East and Scotland which they signed in 2007. My position has been consistently clear – that the Government does not renegotiate rail franchises. That remains the position today.

"This morning, National Express Group announced that they will not provide the further financial support necessary to ensure that their subsidiary, National Express East Coast, remains solvent. As a consequence, National Express East Coast is no longer able to continue operations to the full term of its franchise, and expects to become insolvent later this year.

"The decision of National Express to break their contract is regrettable and disappointing. All other rail companies are fulfilling their contracts, despite the economic downturn. It is simply unacceptable to reap the benefits of contracts when times are good, only to walk away from them when times become more challenging.

"My first and overriding obligation in this situation is to ensure continuity of service to passengers, with no disruption or diminution of service standards.

"I have therefore established a publicly owned company, which will take over this franchise from the point at which National Express East Coast ceases to operate. We will agree an orderly handover with National Express. Until that date, National Express will operate services on the current basis; after that date the new public company will do so. There will be no interruption of services. Existing operational staff – who continue to provide a good service – will transfer to the new East Coast Main Line company; so will the assets necessary for the continuation of the service. I can assure the travelling public that services will continue without disruption and all tickets will be honoured.

"It is the Government's intention to tender for a new East Coast franchise operator from the end of 2010. The specification of the new franchise will reflect my concern to secure better passenger services and facilities. In particular I will be seeking to secure significant further improvements to service quality, including to station security, bike and car parking facilities at stations, bus interchange facilities and train catering. This will ensure a step change improvement for passengers from a new East Coast franchise. I intend to consult fully on the new franchise specification, including with passenger groups, parliamentarians and the Scottish Executive."

He also noted optimistically that: "In respect of rail services at large, they are steadily improving. Passenger numbers are at their highest levels since the 1940s, punctuality is over 90 per cent and overall passenger satisfaction is rising, as shown in the latest independent National Passenger Survey, published yesterday. Moreover, the revenue from rail franchises is enabling us to make record investment in upgrading the network and services on it."

Mr Sadiq Khan, Minister of State, Department for Transport; Tooting, Labour, repeated the above statement to the House of Commons later that day.

On 3 July, Susan Goldsmith, Managing Director, National Express East Coast, e-mailed stakeholders, which includes RAGES, to say:

"Following this week's announcements about the East Coast rail franchise, I am writing to assure you that National Express remains committed to ensuring that high standards of service are maintained and that any transfer to public ownership is Go to page 2

Welcome to this issue of The Rages Rag, which we publish regularly. It is the main means of communication with our members.

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East Coast Franchise

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conducted in an orderly and professional manner.

"Contrary to some media reports, the Department for Transport has not nationalised the East Coast railway, nor has National Express been stripped of its franchise.

"However, we have indicated to the Government that if current poor trading conditions prevail, due to the recession, the financial support available to National Express East Coast (NXEC) from its parent company, National Express Group plc, under the franchise agreement, will be exhausted by the end of 2009. In those circumstances, the East Coast railway will be transferred to public ownership. The Government has stated that it intends to tender for a new East Coast franchise operator from the end of 2010.

"Importantly, both National Express and the Government have confirmed that customers are unaffected by this week's announcements. It is business as usual for NXEC passengers, with services continuing to be run according to the published timetable, and tickets sold and honoured in the normal way."

On 9 July, the BBC Internet News Channel reported that: the possibility was raised by Transport Minister Sadiq Khan during an exchange in the House of Commons with Borders MP Michael Moore. Mr Khan said new stations were an element which could be considered in any new agreement.

It continued saying that Lib Dem Mr Moore had joined

forces with his party colleague Sir Alan Beith, MP, in seeking assurances about the fate of Berwick station on the East Coast line. There are currently no railway stations in the Scottish Borders and Mr Moore said that meant the facility in nearby Northumberland was important to his constituents.

He asked: "Will the minister give a specific pledge that under government control and the new contract, services to and from Berwick-upon-Tweed will not be altered unless they are improved?"

Mr Khan said a new station was "one example of the sort of thing that we will be considering when the contract next goes to tender. We will see whether we can include such things as a new station."

"We need to ensure that we take on board the concerns and issues raised by parliamentarians and stakeholders to get the best deal possible for passengers."

The BBC also noted that "A campaign has been fought for some time to have a station at Reston, in the Borders, reopened on the East Coast line after more than 40 years."

However, RAGES notes that it is strange for a Westminster Transport Minister should comment on a new station in Berwickshire as that is a devolved matter to the Scottish Government.

Berwick News

Services seem to have run well and punctuality is good. The rail link bus to Galashiels is once again shown on the departure board, from which it should never have disappeared. Two information point devices have appeared, one by the station entrance and one at the foot of the stairs leading to the platforms. It is difficult to see the reason for these machines. That on the platform has so far only informed us that "This is some test text". The trouble is that it repeats this message 32 times and it becomes tedious. That by the front door has the same message on one side and on the other repeats the information on the departure screen. Given the financial difficulties of NXEC, it is hard to see how the money spent on these can be justified.

On-board ticket checking on NXEC trains continues to be erratic and it is easy to go through to Glasgow (Central) without having one's ticket examined. Arriva staff set a much higher standard.

Few passengers will mourn the passing of NXEC, which has been associated with a decline in standards of on-board service from that offered by GNER and British Railways. When the ECML is once again in the hands of the government, this would be an ideal opportunity to begin the re-unification of the rail network, whether under private or public ownership. It is therefore incredible to hear that this is only a temporary state of affairs and that in due course a new franchise will be negotiated, no doubt for a shorter term than that which is allotted to the average family car. It has with truth been said that railway staff could now fill a wardrobe with all the uniforms with which they have been issued since privatisation. Politicians seem completely unwilling to admit that the system is now an unworkable mixture of private and public ownership and that the experiment should be abandoned as soon as practicable.

Ticket Barriers

On reading a notice at Berwick, it had been believed that ticket barriers were being considered for the station, however, NXEC responded to RAGES: "You will be pleased to know that you have been misinformed. NXEC has no plans to introduce automatic gating at Berwick."

Understanding and Influencing Your Parliament

Barrie Forrest recently attending a short meeting in Dunbar which Mr Alex Fergusson, MSP and Presiding Officer, hosted. A short presentation on how to organise petitions was given, but its main aim was to promote the one-day conference in November to learn more about Parliament, what it is and how it works. It will focus on the various ways in which local community groups can become involved with and influence the parliamentary process.

Whilst we are quite well acquainted with these procedures, nonetheless we will attend in the hope of gaining further ideas. Attendance is free!

ScotRail Franchise Consultation

At the end of May, RAGES attended a regular meeting in Haddington with SEStran. Present were Councillors from East Lothian and Scottish Borders, council staff from both, members of SEStran and researcher to Iain Gray MSP (apology given). John Lamont MSP had given his apologies. Unfortunately, Transport Scotland did not send a representative.

Despite encouragement from the Minister for Transport during his visit to East Lothian and Berwickshire last August, RAGES has been very disappointed with the progress on our aims and so it was decided that the entire committee would attend this meeting rather than the usual one or two.

The assembled people had been eagerly awaiting, since February (the original expected date), the publication by Transport Scotland of their response to the recently commissioned consultation relating to the ScotRail Franchise extension. All of us had replied to the invitation to respond to the consultation.

However, all round the table were disappointed with the information published below about the option in our area of concern, i.e. East Lothian and Berwickshire.

| Additional services between Dunbar and Edinburgh | Additional service (but unlikely to be implemented short-term due to existing National Express service) plus a study into options for further ScotRail services to the area | December 2010 | £1.4m |
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The meeting thought that the implementation date was too far in the future and that many of the other 27 options were either implemented or would be in 2009.

It had been confirmed that the study into a local service between Edinburgh and Berwick would not be pursued until after these additional service(s) were implemented. It was also noted that any outcome of this study would only be used to inform possible operators of the next franchise due to start in 2014. Transport Scotland would fund this study, but it is believed that money is available for this in 2009.

Tom Thorburn, RAGES Chairman, noted that we were pleased with the overall investment in rail transport in Scotland, but that was not happening in our area.

He asked the meeting how Lenzie passengers would react if subjected to the following if Bishopbriggs' were not:

- Car parking at £4 per day
- Last train Sunday to Thursday at 21:00 hrs
- Last train on a Saturday at 19:00 hrs
- Two hours between services (with a following wind)
- No cheap off-peak fares available
- Cannot access special offers from First ScotRail

Dunbar passengers are subjected to all of these whereas the other six stations in East Lothian are not. The meeting also noted the inability for students to access the Queen Margaret University from there.

In the past years we have seen much development in other areas such as Bathgate and the recently opened Laurencekirk station. It was agreed that all round the table would unite with one voice to try to bring forward both the implementation date and the local service study by:

- Writing to Transport Scotland via the Minister for Transport asking for clarification on what is being put forward on the above consultation option and stating that 2010 was unacceptable.
- Requesting a meeting with the Minister for a delegation from each body round the table to be done via the two MSPs.
- Writing to John Swinney MSP stating that housing development was being delivered, but where is the transport infrastructure enhancements to support this.
- Writing to First ScotRail inviting them to attend a meeting (NB there is now a new MD).

The meeting with the Minister is yet to be arranged.

Plea to members

Included with this edition of *The Rages Rag* to members is the notice for the 10th Annual General Meeting. In recent years the number of members attending the AGMs has been reducing to an all time low of a dozen last year. We hope to get an important guest speaker and therefore trust that more members will show an interest by attending this important meeting.

Meet the Managers

The following Q/As have been extracted from a recent First ScotRail "Meet the Managers" session in Edinburgh as relevant to our own area.

- Q. Can the number of bicycle spaces be increased on the route between Musselburgh and North Berwick, as many keen cyclists use it?
- A. The trains on the North Berwick line already have a higher than average amount of dedicated cycle space, and we must strike a balance between the needs of passengers with bikes and those without more cycle spaces inevitably results in fewer seats. All stations on the North Berwick line are also provided with cycle storage facilities.
- Q. Is there a particular reason for the frequent late-running of the 18:45 Musselburgh to Edinburgh service?
- A. This is 18:24 North Berwick to Edinburgh, which can incur delays between Abbeyhill Junction and Edinburgh. As this service runs during the evening peak, it is vulnerable to reactionary delays due to more trains on the route at this time of the day. We are aware of the issues regarding this and are working to resolve them.
- Q. Would it be possible to increase the number of carriages on services on the North Berwick Line?
- A. We continuously monitor the allocation of our rolling stock. There are no plans to increase capacity on this line due to the availability of rolling stock.
- Q. Would it be possible to provide a 17:15 service from Musselburgh to Edinburgh on weekdays in order to fill the gap between the 16:45 and 18:11 services?
- A. The provision of services is monitored continuously and there are no plans for an additional service at this time of day due to the availability of rolling stock.
- Q. Is there a specific reason for the frequent late-running of the 19:15 Musselburgh to Edinburgh service?
- A. Since 1 March 2009 there have been some delays to this service due to operational issues, such as unit defects. The service has also been delayed at Drem Junction on occasion due to late running trains on the main line.
- Q. Would it be possible to increase services between Musselburgh and Edinburgh to half-hourly on weekdays?
- **** A. There is no capacity on this route to introduce a half hourly service on weekdays. *****
- Q. Would it be possible for more services from Musselburgh to stop at Haymarket?
 - A. There are no plans to increase the direct services between

Musselburgh and Haymarket due to a lack of available capacity on the route. However, First ScotRail later advised RAGES that "In the new ScotRail timetables, the services from Newcraighall at 06:36 and 07:36 which in the winter timetable had terminated at Waverley are now extended through to Haymarket and beyond, forming a 06:36 to Glasgow Central via Shotts and a 07:26 to the Fife Circle via Kirkcaldy."

- Q. Would it be possible to introduce a book of tickets that can be used from time to time for customers who require a more flexible ticket than the current Flexipass?
- A. The 10 Journey Flexipass provides significant flexibility, in that tickets can be used on any train, on any day over a period of one month. These can be purchased well in advance of travel from stations, telesales on 08457 55 00 33 and online at www.scotrail.co.uk For even more flexibility the 50 Journey can be used over a period of one year.
- Q. Can the customer information technology on the North Berwick Line be improved?
- A. The screen at Wallyford Station has been replaced and the screen at Drem will also be replaced by the end of the month

We have experienced severe difficulties in finding replacement parts for the faulty monitors, but any faults that are reported will be investigated and rectified as soon as possible.

- Q. Is there a suitable ticket to allow flexible travel either via Musselburgh or Newcraighall stations?
- A. Customers can use either station subject to paying any differential in price. For a customer travelling to/from Edinburgh, best approach would be to purchase the higher priced ticket to Newcraighall that would give the flexibility of travel via either station.
- Q. Is there a particular reason for having so many ticket checks on the route from Dunfermline Town to Musselburgh?
- A. As part of our franchise commitment, we must ensure that certain stations have barrier checks to try and eliminate ticketless travel and fraud. These stations are identified under our franchise and undergo regular audits. For this journey in particular ticket checks will take place at Dunfermline Town during the morning peak and at Edinburgh Waverley during morning and evening peaks, as well as on-train. While this can potentially mean up to five checks on any journey, we do have an obligation to carry these out.

Some of the above points have been raised by RAGES in the past, but we are surprised at the answer marked *****, as a recent study into the local service from Edinburgh to Berwick suggested a suitable time of 10 minutes past the hour for such a service.

Membership

We now have around 120 members from around the counties.

Please encourage your neighbours or fellow passengers to join RAGES.

Membership forms can be obtained from committee members, whose names can be found on your membership card.