



Newsletter Summer 2018

FROM THE CHAIR

The first half of 2018 has been one of significant developments and challenges, both for NCRUG and the wider region.

Starting with NCRUG; the group has re-branded to reflect both our achievements and campaigns with a modern interpretation of a very well-known local feature. The logo is adaptable to support specific events and time of the year and NCRUG is very grateful for the support that's gone into its creation.

Leaflet holders are in place at Helsby and Frodsham to advertise the work of the group and attract new membership however as always the most up to date information can be found online through either our Facebook page and website.

The Halton Curve engineering works were completed in May this year. The new infrastructure enables both north and south bound traffic again over this 1.5 mile stretch of line; the first service to use the line south bound in 27 years being the 'Northern Belle' on a Liverpool to Cosford excursion on 10th June.

NCRUG is currently raising funds to celebrate the commencement of scheduled services to Liverpool in December this year; memorabilia, commemorative tickets and artwork are all planned plus of course a cake! More details to come, but do follow us on Facebook for daily updates.

Keolis-Amey have been announced as the new franchise Holders for the Wales and Borders franchise starting in December this year. Significant investment has been announced including the procurement of new rolling stock, although there is invariably significant lead in time from placing an order to receiving new train sets. We look forward to working with the new franchisee to ensure services meet with demand and facilities at our stations are improved.

Despite the well-publicised disaster that's befallen Northern Rail due to lack of rolling stock and staff shortages, we have seen no significant degradation in services in our area since the new timetable introduction on May 20th except the reduction on the Helsby-Ellesmere Port service (4 to 3 daily). NCRUG continues to lobby for better and met with the MP for Ellesmere Port, Justin Madders, to voice our concerns earlier in the year. We believe Northern's current plight has pushed the route to the lowest priority and can only expect improved services with the arrival of new rolling stock or interest from another operator altogether.

At our local stations the summer bedding plants have arrived and the NCRUG volunteer team is doing its best to have the stations look attractive as possible; mindful of the increased visitor numbers to the area once direct connections to the Liverpool City region are re-established we want the stations to be gateways to the community that we can be proud of.

Car-parking at Frodsham and Helsby has become a pressing issue and the effect of increased services in December seems to have been belatedly recognised. NCRUG wants a strategic approach to be taken to parking rather than short term and last-minute measures.

Mark Warren

HALTON CURVE UPDATE

All the infrastructure work has been completed on time and on budget. The first north to south train ran over the line on June 10th.

Still to be announced are the timetable and fares. We understand a weekday and Saturday service will run hourly but do not yet know the start and finish times. However, we learned that the manning of the Frodsham Junction signal box, which currently closes at 20.00 hrs has been extended with funding in place. We can, therefore, assume that services will run until at least that time. We believe there is a desire to run Sunday services to Llandudno but that has not been confirmed. Such a service would be popular for Liverpool day trippers to Llandudno and if Saturday were to be included this would be better still.

The service will run fast between Lime Street and Liverpool South Parkway in both directions but call at Runcorn, Frodsham and Helsby. This service pattern has been decided to assist the aspiration to extend services beyond Chester and minimise journey times.

With regard to fares NCRUG have requested that they be competitive with the Merseyrail Chester/Liverpool Loop service and not follow those on the Wrexham/Bidston line which are a deterrent to passengers on that line. Merseytravel state that the fares income projected in the BCR for the Halton curve project will form the basis for their deliberations on fares.

Preparations are under way both by NCRUG, the newly set up North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership and Merseytravel to publicise the new service. They will work together on this important issue. Developments will be posted on our website; www.ncrug.org.uk, in due course.

We have been told that the service will be operated by 2 Class 150 Units. With a journey time of roughly 40 minutes it should be possible to adhere to an hourly timetable under normal circumstances. We would have liked a third unit to make the service more robust but the current rolling stock shortages prohibits this at present.

Talk is already taking place concerning extending the service in the not too distant future. Obviously Wrexham stands out as a future destination together with Llandudno and other destinations along the North Wales coast. Cardiff is also on the radar. NCRUG will also be suggesting Bristol, Thames Valley, Bournemouth and Plymouth for the new Cross Country franchise which is currently in consultation. This may be a little too ambitious but it would only restore long lost destinations from Liverpool and 'if you don't ask you certainly don't get'.

CWG

HOOTON/ELLESMERE PORT TO HELSBY LINE

There is little to report on this service although we suspect, and hope, talks are going on behind the scenes between Merseytravel, Cheshire West & Chester Council and Northern. Northern do not appear to have any interest in the line and their previous provisional timetable suggesting two of their 'Connect' services to West Yorkshire would start from Ellesmere Port has not materialised. In any event we think that decision was based on capacity issues at Chester station rather than enhancing the Ellesmere Port service. All has gone quiet which is not surprising in view of the difficulties Northern are currently going through following the May timetable debacle.

We may have some news on this service when Merseyrail start receiving their new rolling stock which will include bi-mode. This opens up possibilities for extending services beyond the current Merseyrail Network and is an ambition of Merseytravel.

CWG

WELSH RAIL BUSINESS CASES

Readers will be aware of the recent Welsh Government (WG) award of the new Wales & Borders franchise to Keolis Amey, marking a change from Arriva's operation in North Cheshire.

Less well known is that the Welsh Government has commissioned investigations into prospective rail developments in North and South Wales which coincidentally is taking place in parallel with the franchise handover to Keolis Amey.

This initiative was prompted by the UK Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling's controversial cancellation of electrification schemes in various parts of the country last summer, supposedly on 'value for money' grounds, but as we have since learned, largely due to the lack of available budgets in the DfT's coffers.

The cancellations affected South Wales, which saw Cardiff – Swansea cancelled: in compensation, Mr Grayling offered to fund study work to look at how journey times in South Wales could be reduced, as this was considered one of the main advantages of electrification. Similar studies of North Wales were then thrown in as well.

This led to Ken Skates, the Welsh Government's transport Cabinet Secretary, to regard the DfT's move as the proverbial offer of an inch, to which he would take the proverbial mile.

The DfT's studies have commenced and are being managed by Network Rail. The WG add-on work has also started, with separate consultants commissioned to investigate South and North Wales.

To date, a large number of stakeholders have been consulted in North Wales and both parts of Cheshire and a very wide variety of ideas for rail improvements have been aired, going well beyond the DfT's brief to Network Rail.

Services in North Wales will be improved by the incoming Keolis Amey franchise, but there is also history to local organisations getting together to press for much needed improvements. It was only February this year, when the product of this thinking, the West & Wales prospectus of Growth Track 360, was launched at the House of Commons. Your NCRUG representative thought he'd observed some mutual disdain between Messrs. Skates and Grayling, but it may have been nothing!

This prospectus has an expansive vision for rail in North Wales and please note, the vital links from there into Crewe, central Manchester, Manchester Airport and Liverpool. The current work builds on this foundation to define practical service and infrastructure options out of the previous work and the more recent stakeholder inputs, which can then be tested in a value for money analysis. Amongst the ideas that have already come under assessment are:

- Extending all West Coast (Virgin) trains into N Wales, terminating at Bangor or Holyhead;
- Extending the Liverpool-Halton Curve-Chester through to Llandudno Junction;
- Extending all N Wales – Manchester trains to Manchester airport;
- Providing Chester-London services via both HS2 and WCML routes;
- Extending the Crewe-Chester shuttle service to start from Rhyl;
- Finishing the track doubling between Chester and Wrexham;
- New stations at "S Cheshire Parkway" between Chester and Crewe and Rossett;
- Fully resignalling the whole route from Chester to Holyhead.

These ideas build on what has been announced in the Wales & Border franchise and it is sobering to realise that rail services have hardly improved in frequency since the mid to late 1980s in N Wales, when Sprinter trains were introduced, aside from the London services' piecemeal improvements. The same is true of NCRUG's patch, which has seen new trains over the last few years (not that new anymore) but no ramping up of frequency despite the large increase in demand seen at 'our' stations.

For the Wrexham – Bidston line, the need to improve links with Merseyside has been recognised and how desirable it would be for trains to run through from the Welsh line, including the West Wirral, on to Liverpool without passengers needing to change trains at Bidston.

Study work has now progressed to the point where Ken Skates has been able (on 17 July) to release a brief summary of the initial headline findings, stating that there are at least £2bn of economic benefits to be had for Wales and the wider UK, through investing more in rail as a matter of principle.

To make the principle become a reality as well as a nice idea, additional resources need to be found, so making a cast iron case for this is essential. One likely outcome is a case for more rail investment and calls for Department for Transport to fund it.

Whether they do or not remains to be seen, but a failure to respond positively could easily lead to the Welsh Govt. calling for full devolution of rail powers such as enjoyed by the Scottish Government and where levels of rail expenditure are much higher than in Wales and most of the UK outside SE England it must be said.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, details of the impending Welsh franchise are being released and will have an impact on NCRUG's patch.

The Transport for Wales website includes maps showing what improvements are in store.

<http://tfw.gov.wales/journey-begins>

The information can be interpreted in different ways, but it does seem likely that improved service levels will be developed in the NCRUG area over the next few years. Take a look at the site and decide for yourselves!

Interestingly, the Welsh Government's approach to the franchise has effectively overturned UK Government rail policy in key areas: the very concept of a 'not for profit' franchise with re-investment of any surplus in the business, fare reductions instead of increases, complete renewal of a 'provincial sector' rail fleet and transformative rail investment in a city that isn't London – this all breaks the mould quite effectively and you must wonder what the DfT feels about it, not too happy one might guess.

More information will doubtless be revealed in the next few months, but there are a few glimmers of hope that the prospects for rail in NE Wales and NW England might be brightening up despite all the problems we have experienced recently. Let's hope so.

RD

CROSS COUNTRY FRANCHISE RENEWAL

On the face of it this franchise would seem to be 'off territory' for NCRUG. However, as intimated in our Halton curve piece, above, the opening of the curve does present opportunities for restoring some of the long lost Liverpool services to the south of England without impinging upon capacity on the West Coast Main Line south of Runcorn. These services could lead to capacity issues at the Rossett Junction to Wrexham North Junction section but if Transport for Wales sticks to its words then this section will be re-doubled in the future.

It has just been announced that Liverpool has not been shortlisted for a major TV Channel investment due to its poor transport links. In the past Liverpool had direct rail links to Scotland, (soon to be re-instated by TPE), Bristol, Plymouth, Penzance, Southampton, Bournemouth, Weymouth, Brighton and Poole to name but a few. These routes were not given up by the city of Liverpool – they were taken away. Now Liverpool is paying the price. Cross Country could help to remedy this sad state of affairs.

NCRUG will put in a submission to this consultation and include the above. We will also suggest longer trains and softer seating and a complete re-think of the seat reservation system. If members and supporters wish us to include their comments, please let us know.

CWG

KEOLIS/AMEY – WALES & BORDERS FRANCHISE

The new franchise will commence on 14th October and run for 15 years. It is interesting to learn that the branding will be that of Transport for Wales and not Keolis/Amey. It, therefore, appears that Transport for Wales are willing to taking more responsibility than the Department for Transport does with English franchises. We shall see how much effect this will have on the overall performance of the franchise and hope it will be beneficial.

In effect the new arrangement seems to be more of a 'Managed Contract' rather than a franchise so, again, it will be interesting to see how this pans out and to what extent it will benefit the passenger.

Considerable investment is planned, both in infrastructure and rolling stock, and Transport for Wales will be taking over some Network Rail functions in the south. A new CAF rolling stock factory is being built at Newport.

In due course, the Borderlands Line will form the core of a North Wales Metro system with a new station at Deeside Parkway and work to integrate Shotton High Level and Low Level stations to make them into a convenient interchange. Service frequency on the North Wales Coast Line and the Borderlands Line will be increased to take advantage of this facility and bring into play the agglomerative benefits of the MerseyDee area which have been ignored in the past.

Work to increase station capacity at Chester is badly needed and completion of the Chester/Wrexham re-doubling must be on the agenda, particularly with the aspiration for new services over the Halton curve between Liverpool and Wrexham and beyond.

The words all auger well for the new franchise but only time will tell if the funding and will to fulfil these aspirations will be brought to fruition and maintained until 2033.

CWG

NEWS IN BRIEF

Helsby station footbridge – work continues with temporary structures in place.

Powys County Council - is being urged to support the reopening of the mothballed route from Welshpool to Gobowen to passenger trains. The first step is to commission a study.

Retrospective planning permission – University of Chester’s planning application for their Thornton site has been turned down due to Health & Safety issues. We understand they are appealing the decision.

NCRUG AGM – will be held at Frodsham Civic Centre on Wednesday 24th October, commencing 19.30 hrs. Guest speaker will be George Jones who will talk about the Llangollen Heritage Railway and its recent extension to Corwen. Make a note in your diaries. It will be an interesting evening plus refreshments. All are welcome.

Liverpool City Region RUG/Associations – quarterly meetings take place in Liverpool at which matters of mutual interest and concern are discussed and taken forward to an afternoon session with the Chairman and Vice Chairman and Merseytravel’s Senior Rail Manager. Similar sessions, without OPSTA being present, but including the North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership and GrowthTrack360, are held with Cheshire West & Chester Council, in Chester, again quarterly. These meetings are extremely useful to all involved and we appreciate the time given to us by senior officials.

Beware!! – The Clock on the approach to Chester Station has been running a couple of minutes slow. It has been reported but we do not know if it has been adjusted to the correct time, at time of going to press. Don’t miss your train!

CWG

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Website: Visit our website at www.NCRUG.ORG.UK to leave your comments, favourable or otherwise, and to catch up on latest developments.

Note: The opinions expressed in this Newsletter are those of the individual contributors and are not necessarily those of the North Cheshire Rail Users’ Group, (NCRUG).

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APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP OF NORTH CHESHIRE RAIL USERS' GROUP

I/We wish to apply for membership of NCRUG at the annual subscription of £6.00. Subscriptions run from 1st January to 31st December. Donations are always welcome.

Name:

Address:

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Postcode:

Email address:

Telephone:

I/We enclose a cheque made payable to NCRUG:

Subscription:£6.00

Donation:£.....

Total:£.....

Signature:

I/We wish to receive the NCRUG newsletter and updates by: Post / Email (circle).

PLEASE POST THIS FORM WITH REMITTANCE TO:

Bob Florence (Membership NCRUG)

9 Weaver Crescent, Frodsham, WA6 7HU

A WELCOME TO NCRUG LETTER WILL BE SENT IN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT