

BEDFORD COMMUTERS



WELCOME to the September 2006 Newsletter of the Bedford Commuters Association.

1. Committee Members

As we reported in our last newsletter we are still in need of new committee members. If you feel that you have something to contribute and would like to help us improve the travelling environment for rail passengers, then please contact the BCA Chairman, Arthur Taylor, on 01525 715454.

2. Membership Renewal

As always, the falling leaves of September will see BCA committee members taking to Bedford and Flitwick stations to persuade existing members to renew and new members to join the Rail User Group.

The membership fee will remain at £5.

Please remember that the BCA regularly represents the views of its members in both local newspapers and broadcast media, as well as our meetings with the Train Operating Companies and Passenger Focus, etc.

If you think you have had good value out of BCA in the last year, why not suggest to a fellow traveller that they sign up. The more members we have, the better able we are to influence the policies of the railway companies as the only officially recognised rail user group for people travelling from this part of the line on MML & FCC. You will find a membership application form in with this newsletter. It will save BCA volunteers a great deal of work if you can bring it to the station with your payment (cheques made payable to "Bedford Commuters Association") on one of the following days:

Tuesday 26th September (AM & PM)
Wednesday 27th September (PM only)
Thursday 28th September (AM & PM)

Bedford Station
Bedford Station
Flitwick Station

3. Meetings with the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) & others.

First Capital Connect (FCC) The BCA along with the APTU (representing stations further down the line) has had a further meeting with Hugh Clancy (Commercial Director of FCC) to again discuss the recently introduced Cheap Ticket Restrictions. We reiterated our position that it would have little effect on overcrowding, the only answer being more & longer trains. It would deter people from travelling and would have a consequential adverse effect on revenue. FCC stated that they had looked at our suggestion to lift the restriction during the summer holidays but turned this down stating that historic data suggested that even more people travel in the peak at this time of year! FCC also said that a review of the restrictions will take place in October in conjunction with London TravelWatch and Passenger Focus. The BCA will continue to monitor the situation. However, the ban on cheap tickets has been roundly condemned by users. Indeed the press and railway magazines (especially Modern Railways) have all been critical of FCC, with a number of suggestions having been made to circumvent the restrictions.

We also attended a meeting with Paul French (Head of Train Planning at FCC) to introduce ourselves. We took the opportunity to give Paul our views on the present timetable and future timetables and our hope is to continue the good working relationship we had previously with Thameslink Train Planners. Further meetings are planned.

We have also made contact with Larry Hayman, FCC's Integration & Partnership Manager. The BCA will be providing details of the "Plus Bus" initiative to members in due course. FCC hope to establish this in conjunction with Stagecoach and Bedfordshire County Council.

FCC have recently appointed Sarah Pinch as their Head of Communications. Her Communications Assistant is Julie Allan. Sarah's contact details are tel. 020 7427 2086 or sarah.pinch@firstgroup.com

MML A meeting with Garry Raven the new Managing Director MML and his team has been arranged for later in September to discuss the December timetable change and any other relevant topics. If you have any topics you would like us to raise with MML then please let the Chairman know on 01525 715454.

Passenger Focus This organisation is the national body representing users of the railway. The BCA has met with the representative for the Bedford to Brighton line (Kerry Williamson) to introduce ourselves and discuss relevant issues of concern to the BCA. These issues include overcrowding, refurbishment of the class 319 units, the recently introduced ticket restrictions, timetables and station facilities. A further meeting took place on 15th August also attended by Anthony Smith, the Chief Executive of Passenger Focus. We briefed them on the recent meeting we had with FCC. As a result of this Passenger Focus will be arranging a meeting of all rail user groups north of the Thames that use FCC services (both Thameslink & GN) along with local MPs to discuss issues, in particular the Cheap Ticket Restrictions. It is hoped that this meeting will take place during September. We will of course report back on this meeting in the next newsletter. Further meetings with Passenger Focus are planned.

4. Class 319 Electric Trains

As you are probably aware, the trains used by FCC are Class 319s, of which 86 were

originally built for the former British Rail to operate Thameslink services. At privatisation 66 were allocated to Thameslink and 20 to Connex South Central (later Southern). Since then to meet rising demand, seven of Southern's 20 were subleased to Thameslink from Southern, as at the time both companies had the same parent (GoVia Group). However, the continuing rising demand has now caused severe overcrowding and action is urgently required to address this. The BCA has been pressing FCC to resolve this problem by negotiating for the remaining 13 Class 319s to be transferred from Southern – however, Southern wish to retain them until the end of the lease (2009) to cope with growth on their part of the network. Negotiations have been progressing between DfT, GoVia, Porterbrook (the ROSCO) and FCC to try & resolve this problem. A possible solution is for the transfer of the surplus Class 458 trains from South West Trains (SWT) to Southern, thus allowing the transfer of the Class 319s from Southern to FCC. However, this solution is apparently dependent on the result of the SWT franchise bid (which is due within the next few weeks). The BCA have briefed local MPs and will of course continue to press FCC to resolve the situation soonest. First Group and the DfT are actively involved in trying to secure the early release of the Class 319s, for use by FCC. However, at this stage there is no date for this to happen.

5. East Midlands Franchise

The new East Midlands Franchise will operate from November 2007 and the Midland Main Line services will become part of this franchise. A consultation document was issued to which the BCA has recently replied giving our views. Basically the BCA wants the present off peak service to remain as at present - we wish to see at least a minimum 30 minute service frequency both northbound and southbound, or at best a better than 30 minute frequency if this can be achieved. However, the northbound services may be changed by introducing a "commuter" service to Kettering or possibly Corby, with the Leicester route reduced to hourly.

The BCA will attend any Stakeholder meetings by interested parties who are bidding for the franchise to ensure the views of travellers from Bedford are taken into account. We will keep members informed of progress. There is pressure further up the route for through MML services from London to Leeds, which the BCA supports. Hopefully these would call at Bedford for interchange with FCC & the Marston Vale Line. Marston Vale Line services are likely to become part of the new West Midlands franchise (rather than the East Midlands). However, the BCA has learnt from the BBRUA that once improvements are made during the next twelve months at Milton Keynes Central station (a new bay platform & track alterations), the local Silverlink County service between Bedford & Bletchley will be extended to/from Milton Keynes Central. It may at a future date connect with a new Milton Keynes-Oxford service, if re-opening of the western end of the "East-West Rail Link" is successful as part of the Milton Keynes & South Midlands (MKSM) growth strategy.

6. London St. Pancras Station

MML services recently moved from the east side to the west side of St Pancras, their final location above the "Thameslink Box". By the time you receive this newsletter all facilities should have moved across and be operational. This will include a new ticket office.

The latest news we have received for the fit-out of the new Thameslink station is that it is on course for opening in December 2007, which will greatly improve interchange. Regular travellers through "The Box" on FCC services will have noticed that

contractors' plant and materials have started to arrive on site.

7. December 2006 Timetable Changes

FCC The latest information we have is that only minor changes to the timetable are envisaged due to the lack of additional Class 319 units. However one additional service is to be provided in the morning peak. This train will depart Bedford at 05.56 for Moorgate calling at Flitwick, Luton, Harpenden, St Albans, Kings Cross, Farringdon, Barbican and arriving Moorgate at 06.59.

MML Any changes will be discussed at our meeting with MML in September and details will be given in our next newsletter.

8. ORR Referral of ROSCOs

The Government has requested a review of the rolling stock leasing market. The BCA has responded via RailFuture on the issue of the Class 319s, which we believe illustrate the difficulties of adopting a flexible approach to the allocation of rolling stock between TOCs. The BCA has also pointed out that other routes have been able to secure brand new trains, including one which is also another First Group subsidiary – namely Trans Pennine Express! The BCA know that Thameslink had intended to acquire at least twenty new trains under the old franchise. Growth has continued on the route, but the new franchisee has to soldier on with the limited number of trains at its disposal.

The shortage of rolling stock is all the more lamentable when one looks at the comparable sums being spent by the Highways Agency on road schemes - Great Barford bypass £57m; M1 widening south of Luton £25m per mile; A421 Bedford to M1 Junction 13 (approved but not yet underway) – all of which are designed to improve capacity!

The additional Class 319s would mean that current 4-car services could be made up very quickly into 8-car formations. Sadly, we have to await the Thameslink Programme before 12-car working can be introduced, as most platforms along the route have to be lengthened. Question for the DfT – *“Why wasn't Thameslink 2000 & the Thameslink Box station fit-out agreed at the same time that the Highways Agency gained approval for the M1 widening?”*

Don't forget that whilst the M1 south of Luton is now a construction site, work has still to begin between Junctions 10 & 13! A pity the DfT didn't appreciate the role rail could have played in resolving “overload” whilst all these road works take place. More to the point why didn't First include new trains in their FCC franchise bid! No joined-up thinking!

For more information you can access our website - www.bedfordcommuters.org.uk
If there's something you want to tell us about, please e-mail
admin@bedfordcommuters.org.uk

This newsletter is published by Bedford Commuters Association.

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