

Milton Keynes and Bletchley Rail User Group

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on
Tuesday 20 September 2005

Present: Alan Francis (Acting Chair) Louise Green (Acting Secretary), Philip Lawton, Andrew Fisher, Sean Hickey, Robert Webb, Peter J Smith, Nicola Simpson, Martin Canham, Ian Mitchell, Andrew Couldrake, (*this list is not complete.*)

Apologies: Stuart Nightingale, Paul Collins, Peter Marriott, Ros Woodhall, Simon Fitzpatrick, Ann North

1. Alan Francis (Acting Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the Deputy Chair of the Rail User Group Committee, Nicky Simpson, and the Acting Secretary, Louise Green. He explained how the Group had been formed following the open meeting at the Hockey Stadium in September 2004. A Committee of around 15 people had originally been chaired by Nick Gordon but he had had to stand down for family reasons. From that time the Committee had been without a Chair but had still managed to compose a constitution and get involved in talks with the Train Operating Companies, the SRA and all those bodies involved in the debate regarding planning for extra platforms at Milton Keynes Central Station (MKC). He pointed out that the Rail User Group represents not just commuters but occasional travellers also.
2. The draft constitution was circulated and comments were invited. The Chair asked the meeting to show its approval of the draft by a show of hands. The draft constitution was subsequently approved.
3. The Chair explained that it was necessary for a committee to be formally elected. Eight existing members had agreed to stand again and they are Louise Green, Philip Lawton, Andrew Fisher, Sean Hickey, Alan Francis, Robert Webb, Peter J Smith, and Nicky Simpson. The Chair then asked for other nominations or volunteers. Andrew Couldrake and Robert Prosser volunteered to sit on the Committee and this was approved unanimously by a show of hands.
4. A membership fee of £5 was suggested and this was approved following a vote.
5. The Chair declared the AGM closed.
6. Alan Francis introduced the guest speakers, Julian Drury who is Route Manager for Silverlink, and Steve Leyland, External Affairs Manager for Virgin Trains. Steve Leyland was accompanied by Keely Eaton, Virgin Station Manager for MKC and Watford. Julian Drury and Steve Leyland gave a short presentation and questions were then invited from the floor. The main issues are listed below:

6.1 Julian Drury explained that there will be no structural change to the timetable before December 2008 at the earliest. There is no space on the fast lines due to the 125mph speeds of the Pendolinos and additional services. Unfortunately, Silverlink shares the slow line with freight although Silverlink has priority during the peaks.

6.2 Steve Leyland confirmed that even if Virgin were permitted to stop at MKC they probably would not do so. Their remit has been to fill their trains with long distance travellers and if they have space on their peak time trains then they have failed. He informed the meeting that the number of people flying from Manchester to London has dropped, and Virgin's capacity has increased.

6.3 Alan Francis stated that if the funding for extra tracks at MKC is approved then this is the Rail User Group's best chance for petitioning for more fast trains. Julian Drury confirmed that Silverlink would take advantage of the new tracks to run extra, fast services to London. Virgin said they would also.

6.4 Steve Leyland informed the meeting that Virgin Trains are running to Northampton, without stopping at MKC, because of an order from the now defunct SRA. This was intended to give Northampton some access to the inter-city network. This change had also been due in part to pressure from the Northampton Rail User Group.

6.5 Julian Drury explained that if the remodelling at MKC goes ahead, there will be some disruption and he invited Rail User Group members to let him have their views as to whether they would, for example, prefer a complete blockade or weekend closures.

6.6 Julian Drury confirmed that the fast ticket machines at MKC will be replaced and another one or two additional machines provided. He is aware that the current ones are unreliable.

6.7 The issue of fare differentials was raised, particularly between MKC and Bletchley. Julian Drury explained that Bletchley is treated as part of Milton Keynes but he acknowledged that the service is not as good. He confirmed that if the physical layout of Bletchley allowed 12 car trains to stop, he would have more scope to improve the service.

6.8 The issue of the Sunday service was raised. The meeting was informed that currently the service is extremely poor with frequent weekend blockades and a very slow service on the DC line from Watford to Euston. There are many regular users on a Sunday, particularly those trying to get to work. Julian Drury acknowledged the difficulties. He explained that the type of work being carried out by Network Rail had changed recently to "maintenance" and because of this funding was no longer being provided to Silverlink for coach hire. Silverlink cannot afford to hire coaches as this would incur a massive loss to the company. He assured the meeting that he had fought for three months to get funding for a through train service from Watford but unfortunately they lost their case after going to appeal.

6.9 Julian Drury explained that there is a problem with the heating thermostat in the Silverlink carriages. They have a design defect which means that if passengers open a window for ventilation on a hot day, the thermostat thinks it's cold and turns the heating on. Train crew cannot control this but Julian Drury stated that they would consider isolating the heating during hot weather.

6.10 Bletchley commuters explained that the service to London is worse than 20 years ago. They have only one, twelve car service. Julian Drury confirmed that they have no more units available and any change to the stopping pattern would be at the expense of MKC. He stated that the 08.03 from MKC does now stop at Bletchley.

6.11 Julian Drury confirmed that more Desiro trains will be introduced in the new timetable in December. There will be two more in the morning peak and the 18.22 in the evening will be a twelve car Desiro. He did say that the old 321 stock will not be replaced wholesale however and that the introduction of the Desiros is designed to increase their total stock.

6.12 The reliability of the 06.55 from MKC to Euston was raised. Steve Leyland confirmed that the old rolling stock will probably be used on a diminishing basis until the end of the year.

6.13 On the service between Bletchley and Euston there is a gap between 08.07 and 08.29. Julian Drury explained that this is a direct consequence of changes made to the 08.03. Unfortunately, there is no space to run extra trains.

6.14 The issue of communication at stations was raised. It was suggested that announcements could be made to commuters suggesting good, alternative services when there is a problem with one of the trains. Staff are not good at this either at Euston or MKC. Julian Drury acknowledged this was a fair point but explained that it is sometimes impossible to know how long it is going to take to fix a problem. He will however take this suggestion forward.

6.15 The poor Northbound service from MKC was discussed. Steve Leyland explained that Virgin plan to have an hourly service on the West Midland's route and a two hourly service to other destinations. They will see how the market develops and if there is a high demand they may change the frequency.

Alan Francis thanked everyone for attending. He thanked Sean Hickey and the Chamber of Commerce for their hospitality, and the old Committee members for their work.