

NORTHAMPTON RAIL USERS GROUP

Minutes of meeting held 8th December 2012

Those Present: Brian Binley MP, Colin Bricher, Cllr J. Caswell, John Ellerby (NCC), Cllr Stephen Hibbert, Shaun Hope, Gyde Horrocks, Paul Minton, Cllr Beverley Mennell, Patrick Rawlinson, Paul Smith, Geoff Steel, Cllr Winston Strachan, Darren Trotter, Tom Welsh, Rebecca Freeman and Mitzi Latham (both of London Midland) and Callum Jones (Northampton Chronicle and Echo).

1. **Chairman** opens meeting at 10.05 am and welcomes all present, particularly the representatives of London Midland. In his opening remarks he confirms receipt of a letter from David Cheney in support of the re-opening of the Bedford line.
2. **Apologies:** Sally Keeble, Paul Anderson, David Cheney, Paul Varnsberry, Martin DeRosario, Daniel Smith, Jonathan Nunn, Simon Mitchell and David Hugheston-Roberts,
3. **Minutes** of meeting held on 10th November 2012 agreed as amended.
4. **Matters arising** from the minutes. None.
5. **Presentation from London Midland.** Chair remarked on the poor record of service over the last 2 months or so. Rebecca Freeman acknowledged the deterioration in the service due to lost drivers and the matter was discussed at length. Amongst the matters raised were the higher turnover in drivers due to early retirement, that it took 12 months to train drivers and such period cannot be shortened but that once trained they only had to give three months notice to leave. Questions were raised as to earnings and working conditions. It was confirmed that each train operator offers a different package to their drivers.

Chair said if the loss of drivers was a money issue that was a concern as it might be indication of the franchise finding life tough financially and not being able to compete. NRUG was the mouthpiece for Northampton rail users and they do need to know. There was a lack of belief from the public. It needed a response from the very top of the organisation – “the people of Northampton deserve it”.

London Midland suggested there were no common denominators between the various franchise companies. Cllr Strachan questioned the early retirement issue as such matters take time and he rejected the idea that people planning to retire would only give three months notice. Patrick Rawlinson noted that the Press were saying the difficulties in recruitment were “all about salary”.

Tom Welsh raised the issue of poor information announcements at Northampton Station and gave a number of instances. He was concerned about the lack of rail staff other than on the concourse side of the barrier. Rebecca Freeman was “very disappointed in that”, the staff do have training and she will follow up the complaint.

Rebecca Freeman recorded that there were a number of vacancies at Northampton but that she hoped new staff would be “in post by the spring”. There would be difficulties over the next 2 or 3 months but London Midland were moving forward with a recruitment plan.

Tom Welsh compared facilities with Coventry and Chester and said London Midland were “treating us like a market town”. Chair asked London Midland to come back to NRUG with a

response – “you will appreciate this is the largest town in England” with plans to increase the population to 340,000. The town needed more attention from London Midland – “we are on a loop but need main line thinking”. “This is an important public issue to Northampton and your Chief Executive has to come back to us”.

On terms and conditions of staff the Chair remarked that surely the franchisees get together to discuss such matters but Mitzi Latham confirmed the franchisees have separate negotiating teams.

Chair also raised the question of why a definite date had been given for improvements to the service (11th December 2012). Rebecca Freeman explained this was the start of the new timetable with changes to train crew rostering. Patrick Rawlinson asked if the cancellation of trains would be eliminated by the changed timetable. Rebecca Freeman answered “cannot eradicate totally”. In response to a further question Rebecca said there was no reduction in service and that the changes to rostering allowed for more flexibility in the availability of drivers or as Patrick Rawlinson put it “less staff riding on cushions to get somewhere”. Rebecca Freeman gave reassurances about improvements from 11th December 2012.

Paul Minton further questioned the difficulties in recruitment caused by spiralling pay. Rebecca Freeman acknowledged that London Midland had a policy of recruitment “off the street” with training and promotion, whereas other franchisees only took on experienced drivers.

Tom Welsh, Paul Smith, Geoff Steel and John Ellerby all raised questions about problems over the Christmas period with planned engineering works and replacement bus services. There was a discussion about co-operating with Stagecoach as to the use of London Midland tickets on the Wellingborough to St Pancras line. Rebecca Freeman confirmed it was still necessary to have replacement buses as a service had to be maintained to intervening stations to Euston.

Paul Minton raised questions with regard to punctuality of trains. Rebecca Freeman said there had been a number of significant incidents such as 6th November when wires were down in the Watford area and recent flooding problems. She agreed to investigate the Ledburn junction issue further and report back.

In response to a question from Patrick Rawlinson, Rebecca Freeman elaborated on the remodelling of Bletchley junction and Geoff Steel clarified points from his own knowledge.

Gyde Horrocks expressed the view that problems experienced by franchisees were historical, went back to British Rail and would continue “until we get a universal system across the industry”.

Chair thanked Rebecca and Mitzi for “sitting in the hot seat”. NRUG want to be onside with local publicity, kept in the information loop and would appreciate a letter from the Chief Executive of London Midland to allow Chair to take their views to the Government Minister.

- 6. Any other business.** Patrick Rawlinson questioned the interference of the Department of Transport in dictating terms of reference for proposed franchisees. Privatisation was supposed to reduce deficits yet deficits continue to rise. We had a catchment area of three quarters of a million people and needed to push for a mainline service as had been flirted with in the past. Chair stated he would attempt to arrange a meeting with the Department of Transport

Chair introduced a report from County Council "What will be the spatial effects of High Speed Rail in the UK?" This will be circulated to members for discussion at the next meeting.

Chair reported on a two month delay to the new Railway station because of archaeology investigations. Proposals for a western heritage gateway were moving ahead in a positive way. In response to a question from Tom Welsh it was agreed that "Friends of Northampton Castle" may attend NRUG meetings. Tom also raised concerns about the planned development between the Station and the Town Centre. Chair put the group at ease about preservation of St Peter's Church, the Black Lion Public House building etc.

Questions raised about signage of the town from the station and Cllr Caswell to look into it.

Paul Smith raised the question of Nuneaton becoming a rail hub and a rival in competition to the Northampton Enterprise zone.

7. Next meeting and invitees.

January meeting to involve WNDC and Chris Wragg of the County Council. Geoff Steel suggested John Markham to discuss the Crewe service.

February meeting – try again for a representative of the Office of the Rail Regulator.

March meeting – Invite Anthony Smith, Chief Executive of 'Passenger Focus'. London Midland to return.

April meeting – ProLogis and Freight.

- 8.** And finally – Tom Welsh said his goodbyes to the group as he was moving to Cheshire. The Chairman acknowledged Tom's massive contribution to NRUG and the heritage of the town. He left with great credit and will be sadly missed.

9. Meeting closed at 12 noon.

THE NORTHAMPTON RAIL USERS GROUP

www.northamptonrug.org.uk

AGENDA for the meeting on Saturday 12th January 2012

Time: 10am The Guildhall Northampton

- 1. Chairman's opening remarks**
- 2. Apologies**
- 3. Minutes of meeting held on 8th December 2012**
- 4. Matters arising from minutes**
- 5. WNDC**
- 6. Chris Wragg – Spatial Effects of High Speed Rail**
- 7. Any Other Business**
- 8. Dates of future meetings –**
 - **Next meeting Saturday 9th February, 10am, Guildhall**
 - **Dates of future meetings**