

Confidence north of the b

Northern Ireland Railways is enjoying an investment boom, reports Colm Flanagan

Recent developments in the Republic of Ireland's railway system (*Modern Railways*, July 2006) show the fruits of a sustained investment programme there since the late 1990s, but what of the picture on the other side of the border, in Northern Ireland?

In Northern Ireland, a publicly owned holding company, NITHCO (Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company), runs road and rail services through its two main subsidiaries, Ulsterbus and Northern Ireland Railways. These operate under the brand name of Translink.

Just over five years ago the railway network was seriously under threat of truncation of the so-called 'lesser used lines' to Larne and Londonderry, if not closure of the whole system. A public campaign spearheaded by a major local newspaper under the banner 'Save Our Railways' led to a growing consensus that the railways in Northern Ireland were underfunded, and should be retained and improved.

The short lived Northern Ireland Assembly established under the Good Friday Agreement proved to be good for public transport in the province. Members of this assembly voted for investment rather than retrenchment of the railway system.

Translink was also pushing hard for development and there were some positive developments, including refurbishment of some of the fleet, the re-opening of the direct section of line between Belfast, Bleach Green Junction and Antrim in 2001 (covered in *Modern Railways*, September 2001), and relaying of the line to Bangor.

A major investment programme amounting to £100million was put in place by the Assembly. It is now virtually complete and the results are beginning to show.



CAF unit No 3006 on a Lisburn - Bangor working at Balmoral; on the left is one of the old Class 80 units. Colm Flanagan

New trains

Central to this programme was the purchase of 23x3-car DMUs to replace the ageing fleet of Class 80 DEMUs, which had been the mainstay of services since their introduction in the 1970s.

The new trains were built by CAF in Spain and are known as the C3K class. They feature air-conditioning and 90mph capability - at present this can only be exercised on the Dublin line (though they do not normally operate cross border services) and for a short stretch of the Bleach Green - Antrim line. They are powered by a MAN 338kW engine

and Voith transmission; there is also a Cummins 71kW auxiliary generator in each car. The first units began to enter service in 2004 and the full fleet has now been in service for over a year.

Unlike the British mainland where leasing of trains is now the norm, in Northern Ireland the trains have been bought outright, under a contract which includes technical support from CAF for a 15-year period, and covers maintenance and availability. There have been some issues with the trains, the most significant being problems with the visual passenger information system, and exhaust noise. However, the problems have been cured by a rolling programme of modifications.

Public reaction to the trains has been very good, the interior design of the trains being especially well received. The trains feature carpets and 2+2 seating in a mixture of bays and airline style. Lighting is by a mixture of fluorescent tubes and spotlights, a feature based on the Heathrow Express Class 332 EMUs. There is access for disabled passengers and cycles, as well as a dock for trolley services (though none are currently operated by NIR on its internal routes).

Traffic has increased dramatically. The main commuter corridor between Bangor and Portadown through Belfast saw a new timetable come into force with a train every twenty minutes between 07.00 and 18.00 on weekdays, a level of service never before seen.

Although earlier this year the 20-min clockface timetable on this corridor had to be withdrawn due in part to driver shortages, Mal McGreevy, the General Manager of NIR, is confident that a new timetable due in January 2007 will effectively restore any capacity lost



Crossing the Lagan river, a Class 450 unit on its way to Larne passes CAF unit No 3012 arriving from Bangor. Colm Flanagan

as a result. Though he is not keen on running six-car formations and would prefer more frequent three-car trains, signalling and other constraints still make some long trains necessary. The Portadown – Belfast section now has traffic of two million passengers a year and the Bangor – Belfast section is not far behind with 1.8million. These figures show a rise of approximately 30% over a year

or two ago and are proof of what can be achieved with the right investment.

Londonderry line

The new trains also run to Londonderry, which is at the extremity of what are referred to as the 'lesser used lines' – this term refers to the line north of Ballymena, and also includes the six-mile branch from Coleraine to Portrush, as well as the single track section between Whitehead and Larne. A 60mph speed limit is now in force between Ballymena and Londonderry, whereas previously 70mph was the norm. Track condition is the main issue here, with much of it being jointed track which has deteriorated over the years. A lack of ongoing investment has led to a gentle decline in the standard of the track.

The threat of closure hanging over this line has been lifted until at least 2009 under a recent spending option agreed with the Department of Regional Development, which provides funding for the publicly owned company's activities. This does allow for some modest improvements. The sleeper density and ballast quality is adequate, but NIR is to look at re-railing much of the line. Whether this will be new rail or existing rail welded remains to be decided.

The new trains effect, along with some extra marketing (one section of the line runs under high cliffs along a wide sandy beach and is considered to be as scenic a piece of railway as anything in Britain) has raised passenger figures considerably. It is expected they may well top one million by the end of the year – up from fewer than 700,000 not

Future Rail Network Development

Future Options

- Northwest line track relay.
- 60 minute frequency to Coleraine and Londonderry.
- 30 minute frequency to Ballymena.
- Park & Ride at Ballymartin/M2.

Future Option

- Re-open Antrim – Knockmore line with halts at Crumlin, Glenavy and Belfast International Airport.

Future Options

Additional passing loop.

Delivered

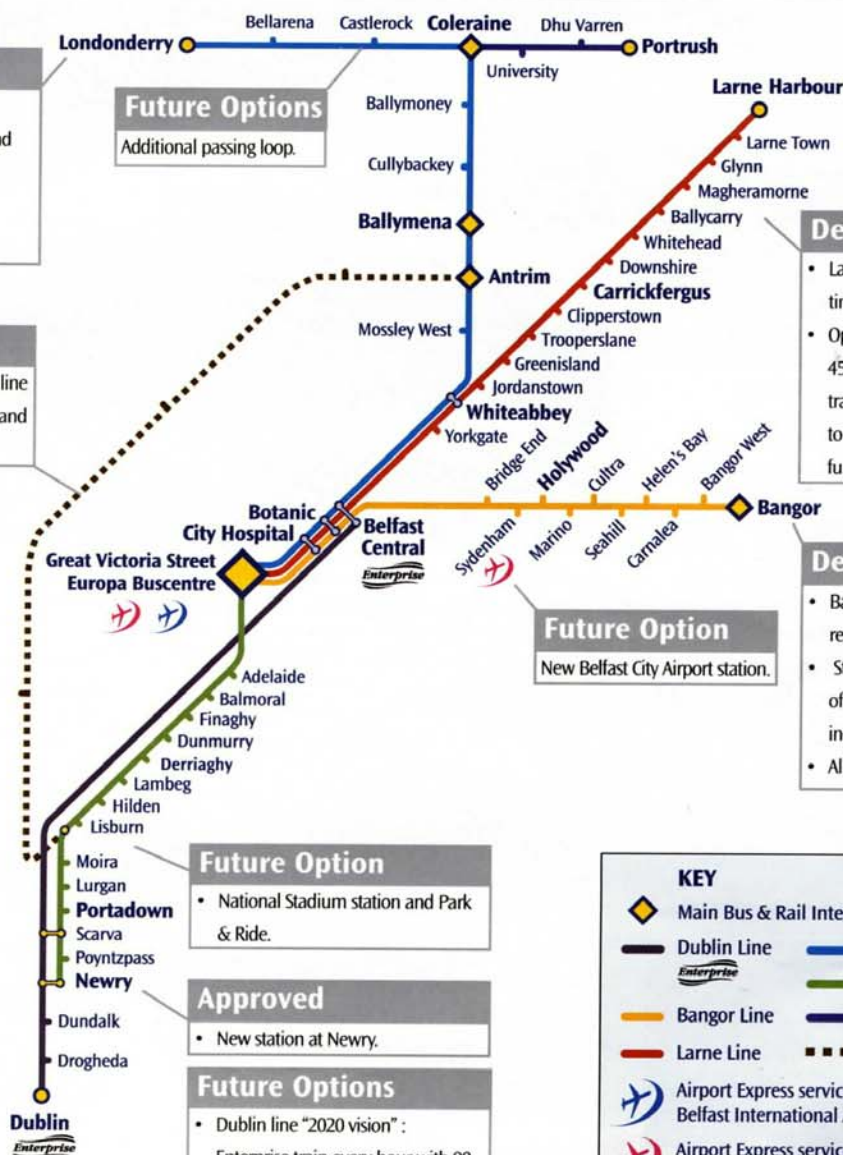
- Larne line fully relayed and timetable enhancement proposed.
- Operations with refurbished class 450 trains until proposed new train order delivered 2010.(subject to Government approval and funding).

Delivered

- Bangor line fully relayed with recent timetable enhancements.
- Strong growth with introduction of C3K train. Frequency to increase to 6 TPH at peak.
- All C3K trains.

Future Option

New Belfast City Airport station.



Future Option

- National Stadium station and Park & Ride.

Approved

- New station at Newry.

Future Options

- Dublin line "2020 vision": Enterprise train every hour with 90 minute journey time.
- Newry – Dundalk expansion of local cross border services.

KEY

- ◆ Main Bus & Rail Interchange
- Dublin Line
- Londonderry Line
- Portadown/Newry Line
- Bangor Line
- Portrush Line
- Larne Line
- Knockmore/Antrim Line
- ✈ Airport Express service to Belfast International Airport
- ✈ Airport Express service to George Best Belfast City Airport

Free bus into town with Metro
Rail passengers with a valid rail ticket can travel between Central Station and Belfast city centre free of charge on Metro bus services.

NI Railways

Future Options: All subject to Economic Appraisal, Government Approval and Funding.



these Class 80 sets to accommodate growth on the network but has to apply to the DRD for funding for this. This decision has been long delayed but must be made soon as new Health & Safety legislation means that unless the Class 80s are fitted with Train Protection & Warning System (TPWS), On-Train Monitoring and Recording (OTMR) and central door locking they will not be allowed to run beyond December 2007.

Cross-border services

Belfast – Dublin Enterprise services are operated by three sets of De Dietrich coaches and GM locomotives owned jointly by NIR and IÉ (Irish Rail). These entered service in 1997; although impressive to look at, and

Left: De Dietrich driving trailer No 9004 waits at Belfast Central with a Dublin service. Colm Flanagan

many years ago. If this trend continues, the term 'lesser used line' may well be able to be consigned to history.

NIR would ultimately like to see an hourly service on this line and commuter services out of Londonderry. This would require either a new passing loop or relocation of the existing one at Castlerock, as well as associated renewal of signalling. That will depend on a spending review due in 2007, for which the company is now preparing its submissions.

An hourly service to Coleraine and half hourly from Ballymena would again be an aspiration but this would depend on funding and sufficient trains being made available, as the 23 CAF units were intended only as replacements for the Class 80 units, to operate what was perceived as the 'core' network. Hourly trains to Londonderry were not part of the scenario at that time. Indeed, Mal McGreevy would be keen to develop the possibility of operating a through Londonderry – Dublin service if CAF stock was available, something which has rarely been done before. The journey by road is still a lengthy one and air transport between the two cities is low frequency.

Larne line

On the Larne line, which was closed for a major relaying operation completed earlier this year, traffic figures are again growing and this line carries some 1.4million

The interior of a CAF C3K unit. Colm Flanagan



The rebuilt concourse of Belfast's Central station. Colm Flanagan

passengers a year. There is currently a half hourly service to Carrickfergus and an hourly one to Larne, although here again the ambition is for half hourly throughout. The majority of services remain in the hands of 9x3-car DEMUs known as the 'Castle' or 450 class; the traction and generating equipment on these units came from DEMUs built by the then Ulster Transport Authority in 1966. However, their relatively modern look comes from the bodyshells which are the British Rail Mk 3 suburban style. They were introduced in the 1980s, when NIR decided to stay with DEMU power rather than opt for the Sprinter-type units with underfloor engines which were then entering service on BR.

In order to give the '450s' a further lease of life a refurbishment programme is underway and they are being finished in NIR's new blue and silver livery, with improvements to seats, décor and heating to bring their travelling ambience nearer to that of the CAF units. Other alterations and modifications are being made to improve the class's reliability, which at present is roughly 5,000 miles per casualty. However, the difference between old and new units is still apparent to many travellers and there have been vociferous campaigns run by public representatives who want to know why they can't have new trains for their new track!

Some Larne services are worked by the last few Class 80 DEMU trains to remain in service. NIR would like to retain three of

with excellent passenger ambience, they have not proved as reliable as had been hoped, and some refurbishment is underway.

NIR would like to see services expanded to hourly on the Dublin route. It is possible that further CAF-type units might provide extra services in the short to medium term, or IÉ Mk 3 coaches which are currently being replaced by DMUs could be cascaded onto the route.

In the longer term, Mal McGreevy would like to see a true high speed line to Dublin, with line speeds of 125mph. Certain sections of the line north of the border are due for renewal shortly and it is intended to make the track formation capable of sustaining higher speeds than at present. NIR's senior managers are watching the debate in Great Britain about HST2 / the Inter-city Express Project with some interest.

New Trains 2010

Development plans for the network centre on the New Trains 2010 plan which is being prepared at present. NIR would like to see the '450s' and surviving '80s' replaced with new trains, which would be compatible technically with the existing C3K sets.

Mal McGreevy reckons that up to 24 new units could be required to achieve what he

sees as the optimum network frequencies throughout Northern Ireland. A train fleet of this size would require infrastructure improvements to allow the best use to be made of the extra trains – signalling as well as possibly station improvements and platform lengthening at some locations. The new trains might possibly run as four-car sets rather than three. But all this is still well in the future.

Station refurbishes

Belfast's main station, Belfast Central, recently underwent a £1.3million rebuild which has improved the facilities there to a high standard. A possible future option if there is to be a more frequent 'Enterprise' service might be the addition of a Dublin facing bay which would release a through platform currently occupied by the trains between arrival and departure.

There have been some significant station developments. These include a new station at Bangor and major alterations in Coleraine, both designed with genuine bus/rail integration in mind. Carrickfergus station was refurbished in an innovative project which won a heritage award.

Approval has recently been granted for new station buildings at Newry, a station which has seen substantial growth in traffic both to Belfast and southwards towards Dublin, since it was opened in 1984. Many of the smaller halts on the network, mostly unstaffed, are being given a programme of improvement to platform surfaces, signing and lighting.

The company is very keen to develop park and ride schemes; one such could be on the

line to Antrim, and rail connection from a new national sports stadium, proposed for location near Lisburn on the Portadown – Bangor line, would feature in any future plans. A new rail station to serve Belfast City Airport is also being considered.

Simulator

Routine train servicing has been transformed by the completion and entry into service of a new £11.4million development at Fortwilliam, just north of Belfast, dedicated

to the C3K fleet. This building can contain up to 10 trains and incorporates a new washing plant and fuelling depot. Driver training is done at a £1.1million driver training facility in Belfast; this incorporates a simulator built by Corys Tess which was commissioned in late 2004. New uniforms for all staff have recently been introduced. **MR**

Benone Strand: a six-car CAF C3K train passes under the cliffs at Downhill on a Londonderry service. *Colm Flanagan*

