

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, SEPTEMBER 2011

It became apparent at our AGM and associated Public Meeting in June 2010 that our organisation would find the environment in which we work much changed from previous years. This report is on how we have attempted to adapt to the new environment.

I said at the AGM that I expected to be unable to devote as much time to TWEM in 2010-11 as I had done in previous years, due to personal circumstances. A combination of events has made this forecast accurate. I would like to thank all members of the Steering Group for their help during the year, especially Steve Abbott, who has shouldered much more of the burdens than we could expect in order to ensure that our activities have continued.

General

The Coalition government, newly elected at the time of our last AGM, has two over-riding policies which affect our activities – a determination to reduce public spending and “localism”.

One of TWEM's original aims was to provide the passenger on public transport with a means of making a co-ordinated response to proposals made by the regional bodies (the Development Agency and Regional Assembly) set up by the Labour Administration. Both these bodies are being abolished, as are regional government offices and the housing targets that underpinned most local planning.

The “cuts” have affected the remaining levels of local government, such that officers responsible for transport may be new in post and/or have different or greater levels of responsibility and fewer staff.

To provide co-ordination between local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have been set up, but these are business-led and it was unclear whether they would have any responsibility for transport. We sent a letter to the relevant Secretaries of State and local authority leaders saying that we thought they should, and that passenger representatives should be involved. This eventually produced a reply from a DfT official which said “LEPs are free to bring forward their own transport strategies if they so wish” and that we should work with them.

The present situation appears to be that LEPs may be involved in transport in the future, but that in the meantime the government regards transport as a local authority responsibility. It is more appropriate for our affiliated local groups to work at this level. The preparation of new (third) Local Transport Plans (LTPs) tended to be over-shadowed by problems with future funding, but I know that member groups were involved in consultations on them.

Both the remit and budget of Passenger Focus (PF) have been severely reduced by the Government's review of "QUANGOs". There are no longer any staff employed with responsibilities for specific areas of the country, either for bus or rail, and many have been made redundant. Kelly Bletchley left the organisation at the start of the process and Paul Fullwood, associated with TWEM (and RPC) for many years, is about to leave. We wish them both well in the future.

Steve Abbott and Alan Meredith met PF senior management in February to discuss the situation as it applied to TravelWatch. There have been three meetings of the TravelWatch Chairs' National Liaison Group, two attended by myself and the most recent by Steve, at which relations with the re-formed PF have been the main topic. Given the reduction in PF's 'field management' it was agreed that TWs could have an increased role, but this is complicated by the differing strengths of the different regional groups. The future role for TWs was seen to be responding to consultations, contacts with transport suppliers and the press, and 'ambassadorial' attendance at meetings and events.

Internal

We have welcomed Barry Davies to the Steering Group this year, and he has offered to develop our relationship with One East Midlands. We contributed to a One EM consultation on "Responding to the Big Society".

We have held 3 Steering Group meetings during the year and I would like to thank Kettering Borough Council, emda (for a final time) and East Midlands Trains (EMT) for hosting them. At the first Steering Group meeting we set up a working group to develop our new role. This has met to draft the letter about LEPs and to consider changes to our constitution.

I would also like to thank EMT for their help with travel to events, and to Passenger Focus for their support for our event in June 2010.

We continue to be represented on a number of groups not directly involved with providing public transport. These include the EM Rail Forum; EM Airport Surface Access Forum; Greater Nottingham Light Rapid Transit Advisory Committee; Notts' Bus Forum; EM Transport Activists Round Table; and the EM Rural Affairs Forum.

Steve Abbott prepared presentations on Lincolnshire Rail services for the SELTA AGM and on Nottingham-Lincoln for a meeting of LEPs, the latter unfortunately cancelled due to lack of support.

Paul Clark continues to maintain our website, my thanks to him for that.

We have not held a public meeting this year.

Rail

We have maintained regular contact with Train Operating Companies, especially East Midlands Trains and East Coast. We have welcomed EMT's refurbishment of the train fleet and station improvements, notably the work at Loughborough now in progress. We have responded to timetable consultations and have secured some modest improvements in stopping patterns. Continuing concerns include ticket gate issues, car park charges, and anomalies in fares for regional journeys.

The extra capacity secured for the Liverpool-Norwich route is still awaited, but the promised additional trains are expected this autumn.

We have continued to participate in the Nottingham-Lincoln Stakeholder Board, and through them and directly with East Coast have pressed for better services between Lincoln, Nottingham and Newark North Gate (for London King's Cross). The DfT has recently agreed to fund several extra trains from December 2011.

Responses have been made to consultations on rail franchising, ECML capacity, information provision, and passenger congestion at stations. We also responded to the WCML and West Midlands & Chiltern RUS, both now published. In our response to the consultation on High Speed 2 we highlighted the limited benefits for the East Midlands and the need for continued investment in the Midland Main Line. We gave support to the MML improvement campaign through letters to MPs on the route. A response from the Minister of State, Theresa Villiers suggested the Regional Growth Fund as a source of funding but also noted that future investment decisions on the MML would have to take HS2 into account

Buses

It has been a strange year for the bus industry. The recent increases in the price of fuel has persuaded some car users to switch to buses, but changes to the re-imburement rate for concessionary fares have reduced operators' income per head, whilst Government plans to reduce Bus Service Operators Grant will also cut income. This mainly affects commercial services, but the "cuts" are already taking effect on services subsidised by local authorities. Some changes have been well-considered and difficult to disagree with, others have not. Northamptonshire County Council originally planned to withdraw all existing services and replace them with a much reduced network of demand responsive minibuses, at a much lower cost. We joined local passengers in sending a letter of objection. Following consultations, and an officer report suggesting that some changes would be impractical and not cost-effective, the Council has back-tracked and is introducing a lower-cost mixed network retaining the most used links. Response to changes in most other counties has come from other bodies, though Steering Group members, especially Terry Kirby, have been heavily involved in these.

We responded to an OFT consultation on exemption of multi-operator ticketing from competition rules.

The Future

Last year's report included the comment "Our vision will not change in the future, but the context in which we work has changed with the national financial situation and the change of government." The short-term context remains confused, but the long-term problems of climate change and energy shortages remain. They continue to indicate that future transport must be sustainable.

At our public meeting last year, Ian Drummond's presentation included the point that "If it was easy, it would have been done already." We need to argue for when it's worth spending newly limited funding on improvements, and to show that quality is cost-effective.

For ourselves, limited funding continues to be a problem but we intend to continue to work as best we can to represent the interests of passengers.

Jim Froggatt

09.09.11