



BARKING – GOSPEL OAK LINE USER GROUP

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NOTES OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY APRIL 9TH 2013 AT LEYTONSTONE SOCIAL CLUB

PRESENT: Ald Frederick Jones (Chair), Richard Pout (Secretary), Glenn Wallis (Assistant Secretary), Adrian Liddle (Treasurer), Graham Larkbey, Jeff Harvey (all Executive Committee), Mark Eaton and Charlie Johnston (London Overground - LOROL), PC Roger Andrews and colleague (British Transport Police) plus about 14 Group members and public.

CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

Ald Jones welcomed all present to the meeting. Barking-Gospel Oak was the only non-electrified line on the Overground network, and electrification had been a Group aim from the beginning. The line had been on the Beeching closure list 50 years ago, and the Group had formed in response to that threat. The line had subsequently been saved for both passengers and freight, despite periods of chronic unreliability. The Group's next target was electrification and a comparable standard of service to the North London Line.

SECRETARIES' REPORT

Glenn Wallis welcomed those present. As recently as 1993, an internal British Rail report had proposed closing the eastern end of the line, and electrifying the western end round to Stratford, as one of the River Lea bridges had a limited life and other bridges were in a poor state. This nearly happened, and in 1996 another bridge had been declared unsafe, but by then the railway was privatised and closing a London line would have looked very bad, so Railtrack/Network Rail had been trying to catch up on the maintenance backlog ever since. TfL took over the route in late 2007, with LOROL as their chosen operator. BGOLUG had warned TfL in 2007 that 2-car trains would not cope, even with improved frequencies, but TfL disagreed and insisted that they knew best, resulting in the chronic overcrowding now being experienced. An added problem was that the line's Class 172 train design no longer met EU emissions standards, so the fleet could not be extended and no other existing UK diesel units met the standard either. TfL would therefore have to meet the full cost of developing and building any new units, so the only practical way forward was electrification. TfL had offered £25m towards the cost, but DfT would neither meet the balance itself nor allow Network Rail to do so, so the stumbling block now was the Treasury. The cost of electrification was disputed – the Government put it at £90m, the Group at £45m.

LOROL UPDATE

Ald Jones welcomed Mark Eaton and Charlie Johnston. Mr Eaton started by reporting on train performance, which stood at 97% of trains arriving within 5 minutes of booked time at their terminating point (98% for BGO). Figures for the morning peak were less robust, but London Overground was the second most reliable railway in the UK. The line had suffered a recent spate of signal problems especially at the eastern end, and Network Rail were struggling to find the root cause. Some cable replacement was planned. December had seen the completion of Overground's "outer circle" with the takeover of the South London Line, and the last four weeks had been Overground's busiest ever. Volumes continued to grow, and electrification of BGO was the solution, but it was a funding issue between TfL and Government. Meanwhile investment in stations had continued, eg at Camden Road and Hampstead Heath, and the electric fleet was being extended to 5-car trains (covered by a £320m increase in TfL's budget). That left the BGO line with its finite resource of eight 2-car diesel units. Some tweaks to the timetable might be possible, but these could only have a minor effect. The morning *PIXC-buster* (**P**assengers **i**n **E**xcess of **C**apacity) relief train had been extended to Willesden as an experiment, which was welcome. South Tottenham was to receive lifts and a gateline, and BGOLUG had submitted detailed comments on these proposals. New additional shelters had been installed on a number of platforms at the eastern end of the line, and LOROL were looking at the possibility of replacing metal-mesh panels with glazing as per BGOLUG's requests.

Ald Jones thanked Mr Eaton for his presentation, and invited questions and comments as follows (questions/comments in italics; responses by Mr Eaton and others in normal type):

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Another PIXC-buster around 06 45 would be very useful to Royal Free Hospital staff. The carriages had no straps or handrails for standing passengers to hang onto. Bulky rucksacks were a problem at busy times. Electrification was the answer to the overcrowding problem.

The first train west in the morning was indeed very busy. If LOROL knew it had another ten years operating the line, it would be easier to procure new rolling stock. (Glenn Wallis remarked that Chiltern's Class 172 units did have better handholds).

Were there any plans for new stations, eg at Cann Hall? The growth in traffic had had an adverse effect on the service.

Several stations had been added to the Overground network. It needed local lobbying to TfL in order to get proposals included in the Mayor's transport plan. More stations meant a slower service; Overground was designed as an all-stations service so skip-stopping was not an option (and anyway confused people). BGOLUG's longest-running new-station campaign was for the reinstatement of Junction Road (Tufnell Park) (closed 1943 as a wartime economy measure), but progressing this was hampered by its location on borough and parliamentary boundaries. A station at Lea Bridge Road (Bakers Arms) would also be very useful.

Electrification would not happen for several years, even if approved now. What could be done in the meantime? South West Trains apparently had spare middle/long distance rolling stock; maybe they could loan this to Chiltern or First Great Western to replace suburban stock (eg Chiltern's 172's) which could be reallocated to BGO. TfL and LOROL ought to approach SWT about this.

This suggestion was noted with interest.

How much of BGO's revenue intake was ringfenced for reinvestment in the route?

Not known.

What platform lengthening would be required for longer trains?

The only real problems were South Tottenham (eastbound) and possibly Gospel Oak's bay platform. All the others were do-able. Electrification could mean either 3 or 4-car trains.

Why not run an additional PIXC-buster shuttle between Barking and South Tottenham?

LOROL were looking at ways of doubling-up the PIXC-buster's run. However, it was pointed out that if the spare unit was put into service, this could affect reliability if another unit failed and there was no spare to cover for it; would TfL accept this risk in exchange for easing overcrowding?

Chiltern diesel units had been sighted at Willesden depot.

The two companies were closely related. The railway was booming, resulting in pressure on rolling stock resources.

TfL/LOROL were to be congratulated for the improvements of recent years. Putting the line on the Tube map had made a big difference. Why was there a half-hour gap in late evening? 20 minutes would be more acceptable.

This was a very fair comment which would be taken on board. The North London Line moved to a 20-minute frequency after 20 00, and the same could be done on BGO.

There had been a change in Government attitude over the last year or so. If electrification was treated as a capital project which would benefit local economies, it might stand a better chance of funding.

Noted.

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Last-train times were too early. TfL's original outline for Overground had promised Tube-style frequencies and first/last train times.

These were issues to flag up for the next concession period.

Whatever eventually happened re electrification, the interim period was the immediate problem. Overcrowding levels were shocking, and an interim strategy was needed.

LOROL recognised this, and planning work was ongoing to see what could be done. There were no easy answers.

Glenn Wallis thanked Mark Eaton for his presentation and responses to points raised. Both TfL and Network Rail had also been invited to attend the meeting, but neither were present. TfL had given only an interim response, and Network Rail none at all. Members felt that TfL's failure to attend was deplorable in view of the issues requiring their attention.

BRITISH TRANSPORT POLICE

Ald Jones welcomed Roger Andrews, who gave an update on BTP activity covering the route. They now had a dedicated BGO line team; their policing was based on intelligence received so they needed to know what was occurring and to receive information. This could be passed on discreetly by text from trains if people witnessed incidents etc, or via the BTP website (there was also a link to this from the BGOLUG site). They were now reorganising so that each station would have its own dedicated policing. They did a lot of work alongside Revenue Protection staff, and found that a lot of fare evaders were wanted by the police for other reasons (recently two were found to be the subject of international arrest warrants). Some stations had more problems than others – not always following expected patterns. BTP teams worked from about 07 00 until last-train times. CCTV had been greatly improved, and vulnerable groups (eg women) no longer felt particularly unsafe on the line at night. Officers carried DNA kits to take swabs where necessary. The no-alcohol policy was enforced at all times of day.

Ald Jones thanked PC Andrews for his presentation.

LONDON TRAVELWATCH

Richard Pout welcomed John Stewart, a long-time transport campaigner and friend of BGOLUG who had recently joined the Board of London TravelWatch, and invited him to say a few words. Mr Stewart began by explaining that LTW represented all passengers, and outlined the appeal process whereby LTW could take up individual complaints if transport operators had not responded adequately. LTW maintained a broad overview of the whole London transport network, and his advice to groups such as BGOLUG was to keep on pushing - those in control were aware of the problems but sustained pressure was needed. For years the BGO line had been a "Cinderella" route; to continue the metaphor, Cinderella was now at the ball but was being left standing on the sidelines. BGOLUG were welcome to suggest issues for raising at LTW level.

Thanking Mr Stewart, Glenn Wallis added that the Group had just resolved the issue of rail-replacement bus provision with LTW assistance, for which BGOLUG was very grateful. An earlier start to Sunday services was needed too.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None.

Ald Jones thanked all present for attending a very useful and successful meeting, and declared the meeting closed. Another open meeting would be scheduled for autumn.

Graham Larkbey
Minutes Secretary