

The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland

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ScotRail MD faces Commuters at Longniddry

At the invitation of RAGES, Mr Alastair McPherson, Managing Director of ScotRail, agreed to come to the Community Centre at Longniddry to face the public on the problems that commuters were having with the North Berwick service.

This was arranged for Friday 16 March 2001 and around 160 commuters attended, stretching the Centre's seating capacity to its limit.

RAGES Vice Chairman, James King chaired the meeting in the absence of our chairman, who had sent his apologies. James introduced the top table as:

- Alastair McPherson, ScotRail
- Bill Ure, Rail Passengers Committee for Scotland
- Ralph Jordinson, Secretary, RAGES

He outlined the aims of RAGES and its concerns about the North Berwick service. The latter included:

- Date for the introduction of 318 sets needed
- Breakdowns/cancellations of the old 305's unacceptable
- No information to advise passengers on actions/options when things go wrong
- Substitute diesel units lacking capacity
- Lack of fare collection
- Gaps in service
- Dirty windows

James then asked Mr McPherson to address the meeting.

Mr McPherson outlined the framework within which ScotRail operates. In particular, the franchise agreement has proved inflexible in what changes or improvements can be made.

Among the current issues that he addressed was the operational performance to North Berwick. Until recently, punctuality had averaged around 90% which is the franchise target. The reliability had bettered its target of 99%. These figures reflected the service as a whole and not the peak time situation. Matters had deteriorated recently. This was blamed on the elderly sets continuing to breakdown. Out of five dedicated sets, three were required on any one day. Recent breakdowns had reduced this to one or none on some days. One of them had now been withdrawn from service for cannibalisation to provide spares.

As is well known, the introduction of the newer 318 class

of electrical multiple units has been delayed because of the problems in commissioning their replacements in Strathclyde. Since privatisation there had been an 18% increase in passenger numbers at peak times, which has led to over-crowding.

On fare structuring, Mr McPherson showed fare increases for the period 1997 to 2001 that were less than the retail price index. The exception was for the single fare.

He outlined other changes which had taken place:

- Weekend service frequency doubled
- Additional new 18:37 from Waverley to North Berwick and 18:50 return (from summer 2001)
- Through ticketing to Seabird Centre
- CCTV at Musselburgh and Wallyford
- Platform lengthening at North Berwick and Drem to cope with six car 318's
- Improved information on train running for the Dunfermline Centre

In reply to RAGES concerns, he had the following proposed solutions:

- Reliability would be greatly improved by the introduction of the 318 sets. However, this will produce a capacity problem due to one set only having a capacity of 220 seats compared with the 305's 320 seats. ScotRail were investigating other options which included: interim diesel multiple units; class 322 EMU's from their (now) sister company WAGN; and possible extra 318's owing to extra 334's being available.
- On fares collection, Mr McPherson said that a summer squad was being organised and that Musselburgh station would be staffed in the mornings. Automatic ticket machines and barriers were also being considered.
- Communications were agreed as being a problem and improvements were to be made at the Dunfermline Centre. Web and WAP solutions were also being looked at.
- Dirty trains were a surprise, but timing for getting the units to the cleaning depot was blamed.

Future prospects included:

- Improvements to station facilities, services and capacity
- New or re-opened stations
- Extension to Dunbar (possibly next year)
- Integration with the CrossRail Concept

A question and answer session then followed.



Q. (Cllr Costello) It is Alastair McPherson's job to run trains on time and also to ensure that trains are clean and to keep passengers informed about late running etc. It is NOT good enough just to say things. The rail-travelling population is suffering badly. We need a better response from ScotRail.

A. I am not ducking responsibility. We manage on a day to day basis and we do deliver cock-ups! We cannot give definite solutions through lack of train sets. But the 318's will transform the service with much greater reliability than the 305's and we plan to give more seats. In the West of Scotland with similar problems last year, the service has been transformed with growth rates beyond expectations. We suffer from late delivery of new replacement train sets.

Q. What are the capacity problems?

A. The 305's have 320 seats per 4-coach set and the 318's 220 per 3-coach set. Train sets will be doubled at peak hours. We need to borrow more electric trains and diesel sets (arriving in September).

Q. Which services will have reduced capacity? Passengers need to know this.

A. We shall put out customer leaflets. We recognise that passengers need advance warning over late running, cancellations, reduced capacity sets etc. I agree that proper communication with passengers is essential.

Q. On a day to day basis how is train crew availability managed?

A. We need 105 drivers and currently have 101. It takes 40 weeks to train a driver and 4 weeks to lose one! ScotRail has been a nursery for driver training and we have lost drivers to G.N.E.R., but hopefully that loss will stop.

Q. (from Wallyford) The main issue is uncertainty over trains. Passengers need to know well in advance about lateness, or availability, of a service.

A. In Fife we have experimented using local radio to advise passengers of problems.

Q. Does ScotRail carry out reviews of its performance?

A. Yes!

Q. Is CCTV available only at Wallyford and Musselburgh?

A. Yes. So we cannot give precise information about train movements beyond there.

Q. Train staff do not always communicate with passengers. Can this issue be addressed?

A. We accept your comment. In the past we have focused on developing the "hard" side of company operations (i.e. salaries) and we now need to grow a culture of really responding to customers' needs. We need to improve and we shall get more managers in.

Q. (Peter Ford) The franchise is in its fourth year. You made a commitment to run the service. You give excuses, but where shall we be in 6/12 months from now on the North Berwick service?

A. National Express will not waltz on its commitments. Indeed it is committed to the future. We bought 24 trains instead of 9 as required under the terms of the franchise. In 6 months the 318's will be in service with their greater reliability. In 12 months we shall have delivered our commitments with increases in public communications and through customer service. A rounded service will be in

place.

Q. East Lothian's population is expanding. We want you to tell people that a train is running or not. You must tell people about problems and we will understand.

A. We do put information out through Radios Forth and Clyde, BBC Scotland and CEEFAX, but we are edited by Radio Stations and often essential information is omitted.

Q. How safe are passengers when many are standing?

A. It is the current opinion of the Health and Safety Executive that passengers are no more at risk in the event of an accident, whether standing or seated.

Q. (John Home Robertson MSP/MP). Thanks are due to RAGES for arranging this meeting and to you Alastair for coming. I believe the franchise system is complicated but there is a will to make it work. So do come and talk to the politicians. We need to trust ScotRail, so please come and talk!

A. We are discussing with the Scottish Executive a plan to buy more new trains on a short term basis to help bridge the gap between our bid for the new franchise being called for and a decision on the new franchisee being taken (which on current trends could be up to three years!)

Q. (Cllr Jones) In the Borders there are no trains! Can ScotRail run trains to Berwick on Tweed and Reston?

A. This is a franchise issue.

Bill Ure commented that there is a distinct lack of stations in the Borders compared with the Highlands and there is a good case for re-openings of stations and new ones. The Scottish Executive has an awareness of this issue and he felt there were grounds for optimism in the future.

Q. (James King) Will you come back here in 12 months to testify again?

A. Yes!

Q. (Received after the meeting) When the 318's arrive, will there be any limit on the number of bikes during peak hours.

A. The official line is that there should be no problems with bikes except that there will be no dedicated area for them. Bikes should be stowed in the doorways on the side that is not next to the platform.

In his summary, the chairman thanked all present and said that we were encouraged by ScotRail's commitment to improving the service and trusted that the first 318's will start to appear at the end of May.

Local Service to Dunbar

As reported in the last issue, RAGES is pursuing the re-instatement of a local service to Dunbar. ScotRail have already declared their interest in providing an off-peak service (see above).

To help this cause, it was suggested to RAGES that we should undertake a passenger count at Dunbar. This was done on Wednesday 21 February, when committee members were seen 'clicking' passengers on and off every train, from 06:17 to 22:29.

This off-peak service must be the start of improving rail links to Berwick, with the re-opening of East Linton and Reston stations.