

Railwatch

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New vision is needed

The Strategic Rail Authority has been challenged to be more active in setting out a clear idea of its vision for the future of the railways.

So far the authority, which only exists in shadow form at present, has been non-committal about electrification, silent on the need for new rail lines, negative about rail reopenings and merely sympathetic about the need for rural rail services.

Chairman Sir Alastair Morton has been quoted as seeing his job as providing a little help at the margins to enable other "players" in the industry to improve services.

RDS which has been campaigning for the creation of the SRA, had been hoping for something more positive – and strategic.

The question of whether the SRA is committed to the idea of new rail lines was posed at the RDS Rail Users Conference in September by Richard Delahoy.

"So far there is no evidence they are," said Mr Delahoy, vice president of the Southend Rail Travellers Association and now a member of the statutory Rail Users Consultative Council for Eastern England.

And he also asked: "If the Tories were in power, how would they manage the SRA?"

He added: "We may have a shadow SRA but I don't think the 'S' stands for strategic.

"At the moment it is just being opportunistic. It is not defining what it wants from the train operators.

"It is just asking the train operator what it can provide in the renegotiation of the franchises.

"But we, and the SRA, should be changing the agenda. Should we for instance have 25 train operating companies or just four?"

He added: "We don't even have any standards for basic levels of service. We need a minimum standards document. We have 25 different passengers' char-

ters. But we should have the same standards on all lines.

"The penalty system obviously doesn't work. The train operators find it cheaper to run short trains and pay the penalties for

overcrowding rather than run longer trains."

On expansion of the network, he asked: "Who is going to make the case for reopenings? The train operators won't be

interested even if they do have a 20-year franchise. Railtrack is certainly not interested. So do we have to rely on local authorities?"

"Some of them have been very good but others not." He said that even when there were attempts at integration, they don't usually work very well.

"There are 350 through bus-rail ticketing schemes at the moment, but most people do not know about them or understand them, and nor do the clerks who are issuing the tickets."

And he had this advice for rail user groups: "We should write our definition of what a franchise should deliver and we will want a passenger dividend if things go wrong."

He also highlighted one problem with the highly popular Travelcard scheme in London which does not provide incentives to improve services at inner London stations or any incentive to reinstate inner suburban stations.

"The SRA and the future Mayor for London should put their minds to how to reward train operators for improving services when the operator does not get a satisfactory financial reward from the Travelcard share-out."

And in view of people's reluctance to change trains, what about more through services?

He asked why Silverlink's Barking-Gospel Oak trains did not run through to Richmond.

And why are we still waiting for Thameslink 2000? Railtrack has recently started to talk about it again. Will it be in action by 2006?

For more news from the rail users conference, see page 3.

■ Even though more than 70% of people polled in October said the Government should re-nationalise the railways, there is virtually no prospect of that at present. That's democracy!



At last, after several false starts, RDS has a London base. Campaigns director Alix Stredwick has already started work there and is pictured outside our office with national executive member Ken Cropley and volunteer Robert Stephens. Details: Page 3