

Reprieved railway looks forward

NORTHERN IRELAND A decision to save the network from closure was followed by a 60% increase in ridership and has enabled long-term planning which includes electrification, Translink General Manager, Rail Services, Mal McGreevy tells Andrew Grantham.

The first of 20 CAF Class 4000 diesel multiple-units is now undergoing trials in Northern Ireland, having arrived from Spain during March. The Class 4000 units are the second batch of trains to be ordered since 2001, when the province's devolved government took a decisive decision to save its rail network.

Ten years ago, the network was in trouble. In 2000 Ted Hesketh, the then Managing Director of Northern Ireland's transport holding company Translink, said the trains were old and unreliable, track was in poor condition and services were increasingly unattractive to passengers (RG 8.00 p468). Staff were warned that closure of everything except the cross-border Belfast – Dublin route was a real possibility.

'We had been suffering from continuous downgrading', recalls Mal McGreevy, Translink's General Manager, Rail Services. After a number of incidents a strategic safety review was commissioned from AD Little. This clearly showed that although risk was still at an acceptable level, something had to be done. The 120 recommendations were costed at £130m.

In parallel, there were significant political changes. After a troubled start, the Northern Ireland Assembly was finally up and running with extensive local powers, and in March 2000 a taskforce was appointed to study the options for the future of the railway. This looked at closure of all lines except Belfast – Dublin (which could have been fully contracted out to the Republic of Ireland's state railway Iarnród Éireann), part closure, investment to meet AD Little's recommendations, or even expansion.



The first of 20 CAF Class 4000 DMUs arrived in Belfast during March (RG 4.11 p10). NI Translink's New Trains Programme will see modern rolling stock replace its entire fleet of DMUs.



A new £14.6m station building in Newry opened in September 2009. Robust modern use of engineering brick and metal is intended to echo past railway architecture while providing a striking contrast to the Victorian stations along the line. The station has a 300-space park and ride car park, and a dedicated stop for a free bus link to the city centre.

Consultation found public support for investment. 'It was still a young Assembly', recalls McGreevy, 'and politicians don't like to be seen to be closing railways.'

New Trains 1, 2 and 3

One of the first steps was the Assembly's approval of funding for the New Trains project in late 2000. 'Local accountability was the most significant factor in securing the money', says McGreevy. In early 2002 CAF beat Bombardier for a £80m contract to supply 23 Class 3000 DMUs which would replace life-expired DEMUs offering a poor travelling environment.

Deliveries began in 2004, and to give the maximum public impact a policy was adopted of introducing new trains to a route in one go, avoiding a mix of old and new stock running together where possible. 'Passenger perception is impacted by the lowest level of service', says

McGreevy, 'so the biggest impact comes from having completely new trains'. Within three years there was a 60% growth in traffic on the Belfast - Bangor line after the new trains entered service. Other steps were also taken, with smart uniforms encouraged, all staff undergoing customer service training, and an effort made to restore staff pride in the railway.

'A lot of money' was spent refurbishing the old trains for continued service on the Larne line, and McGreevy believes they now 'compare favourably with any equivalent old trains in Great Britain'. Despite the older stock, there was a respectable 15% growth in traffic on the Belfast - Larne route, but inevitably passengers 'were not happy' at not getting new trains. The changing public perception of the railway after the Class 3000 arrived helped create a business case for New Trains 2, and a £114m order for Class 4000 units was placed with CAF in March 2009. The first was delivered to Belfast on

March 14 (p67), and McGreevy is anticipating 50% growth in traffic on the Larne route after they begin entering service at the end of the year. An expansion of park and ride facilities is now being planned.

As part of the procurement process, NI Railways studied new ways of maintaining the trains. 'In the 1990s there was a political perception that the public sector was inefficient', says McGreevy. Outsourcing was considered, but after a full analysis 'of what the manufacturer can manage, and what we can manage' a 15-year maintenance support and collaboration agreement was signed with CAF. Under this 'logical and cost-effective solution' the railway provides staff, tools and premises, while CAF provides parts and technical support and receives a fee per train-km. 'We have a very good relationship', reports McGreevy.

New Trains 3 is currently under consideration, and could see additional intermediate vehicles acquired to lengthen the existing units from three to six cars. 'We are running close to network saturation. We can't run more trains on the infrastructure, so we will have to run longer trains.'

Planning ahead

Committed political support and rising passenger figures enabled the development of a clearer long-term strategy for the network. 'Until 2000 it was only reactive', says McGreevy 'we were responding to opportunities and needs as they arose', with no long-term strategy.

There is now a rolling 25-year plan for renewing and developing the infrastructure. But although the Assembly is supportive of public transport, McGreevy believes it has not yet got the balance right between roads and public transport, and rail funding is still a potential issue. All capital investment is dependent on grant funding, and the Assembly



'We are looking at what we need to do to migrate from what we have now to what we want to have in 2025'

Mal McGreevy General Manager, Rail Services, Translink

only works on three to four-year timescales.

The next major infrastructure investment will be track relaying on the Belfast – Londonderry line, which has been put back from 2013 to 2015-16 because of a shortage of funding in the current economic climate. The project is designed around a desire for an hourly clock-face timetable, which will require extra passing loops to be installed. The route was particularly

accounting of infrastructure and operations, and for the introduction of track access charging, but there are no plans for full separation or concessioning. The network is small, an unusual gauge and physically isolated from the wider European network. 'It is unlikely there are opportunities for open access', says McGreevy, 'but if a third party sees an opportunity, we will facilitate it.'

The *Enterprise* service between

– Dublin main line as a driver for future growth, and a detailed study of demographic and economic trends in Ireland will be undertaken to assess transport needs in 2025 and beyond. 'We are looking at what we need to do to migrate from what we have now to what we want to have in 2025', explains McGreevy. 'Each time we do an upgrade it will be compatible with our 2025 vision.'

The route 'needs an hourly service', but this will require more rolling stock and is therefore dependent on external funding, as costs could increase more than revenues at first.

In the past the *Enterprise* benefited from relatively poor parallel road links, but upgrades to dual carriage-way and motorway standard have led to 'stagnant' rail traffic. Higher speeds would help compete with road, with 200 km/h running needed to get journey times down from 2 h to 1½ h for the 183 km. Topographical constraints on the route mean higher speeds would bring 'not much benefit' without building a new line, which is not seen as an affordable option.

A plan to move to 200 km/h running would also justify launching a programme to install ETCS, which is currently 'a dream' rather than an active plan in Northern Ireland.

The current *Enterprise* coaches built by De Dietrich in the 1990s will need replacing around 2020. McGreevy believes that by then it will be hard to procure diesel traction suitable for such high speeds, and so it will be time to look seriously at electrification in 2020-25. 'Sustainable electricity generation is possible in Ireland', he points out.

Line speed upgrades and wiring the Belfast – Dublin line at 25 kV 50 Hz (with dual-voltage operation over the existing 1.5 kV DC DART route) was costed at £500m to £600m five years ago. This would act as an 'anchor project' for further electrification, with the ultimate aim of covering the whole Northern Ireland network.

The rising cost of fuel and tightening emissions requirements mean 'New Trains 3 will be the last diesels we buy', believes McGreevy. 'Ultimately we will electrify the whole lot; it is just a matter of phasing, with diesel trains gone by perhaps 2035. McGreevy cites single-track electrified lines in Spain; 'if they can afford to electrify, then so can we'. ❏



During March contractors BAM and FP McCann completed a £1.3m re-railing and drainage project on the 10 km Coleraine – Portrush branch, which has seen a 40% growth in passenger traffic since 2002.

hard hit by the lack of investment in the past, as an old train failing on the single-track sections could play havoc with the timetable.

McGreevy is unequivocal in his support for the traditional, vertically integrated structure of NI Railways. 'I firmly believe that the benefits of an integrated organisation outweigh the benefits of separation', he says. The New Trains projects progressed rapidly because Translink understood its infrastructure and what was needed. Work is underway to meet European legal requirements for separate

Belfast and Dublin is operated jointly with Iarnród Éireann, and train maintenance is shared. Costs are split between the operators — 'after a bit of arm wrestling over the table', McGreevy jokes — under a 'simple and cost-effective' arrangement. One consequence of the required accounting split is that *Enterprise* services may pay the two railways an access charge in the future.

There is currently no rail freight in Northern Ireland, and a revival is only a remote possibility over a five-year timescale. The former Adelaide freight yard in a built-up area of Belfast 'is not where you would put a freight facility now', and will be used as the site of a new depot to service the Class 4000 DMUs. However, the price of diesel will continue to rise over the longer term, and McGreevy believes there is potential for freight 'at some point in the future'. Thus a route for rail access to Belfast docks is being protected.

Electric ambitions

Translink and Iarnród Éireann have a shared vision for the Belfast

The UK's other railway

BACKGROUND: With so much attention focused on the saga of rail privatisation in Great Britain, Northern Ireland's vertically-integrated and publicly-owned rail system is often overlooked. The 1 600 mm gauge network was not part of British Rail, and today it is the responsibility of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly. Services are provided by NI Railways, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Northern Ireland public transport holding company Translink.

The 340 km network consists of an inter-city line from Belfast to Londonderry with a branch to the seaside town of Portrush, commuter lines from Larne and Bangor into Belfast, and the route to the border with the Republic of Ireland. All services except the cross-border *Enterprise* are operated by DMUs; there is currently no freight traffic. ❏