

CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH FOR

The Northern Rail review has seen the threat of cuts to train services lifted – for now at least.

Alan Whitehouse has been reading the small print and thinks passengers with no alternative to the train face fares increases

It is not often that the rail industry receives a piece of unambiguously good news. But, at first glance, that's what the outcome of the Northern Rail review looks like.

Rail minister Derek Twigg announced that there would be no closures, no service cuts and no replacing trains with buses. The Serco-Ned owned Northern Rail franchise emerged with a clean bill of health and was proclaimed a lean and efficient operation. The RMT union, to its surprise, found that there was no battle to fight after all.

Nevertheless, there are two ways of interpreting the review and the Government's reaction.

Firstly, it could be said that it was never likely to reach any startling or unpleasant conclusions because it had been overtaken by events.

The fate of the whole railway network is now to be decided by next year's High Level Output Specification.

No matter that the revised closure procedures will make it easier to hack off a branch line here or there; a round of closures



Fare rises are the most likely outcome of the Northern Rail review.

or service cuts in the North could be completely out of tune with the HLOS findings for the rest of the network.

So the battle for the North's local trains has been won, but not necessarily the war. The big fight is still to come when HLOS makes us decide what sort of railway we want for the nation and how much we are prepared to pay for it. Barring a public spending miracle between now and then, there will be a sizeable gap between aspiration and affordability.

It may be that this gap has to be bridged by closed stations, substitution, or even line closures. We simply won't know until the HLOS is published.

But in the short-term world of Westminster politics, the Northern Rail Review gets ministers off the hook. Neither Twigg nor his boss Alistair Darling has to present themselves

as a latter day Ernest Marples, at least, not yet.

A more enlightened view of the review is that there are signs that the Government has accepted the idea that more money must be spent on mass transport if the country is not to grind to a halt. The road network is clearly operating at the limits of its capacity – and so is the rail system. If the economy is to continue to grow, remedial action has to be taken, however distastefully the Treasury views pumping public money into the black hole of railway finances.

This has to mean expanding the rail networks of what are increasingly being referred to as the city regions. These broadly relate to the existing metropolitan Passenger Transport Executive areas where the pressure of both capacity and rolling stock quality is at its most intense. Commuter routes into major Northern cities

are now routinely growing at 10 per cent per year or more. Some individual figures are nothing less than startling: The core Leeds-Manchester route on the TransPennine Express franchise grew by 17 per cent last year. The Leeds north-west electrified network has something more than 70 per cent of the market share for commuters north of Shipley. The relatively affluent townsfolk of Skipton and Ilkley would rather leave the Beemer or the 4x4 in the station car park and take the train.

Things are clearly changing, and there is evidence that Alistair Darling is taking note. In Bradford to launch a car-sharing lane on the M62 motorway just a few days before the results of the Northern review were announced, he said: 'If we are going to see growth in major British cities like Leeds we have got to make sure the transport is there to support it.'

Better still, he added: 'There is

NORTHERN

more money going to be spent on transport and we do want to make sure that we spend increasing amounts in Yorkshire as well as other parts of the country.' Putting aside the tailored reference to Yorkshire, it is clear that the major metropolitan areas – the new city regions – are being targeted for a makeover.

But it looks likely to come at a price. If closures and service cuts are off the agenda, then fare levels are firmly on it. A little noticed section of the review mentioned the low fares charged in metropolitan areas. Twigg's statement read:

'...revenue through fares, at 11 pence per passenger mile is lower than for other comparable rail operators. In the PTE areas, which account for 72 per cent of passenger journeys, the figure is as low as eight pence per passenger mile.'

The blunt truth is that fares in the metropolitan PTE-run areas

Greater Manchester, the gap is closing quickly. The league tables of congestion and road hot-spots are now just as likely to contain entries from the M6 and the M62 as from the M25. There has been a sea change and local trains have still to catch up. In recent years rises in bus fares have outstripped rail fare increases, eroding the 'rail premium' that used to be applied, recognising that trains give a quicker and more comfortable journey.

Rail fares could rise significantly on the commuter routes into big cities and customers would still keep rolling in. There is no longer any real alternative. Since rail privatisation, passenger numbers in West Yorkshire have risen by 40 per cent. This is not an industry struggling to market itself.

So far, so good: a growing network in which more costs are paid by the people who actually use the service has to be healthier

'The road network is clearly operating at the limits of its capacity – and so is the rail system. If the economy is to continue to grow, remedial action has to be taken'

have become a real bargain.

Back in the 1970s when hard decisions were being taken about these rail networks – and many passenger transport authorities at least considered the impact of total closure of local commuter services – the premise was that local trains had to charge bargain basement fares because the punters had a real choice. With relatively empty road networks, if you thought the train ticket was a bit steep, you could drive instead.

This is no longer true. While south-east congestion levels have yet to arrive in West Yorkshire and

in the long term. But PTE services account for less than three-quarters of Northern Rail's portfolio, and city regions are not going to have an impact on rail lines on the Cumbrian and Wolds coast. It is here that the HLOS battles are likely to be fought.

And, as the service cuts currently proposed for Liskeard-Looe demonstrate, being a community railway – or any other kind of railway – counts for little when the chips are down.

Alan Whitehouse is transport correspondent for BBC North

ANT AUDITOR



Visit us on stand P32
SAFETY & HEALTH EXPO

Flexible for ALL AUDITS

40% time Saving

Detailed Audit report

Linked Photographs

**For small, medium and
Corporate solutions**

**YOUR SYSTEM CHOICE
Stand Alone**

Networked (& SQL)

Partial Web

Full Web Application



Contact us for;

**Testimonials - Audit report
Or on site demonstration**

info@a-n-t.com

Tel: 01825 713058

www.a-n-t.com

