

A stunted strategy

By Mike Crowhurst

The Strategic Railway Authority has taken its first step towards producing a policy for the future with its "strategic agenda" issued in April.

I find it a difficult document to comment on constructively. It appears to consist of a restatement of refranchising policy and some other fairly anodyne policy background, little of which is particularly new, plus what amounts to an SRA Network Management Statement.

It seems notable for the weakness of its commitment! "Please do not invest too much emotion in the list," it says on page 51.

The ranking of schemes probably depends as much on the availability of external funding and level of interest on the part of franchisees/bidders, public transport authorities and local authorities at any point in time, and thus can be expected to vary over time anyway. This reduces its significance. How much will it match the Network Management Statement from Railtrack which is now at the consultation stage?

Nevertheless there is some value in having SRA "policy" brought together in one document. The most interesting part is the preface, where along with the reiteration that "the SRA must guide and lead, but not command and control", we find a commitment to produce a strategic plan in the autumn. About the only firm commitment in the document!

Refranchising policy seems to consist of the softly softly approach we are already familiar with, and precious little alteration to the map except for the commitments already made to Wales and TransPennine franchises.

There is no serious attempt to address the problems inherent in franchising (for instance what is to be done with a lame duck operator) or even whether there should be fewer or more franchises to reduce fragmentation and improve integration.

If we are ever to seriously reconsider the franchise map, then we need to have as clean a sheet as possible at some point in the future, which suggests that what should be happening is that most franchises should be extended or relet to run out around 2010-12, as the longest ones now do. The intervening decade could then be used for a long rethink by everyone, presided over by the SRA.

Apart from refranchising, the document is perhaps most interesting for what it leaves out. Conspicuous for its absence is electrification. There is no men-



tion of this in the text sections at all, either as an operational enhancement or as policy for energy conservation, pollution reduction or as a marketing tool.

The only scheme of any size listed is Manchester-Blackpool, which is already 20 years overdue. Apart from this there is Ashford-Ore, Uckfield, Dudden Hill (for London Heathrow to St Pancras), Birmingham-Nuneaton, some minor extensions on Merseyside, and Rutherglen-Coatbridge. Not a great deal to write home about.

On the plus side, for freight there is recognition in passing that "the loading gauge on key freight routes (to and from ports, routes unspecified) needs to be enhanced" and the Central Railway scheme is included in the list as a "promoters' option". Hopefully the SRA will at least examine how to maximise network benefits from such proposals.

On reopenings, of which almost all the reasonable proposals are listed, one gets the impression those which offer additional capacity to overcome current problems have more chance than those which seek to put places back on the rail map - except where there is PTE support.

"Partnership" is clearly the buzzword when it comes to funding. Nothing is said however about land protection, be it for route restoration or for improvements to station access and integration either at existing or new stations. This is perhaps a key point for us to make. There are at least two major instances where the failure to acquire, retain or protect land essential for improvements has led to much higher cost solutions having to be considered. One is Welwyn viaduct, where the inevitability of widening at some point in time has been blindingly obvious ever since quadrupling reached Welwyn Garden, yet no serious attempt was ever made either to decide conclusively which side the widening should go, or to safeguard the land required, with the result that the line is now hampered by modern residential development on both sides and widening will be expensive and disruptive whichever side it now goes.

The mistake has been repeated at

Bull Ring in Birmingham, where the opportunity to reserve land for extra tracks into New Street (or better still, a new station) has just been lost, and already expensive alternatives involving a new burrowed tunnel for cross-city are having to be considered.

There is another example in Maidstone, where the opportunity for a cheap, simple but very useful link between two lines has just been lost. If we cannot devise a way to protect land in such situations, what hope is there for reopening schemes?

You can check the SRA's strategic agenda for yourself at http://www.sra.gov.uk/sra/publications/Default.htm#Register_Documents

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I have sent a few to women's glossy magazines. It is unlikely that all letters will be published but the more we send out, the more our message can spread and the more effective we can be. Thanks. Kate Tudor-Pole

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