



# Newsletter

Spring 2021

## FROM THE CHAIR

Despite the restrictions we've been under for the last 14 months there has been considerable activity within the industry and in our own area, albeit much done virtually. This newsletter comprises a brief summary of the group's activities and relevant news.

---

### Great **British Railways**

The long-awaited Williams Report has arrived. At the time of writing the breaking news of complete industry reform was announced. Great British Railways (GBR) will be a centralised body controlling not just trains and tracks but also timetabling and ticketing. Overall, this is a very welcome development that should fundamentally put the needs of the passenger first and foremost - something that has become increasingly lost over the last 30 years. There will still be some private sector involvement; rather than Operational Delivery Partners (ODPs - formerly ToCs) bidding for complete franchises only threaten to hand the keys back when earnings fall below expectations, private industry will be brought in to provide services on a purely contractual basis. There's no short-term change expected to the current ODPs we are used to dealing with, so expect our near Continental neighbours to be calling Britain 'Treasure Island' for some time yet.

Such re-centralisation of the rail industry will bring strategic benefits, but with the (on paper) cost / benefit analysis skewed towards investment in the South East, the future of Northern Powerhouse Rail must be called into question. The Williams Report addresses the issue of the need for local influence over the railways but will the creation of GBR undermine this? The elected Metro Mayors, having lobbied so long for greater regional control of local transport might yet again find their local trainsets beyond reach.

The staggering £12 billion poured into the network to ensure service continuity over the last year clearly will not continue. Although passenger numbers are running at c40% of pre-Covid levels and steadily climbing, the long-term revenue stream is uncertain and the easy options would be to reduce frequency or increase fares – possibly both. NCRUG will be keeping a close watch.

---

### **Timetabling and the Manchester Recovery Taskforce.**

Much of the Winter newsletter was dedicated to the 3 options (A,B&C) proposed by the Manchester Recovery Taskforce to solve long term congestion problems through the Castlefield Corridor. Although on time performance has been excellent over the period of reduced schedules, the infrastructure constraints in

Manchester have not gone away and as schedules ramp up towards previous frequencies a timetabling solution is still to be decided on.

It is understood that some stakeholders strongly objected to the quite binary set of options outlined in the recent Recovery Taskforce consultation, and despite the consultation document being quite explicit about the lack of an Option D, it is a hybrid solution that might now be sought. At a recent meeting hosted by Cllr Liam Robinson (Chair of Merseytravel) which NCRUG attended, it was pointed out that scheduling restrictions cannot be seen as a long-term solution to solve infrastructure constraints that were to be rectified in conjunction with the Northern Hub concept some years ago. As yet the much talked about 'Levelling Up Agenda' has yet to see an even spread of transport infrastructure spending to include the North West.

---

### **Merseyrail, the Class 777 and Ellesmere Port – Helsby.**

At a recent meeting of the Liverpool City Region rail user groups hosted by Liam Robinson, Chair of Merseytravel, a short presentation was given detailing progress in bringing the new Class 777 Stadler fleet into operation. NCRUG has been keeping a keen watch on the introduction of this new fleet; later model Class 777's have the ability to leave the 3<sup>rd</sup> rail and operate under battery power for 20 miles or more with a full load thus permitting expansion of the Merseyrail network beyond its current limits.

Particularly of interest in our patch is the Ellesmere Port to Helsby line, although at one point in the meeting I did raise the concept of ultimately having a complete Merseyrail service circling the Mersey Estuary on a metro styled basis Ambitious certainly, but unrealistic as a long-term goal? There would be considerable work required at Liverpool south Parkway to connect the Merseyrail line to the network, however the terrain is suitably flat and the trains will be capable. This obvious evolution of the network did seem to take the meeting by surprise.

Unfortunately the much anticipated introduction of the Class 777's has been delayed for a number of factors, not least of all the pandemic but border issues and storage also play a part. Trials are taking place on the Kirby and Ormskirk lines, and full introduction might not be until as late as next year. The Liverpool City Region has a clearly defined set of (deliverable) objectives for development of the rail network and the expansion has been prioritised with a line to Skelmersdale being top of the list and the first step of that being a new station at Headbolt Lane, Kirby - plans are already well developed for this. It is expected to be this line where proof of concept trials will be conducted for the battery powered 777's, although Merseyrail does have authorisation to use Ellesmere Port–Helsby on account of the low traffic movements on that line! Network expansion is being considered to Widnes via Hunts Cross and possibly as far as Warrington, but when the question of Ellesmere Port–Helsby was raised, the route, although under consideration, was not high on the priority list. I suspect it will be at least several years away and I'm sure the delayed introduction of the type will not only come as a disappointment for NCRUG but also the Community Rail Partnership and CWaC Council, who have funded a basic feasibility study into possible demand. Therefore we are left with the Northern Trains service for the foreseeable future – 3 return trains daily on the current schedule.

---

### **Liverpool South Parkway – LJLA**

At a recent meeting of the LJLA Surface Access Committee a presentation was delivered outlining a number of options to connect Liverpool South Parkway (LSP) with LJLA with a reliable and timely service that isn't at the mercy of road traffic congestion and associated uncertainty. Some 3 years ago NCRUG delivered a quite detailed study on the advantages of the POD system as employed at Heathrow, however this option, whilst a technically ideal solution, has been discounted on the basis of cost vs the projected passenger numbers at the Airport in the future. The shortlisted options include a surface run trackless tram system but also elevated tram systems with differing means of propulsion are in the mix. The trackless tram has significant cost advantages and is also quite new technology. It's important to note these feasibility studies do not mean there is a funding scheme ready to go for implementation – in the interim the bus service from LSP to LJLA will be improved. Better connections from LJLA to the City Centre are a City Region priority and options being considered include a

trackless tram from the airport to the city centre but also a tram train from LSP to the City Centre, depending on what connection is chosen to the Airport.

## Community Rail Partnership (CRP)

At the CRP AGM Garfield Southall was re-elected to the Chair. The CRP continues to receive the bulk of its funding from Northern Trains and is hosted by Chester University. NCRUG is a key stakeholder of the CRP and works actively within to help develop projects and promote travel by rail. The CRP is working with the newly created Sustainable Transport Task Force (STTF); an organisation set up by CWaC Council in the wake of adverse reaction to the pop-up cycle lanes implemented in Chester last year. The STTF will be working to promote active travel in our area but moreover identify ways to integrate different modes of public transport and seek funding streams to benefit disabled users and improve connectivity for cyclists and pedestrians with rail and bus services. CWaC Council has been successful in obtaining a sizeable grant to trial an on-demand community bus service to connect Frodsham and Helsby with Delamere, Mouldsworth and Alvanley.

I'm pleased to say our Community Rail Officer, although intending to relocate and leave the CRP earlier this year, will be staying in post for the time being. Marina has been in post as our CRO for around 3 ½ years now and has done a fabulous job working with the local community and industry stakeholders to promote activity within our area.



Presentation of the 2020 Best Kept Station 'Special' Award for Helsby. At back: Cllr Terry O'Neill (Chair HPC), Bob Florence (NCRUG) and Mark Mesham (TfW). At front: The Helsby Station Adopters – 23 years of caring for the station and still going! Cllr O'Neill thanked the volunteers for their hard work over the years in keeping the station a cheery welcome for visitors to the village.

## NCRUG Volunteering

'Team Briggs' (Janet and Philip) have, after many years of tending the gardens at Frodsham and keeping the station area a tidy and colourful welcome to Frodsham, decided to call it a day. Frodsham, Helsby and Runcorn East have won numerous awards over the years on account of the work put in by community volunteers and the gardens and floral displays are a credit to their work. TfW, as station managers have agreed volunteer activity can re-commence in accordance with current Covid rules however NCRUG, as a station adopter, is severely short of capacity. The matter was discussed recently with TfW who pointed out that support is given to anyone wishing to join a station adoption team with tools, plants, compost available and also rail travel vouchers - £100 per annum per station team but rising to £400 for teams of 3 or greater. There are few formalities (regular reports must be submitted and basic safety training is provided), but the benefits along with the satisfaction of making a difference, all for an hour or so a week could be an attractive proposition for someone wanting regular fresh air along with some gentle activity. If you want to get involved with station adoption please contact the Chair (details at bottom) and I will put you in touch with the TfW Volunteer Manager who can provide more information on volunteering at our stations.



Marina Farey the CRO presents the 2020 Frodsham award to Cllr Caroline Ashton, Mayor of Frodsham. Representatives from TfW and NCRUG look on.

---

## NCRUG Committee

The NCRUG committee meets every 2 months and discusses local rail issues, our stations, and updates from stakeholders, but also sets direction for campaigning. The NCRUG committee is well respected by those we work with and continues to exert influence at many levels, however with the Secretary position remaining vacant and after many years co-ordinating volunteers and raising funds for NCRUG projects, Ian Whitely is taking a step back from committee activities. The committee lacks the capacity it needs and if we are to continue to influence in the manner we currently do, we will need some new feet under the table.

Subject to confirmation the next NCRUG committee meeting is expected to be Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> July (venue TBA) and as has always been the case, anyone interested in getting a feel for the work we do and possibly joining the

committee will be extended a warm welcome. Contact the Chair (below) or simply come along to the next meeting and introduce yourself. Meeting details will be published on the website.

---

### ...and finally, **The Llangollen Railway**

In the absence of the regular 'Train on Line' contribution from George Jones of the Llangollen Railway Trust, we are pleased to advise the future of the heritage railway has been secured with the Trust itself buying the business from the administrators of Llangollen Railway PLC. This is a most welcome development and ensures this popular local tourist attraction will continue to draw crowds for many years to come.

---

### **MW**

<b>Contacts:-</b>		<u>PHONE</u>	<u>EMAIL</u>
Chairman:	Mark Warren	07979 513205	chairman@ncrug.org.uk
Vice Chairman:	Bob Swann	0151 4201910	bob.swann@blueyonder.co.uk
Secretary:	<b>Vacant</b>		
Membership:	Bob Florence	01928 731209	r.florence45@btinternet.com
Volunteering:	<b>Vacant</b>		
Website/ Facebook:	Ian Whitley		ian_whitley@hotmail.com
British Transport Police:		0800 405040	

**Newsletter:** If you wish to contribute to the next newsletter, including any photos of workings of interest, please email your submission to [chairman@ncrug.org.uk](mailto:chairman@ncrug.org.uk)

**Website:** Visit our website at [www.NCRUG.ORG.UK](http://www.NCRUG.ORG.UK) to leave your comments, favourable or otherwise, and to catch up on latest developments. We are on Facebook too.

**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).

=====