

LONDON OVERGROUND UPDATE

by Richard Pout

London Overground has joined the TfL family, but there are problems and more to come in 2008, with two lengthy blockades planned in the autumn for major track upgrades.

LONDON OVERGROUND BRANDING AT LOROL OPERATED STATIONS

By the end of February 2008 most Overground managed stations on the former Silverlink network had new 'Overground Orange' and white 'Temporary Signs' at entrances. However, LOROL's management recognised the poor legibility of the house style white lettering on orange, particularly at dusk and under artificial light. Apparently this is to be reviewed before the permanent signage is finalised.

In places obliterating Silverlink's identity has been a rather crude application of white paint or vinyl on some, but not all, station signs. Dalston Kingsland now has some very large new external signs, but Gospel Oak and Brondesbury have only the basic small signs. These are difficult to read from some angles and locations. London Connections maps are now displayed alongside Tube Maps at most stations, crucial as Overground is part of the National Rail network. (At LUL managed stations the High Frequency Services version is usually displayed).

TfL's 'The Overground is having a make-over' campaign, is now manifesting itself in local papers and on station poster-boards referring to an "investment programme to deliver a model railway". There is concern that the 'Trumpton' style poster depicts work practices that are not normally permitted, such as staff working off a stepladder near to a platform edge!

Stations are being repainted in three main house colours, Overground Orange for features and handrails, mushroom and off-white, or sometimes white, on other surfaces. By the end of February, only Crouch Hill and Upper Holloway had not seen the painters, where they arrived early March.

Painting styles and standards are variable. Schemes differ significantly as Silverlink's dark blue is retained at various locations where this was in a reasonable state, on either lower wall and stairwell surfaces, many repainted during Nat-Ex Silverlink's dilapidations works, the Macemain shelter structures, or where it is difficult to repaint at this stage. Nevertheless, if it doesn't move it is steadily being repainted!

So almost every station scheme is slightly different, even from TfL's makeover poster!

UNDERGROUND MANAGED OVERGROUND STATION CHANGES

By contrast, stations transferred to LUL between Queen's Park and Harrow & Wealdstone have had more varied re-branding treatments. Most stations had signage changes undertaken almost 'overnight' during the changeover weekend as the Silverlink franchise ended.

This involved using either vinyl signs or white tape to cover up the Silverlink name or logos. Externally the LT style blue vinyl station names appear reasonable, but platform signage is more variable. Many new platform signs display the LT target logo, but with a lighter red circle and station names in 'upper case' white on blue.

A few Silverlink signs survive – most have had their stripes and swirls obliterated with white vinyl. However, at several stations, not only have the words ‘Silverlink Trains’ been obliterated, but the station names as well – at both Harlesden and South Kenton for example!

Kensal Green has been fully redecorated in a carmine and cream style, similar to that used at Harrow & Wealdstone, but elsewhere only Kenton has benefited from some similar repainting. Stonebridge Park and Harlesden remain in Silverlink colours and are reasonably tidy, apart from handrails, which are now white. Wembley Central has had no further refurbishment, just new signs, but it is part of a larger redevelopment scheme. North Wembley and South Kenton stations are both now very shabby and scruffy.

It appears the LOROL contract is more specific on station standards than LUL, including the cleaning regime. Any further improvements on the DC lines may be constrained by the machinations of bringing Metronet out of administration and how these stations will come into the work plan, notwithstanding the fact they are still owned by Network Rail.

ROLLING STOCK

All rolling stock, however, retains Ray Stenning’s *Best Impressions* Silverlink style *Dairy Milk* purple-blue, lime green and yellow livery. Some trains now look distinctly shabby, inside and out. The order for eight class 172 Turbostar 2-car units is confirmed, four more units will also operate over LUL tracks to boost capacity on existing Chiltern Aylesbury – Marylebone services. If the Gospel Oak – Barking electrification were given an early approval, LOROL’s eight units might also go to Chiltern. The local rail user’s group is pressing for 3-car trains as services are now very overcrowded.

OVERGROUND SERVICE CHANGES

The December timetable brought some welcome service improvements, boosting some North London Line peak services, also Saturday and evening trains on the Gospel Oak – Barking line. Peak overcrowding remains a serious problem on both routes, however later trains ‘promised’ by TfL are limited by Network Rail’s ‘Rules of the Route’ – this means some possible late services, such as a 23.38 from Barking to Gospel Oak, sadly runs as empty stock.

It is hoped that once the North London Line upgrades are completed, TfL’s and users aspirations for trains running until after midnight can be achieved.

TRACK SEPARATION BETWEEN THE EAST LONDON AND NORTH LONDON LINES

It appears the East London Line operation from Dalston to Highbury and Islington will now be entirely discrete from the NLL. The ELL will be controlled from the new centre at New Cross, while the NLL between Willesden Junction and Hackney Wick will be controlled from Upminster. The Gospel Oak – Barking Line will be controlled mainly from the existing signal box at South Tottenham.

The future interchange at Highbury becomes more inconvenient, with NLL – ELL passenger flows interfering with access to the Victoria and FCC GN suburban platforms, as Overground passengers change platforms. The possibility of extending ELLX trains operating from New Cross to Highbury, on through Camden to Queen’s Park and Willesden becomes more remote.

It also means ELLX trains cannot serve traffic objectives around Camden Road station, such as Camden Lock and markets, also interchanging with Camden Town station and many local buses. Later redevelopment around King's Cross north-side could benefit from rebuilding a former North London Railway station at Maiden Lane – York Way, but this now has less potential. It also could preclude reopening Primrose Hill station, with a convenient interchange to Chalk Farm, barely 100 yards away.

Will Overground effectively become two separate operations, linked only by name? It appears so.

Some professionals' comment, off the record, that this separation is partly due to NR's insistence that the North London Line is controlled from Upminster, as opposed to establishing a local control centre, once planned by BR, and based at Willesden. The scheme started with resignalling the Watford DC Lines, and effectively the Bakerloo north of Queen's Park. The North London would have been included, but for Railtrack's intervention and their organisational zone changes.

Operationally there is a strong argument for operating the northern part of the system from one local control centre. This could reopen the debate about who should own and manage these routes, one that has simmered for the last 40 years!

DEVELOPING THE MAYOR'S NETWORK – LONDON RAIL METRO SERVICES

A coherent fares structure and consistent service standards, on what has now been defined as the Mayor's network, by 2012, is promoted as the objective. Nevertheless, some fares are confusing.

The debacle over Watford Junction fares continue. Despite the fact that Overground goes to Watford Junction, the fare is not set by TfL. London Midland has agreed to accept Oyster on its trains but, unlike Amersham, Watford Junction is not in Zone 9! LURS members can follow this saga in Barry Doe's column in *Rail* magazine, or on his web-site. Some very low single Oyster fares are available on Overground routes, and some cash rail fares are cheaper than bus fares!

OYSTER ON LONDON RAIL

National Express TOCs East Anglia and LTS-c2c extended Oyster acceptance at more stations from 2 January 2008. All stations between Liverpool Street and the three main Underground interchanges, Seven Sisters, Tottenham Hale and Walthamstow Central now accept Oyster PAYG. All National Rail passengers travelling within Hackney now have Oyster, if not access to the Underground! This has caused a protest in the local press from passengers from north of Walthamstow complaining bitterly – why do they not have this facility too? LTS-c2c TOC has extended Oyster to all stations within the GLA area, effectively adding Rainham and Dagenham Dock to existing validity at Upminster, Barking and West Ham.

Chiltern has added Oyster to all stations and journeys between West Ruislip and Marylebone, bringing it into line with the present arrangements south of Amersham, where services share Metropolitan Line track and stations. First Capital Connect (Thameslink) and Great Western also added a few stations to their networks. Thameslink has extended Oyster from Kentish Town to West Hampstead, First GW added Paddington to Ealing Broadway and Greenford, but not yet at intermediate stations.

These changes highlight journeys where Oyster availability could lead to some passengers transferring to surface rail where the journey is quicker. Generally the TfL zonal fares apply to Oyster, although some local cash fares are still set by the TOCs.

Nat-Ex's Liverpool Street – Shenfield service is still a point for discussion, along with their other London suburban lines to Enfield, Cheshunt and Chingford. This busy group of lines, which parallel various Underground routes, could also provide a model for the rest of London.

Nevertheless Oyster PAYG availability now covers all National Rail stations, including Overground, in seven London Boroughs: Barking and Dagenham, Brent, Camden, Islington, Hackney, Harrow and Tower Hamlets, for journeys within the GLA boundaries. Cross boundary PAYG journeys will still require passengers to Touch-In as they enter the Oyster validity area. For some journeys cash fares and paper tickets may offer better value. Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham could also be included, but since services are very limited, effectively two shared stations, Kensington Olympia and West Brompton, and only very limited acceptance of Oyster on the Southern services, these two are not quite full members of the Oyster Club.

Oyster in South London is making relatively little progress, even on routes where TOCs operate parallel services to LUL, such as from Richmond and Wimbledon to Clapham Junction, Vauxhall and Waterloo, or from Wimbledon into the Thameslink route. TOC representatives argue there are still many 'problems' to be resolved. Not only is it a matter of who pays the cost of installing the equipment, but cash revenue allocation of Oyster fare revenue is still a matter of contention.

When ELLX goes into South London, clearly Oyster fares will need to be compatible between both Overground and South Central, where the franchise comes up for renewal during 2009. Perhaps the TOCs should look carefully at the Overground set up, where both marketing with Oyster and the Tube map, and a concerted revenue protection operation has boosted income by over 20% in three months, and that is without any significant improvement to services.