

MEETING REPORTS

THE LONDON OVERGROUND NETWORK

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A report of the LURS meeting at All Saints Clubhouse on 11 May 2010

The London Overground network came into being on 11 November 2007, when Transport for London assumed responsibility for the former “Silverlink Metro” services across north and west London. Since that date, LOROL (London Overground Rail Operations Limited, a joint venture between Germany’s Deutsche Bahn and Hong Kong’s MTR) has operated the network on TfL’s behalf. Both the Concession Agreement (the contract between TfL and LOROL) and the Mayor’s Transport Strategy set a number of objectives for London Overground. With the East London Railway now being added to the network, it seems timely to review what has been achieved so far, and to see how the remaining objectives will soon be met.

THE CONCESSION AGREEMENT

The London Overground concession, let by TfL, is largely a “gross cost” contract. LOROL is paid a fixed amount for operating the network, with penalties deducted if performance targets are not met (and bonuses paid if they are exceeded). Fares revenue accrues to TfL. Hence, it is rather different to a “standard” rail franchise, let by the Department for Transport as a “net cost” contract (where the operator retains the fares revenue, and is usually also paid a fixed subsidy).

LOROL operates the services over infrastructure provided by Network Rail (existing lines) and TfL (the “new” section of line between Dalston and New Cross / New Cross Gate). It also manages most of the stations that its trains serve. LOROL take the lead in maintaining and upgrading these stations. Performance measures (used for calculating TfL’s four-weekly payments to LOROL) do not just reflect train service reliability – they also include Customer Satisfaction Survey and Mystery Shopper Survey results. The operator does in fact receive a small proportion of the fares revenue (as an incentive under the bonus / penalty regime).

TfL provides the fleet of electric trains that LOROL uses. TfL is also responsible for planning and developing the London Overground network, and for delivery of the East London line project and, with Network Rail, the North London line upgrade. It sets overall service levels (although the operator, in conjunction with Network Rail, determines the detailed timetables). TfL is also responsible for fares and ticketing, and for marketing the network. The current concession lasts for seven years (from November 2007), with the possibility of a two-year extension (dependent upon performance). After that, the concession will be retendered.

THE EXISTING NETWORK

The London Overground network has become an integral part of the TfL “family”, fully integrated with TfL’s wider ticketing and marketing systems, and shown in its distinctive shade of orange on the Tube Map. Performance measures for the existing network have shown significant improvement since LOROL took over. The proportion of passengers travelling without valid tickets fell almost overnight, from about 15% under Silverlink to around 2% now (reflecting not just improved station staffing and the introduction of ticket gates, but also the fact that some previously non-valid ticket types – such as Oyster Pay-As-You-Go – became valid). The independent *National Passenger Survey* shows that the proportion of customers satisfied with their journey has increased from less than 60% to over 75% (but with occasional blips, when major engineering works have led to prolonged closures). Although already fairly good under the Silverlink regime, Mystery Shopper Survey results (which examine cleanliness, staff behaviour, customer facilities, and customer information) and the national *Public Performance Measure* results both show steady improvements since London Overground took over. According to the latter, LOROL is now the 5th best-performing Train Operating Company nationally.

The network is now mid-way through a £40m stations improvement programme. Ticket gates and Oyster readers were installed in the final months of Silverlink operation (not an easy task, as the outgoing operator had little interest in the outcome!), with all stations completed in time for the start of the LOROL concession. By summer 2008, all stations had been cleaned and repaired. More

thorough refurbishment works (including the provision of Help Points, and improved real-time information displays) have now commenced at five stations, and should be completed across the entire network before the Olympics in 2012. It was hoped that four key stations on the North London Line (Hackney Central, Camden Road, West Hampstead, and Gospel Oak) could be remodelled, although this is currently unfunded. However, a similar remodelling of Crystal Palace station on the extended East London Railway has now been funded (jointly by TfL and Network Rail), and should go ahead.

TfL's new fleet of 54 four-car class 378 trains is currently being delivered from Bombardier in Derby. The £260m fleet consists of a mixture of third-rail-only trains (for the East London Railway) and dual-voltage trains that can also use 25kv overhead electrification (for the electrified ex-Silverlink routes). They provide a much-improved ambience compared with the trains that they replace, with better accessibility and passenger information systems. The trains are air-conditioned, and feature regenerative braking (returning about 20% of the energy that they consume back to the power supply system). They also incorporate a number of innovations for the National Rail network (such as "tube-style" all-longitudinal seating, and full-width "walk-through" gangways) to increase capacity – sorely needed these days on some part of this increasingly-busy network (the section between Highbury & Islington and Stratford now being particularly crowded). LOROL is itself providing a new fleet of 8 class 172 diesel trains for the Barking to Gospel Oak service (the only section of the network that is not electrified), bringing similar standards of ambience to that line.

A major renewal and upgrade of the railway infrastructure on the North London Line is currently underway. This includes re-signalling, and the four-tracking of the existing line from Dalston to Highbury & Islington (to permit the extension of the East London Railway there, running parallel to the existing North London Line) and on to Camden Road (to allow some separation of passenger and freight paths). Other works include new and lengthened platforms, a new turnback siding at Willesden Junction, and doubling the single-track Latchmere Curve (on the West London Line near Clapham Junction). Delivered by Network Rail and their principal contractor Carillion, these works are costing £326m. TfL is contributing £100m, with the balance coming from the Olympic Delivery Authority, and Network Rail itself. Once these works are completed, line capacity will have doubled (allowing 8 passenger trains per hour to operate between Camden Road and Stratford). Sadly, some disruption will result in the short term (including weekend closures, and the North London Line blockade), but the end result will justify this.

On the West London Line, new stations have been opened at Shepherd's Bush (serving the massive Westfield development) and Imperial Wharf (funded by a number of bodies, including the developer of the neighbouring residential development).

THE EAST LONDON RAILWAY – PHASE 1

The upgrade of the existing LU East London Line, with extensions north to Dalston Junction (over the disused Broad Street line) and south to Crystal Palace and West Croydon (over existing Network Rail tracks) is now complete. This has included the conversion of the former LU section to Network Rail standards (in areas such as signalling, passenger information systems, and traction power supplies). While the Dalston Junction to New Cross and New Cross Gate section is owned by TfL, it is now considered an integral part of the National Rail network.

A "preview" service as far south as New Cross and New Cross Gate (initially operating just during Monday-to-Friday daytimes, with weekend service added after a few weeks) began on 27 April 2010. A full seven-days-a-week service, together with the projection of services south of New Cross Gate, starts on 23 May 2010. This will give a frequent "turn-up-and-go" service from South London via Docklands to the City – something that a TfL marketing campaign, including radio commercials, will emphasise. The final section of Phase 1, beyond Dalston Junction to Highbury & Islington, should open in early 2011 (in fact 28 February 2011).

The stations from New Cross Gate south were brought up to London Overground standards (gated, staffed and refurbished) in advance on this. They were taken over by LOROL on 20 September 2009 (coinciding with the start of the new Southern franchise), which led to the curious short-term situation where LOROL ran the stations but not the trains! The Southern service pattern will be recast on 23 May 2010, with their services changed on the sections to be served by London Overground.

Some major construction has taken place. At New Cross Gate, a flyover was built for northbound ELR trains to cross the main line, and a new control centre and rolling stock depot was constructed. At Shoreditch High Street, the elevated station is built inside a concrete box (intended to eventually be encased within a new building), and the station should gradually become a more integral part of the surrounding area. Hoxton and Haggerston are both complete, but still require improved signage from nearby Kingsland Road. The large Dalston Junction station has plenty of capacity for the interchange traffic expected when the bus station above opens.

THE EAST LONDON RAILWAY – PHASE 2

This will add a further route – from a flying junction just south of Surrey Quays (already constructed as part of the Phase 1 works), via a disused rail alignment (currently used as a cycle path) to Queens Road Peckham, along Network Rail's existing South London Line as far as Wandsworth Road, and then to Clapham Junction. Here, the two London Overground routes will remain operationally separate, with no through running, although there will be a convenient interchange. London's new orbital rail system will then be complete.

This £75m extension is funded. Final design work is currently ongoing, with construction starting in April 2011). It is hoped to begin operation in late 2012. When that happens, the East London Railway will see a 16 trains-per-hour service on the core section from Dalston Junction to Surrey Quays, with 8tph north to Highbury & Islington, and 4tph on each of the four southern branches.

TfL will be responsible for constructing the first section, along the disused line (a cycle path on this alignment will also be retained). Network Rail will be responsible for the remainder of the route, including the new junction near Queens Road Peckham, and significant works at Clapham Junction station. Here, the abandoned platform 1 trackbed is in poor condition, and would be very expensive to reinstate. Instead, the centre road between platforms 2 and 3 will become new platform 2 for ELR services (with the edge of the existing platform 2 extended across the adjacent trackbed, to meet this centre road at the south end). The north end of the existing platform 2 will become new bay platform 1, and will continue to serve the West London Line.

The budget for Phase 2 of the ELR is firmly fixed, and so additional elements cannot be added to the scheme unless they are separately funded. Indeed, the funding for Phase 2 itself was so finely balanced that DfT funding was conditional on Shoreditch High Street being part of zone 1 for ticketing purposes.

The proposed Surrey Canal Road station (between Surrey Quays and Queens Road Peckham) will not initially be built. This station would be relatively expensive (£10m) to construct, as it is on a difficult site (on an embankment, close to a bridge), and needs to be large enough to cope with football crowds (travelling to and from the nearby Millwall FC stadium). At one stage, the DfT offered to provide £7m towards its costs. "Passive provision" for the station has been made in the design for this stretch of line. This allows the station to be added later with the minimum of disruption, and a developer of a large adjacent site has expressed interest in doing just this.

Similarly, while a new South London Line station at Brixton (for ELR Phase 2 services) would be highly desirable, at £40m it would also be very expensive. It would have to be built at the top of a very high viaduct, and the curves and gradients in that area mean that derogations from current safety standards would be required. Alas, it is just too costly to offer value for money to the public sector. Private sector contributions are of course very welcome.

FUTURE PLANS

By 2012, increased services should also be operating on most of the ex-Silverlink routes, too. During the peak, there will be 8 trains per hour from Stratford to Willesden Junction with 4tph continuing to Richmond and the remainder to Clapham Junction). There will be 4tph running between Barking and Gospel Oak, and still 3tph between Euston and Watford Junction. Off-peak frequencies will be almost as good (reflecting recent growth in off-peak traffic). This will give a "turn-up-and-go" service across almost the entire network.

There are no firm plans at this stage for further improvements to, or extensions of, the London Overground network. But there are plenty of aspirations – from very simple measures like putting in dropped kerbs and cycle racks close to Overground stations, to very expensive ideas like new stations and new lines. Various options will be explored in Network Rail's London and Southeast route utilisation strategy.

The proposals for High Speed 2 (a new high-speed railway from London to the North) envisage a much-enlarged Euston station, retaining sufficient capacity for all existing services. Hence, there would be no need to divert the Watford Junction service away from Euston if HS2 goes ahead. Diverting this service via the Primrose Hill route to Stratford would be difficult, as the line east of Camden Road will already be running at full capacity and in any case the proposed HS1-HS2 link would preclude this.

Should HS2 include a station in the Willesden Junction / Old Oak Common area, then this entire area could be redeveloped. This might see improved interchange between the various lines that run through this area, and perhaps even a passenger service on the Dudding Hill line. The major redevelopment scheme at Cricklewood / Brent Cross might also lead to passenger services being introduced on that route.

Some commentators have suggested extending the North London Line service beyond Stratford to the Lea Valley (and possibly, via a reinstated Hall Farm Curve, to Chingford). This is much less likely to happen – an existing scheme for improving interchange in Hackney (providing a direct “within-the-barriers” link between Hackney Central and Hackney Downs stations) would provide many of the same journey opportunities, and is considered to give a better solution for a wider area.

Freight trains have very different operating characteristics to a metro-style passenger service, and this can cause problems. Yet, there is considerable freight traffic over LO’s routes – and, with the continuing expansion of container ports on the east coast (such as Tilbury, Harwich, and Felixstowe), this traffic is expected to increase. Much of the £326m investment in the North London Line is to make continuing provision for growing freight traffic. TfL has lobbied the DfT to upgrade the existing rail route from Felixstowe to Nuneaton (via Peterborough), so that it can carry a greater proportion of the container traffic – this would allow much of the freight traffic currently routed over the Overground network to bypass London altogether. The upgrade of the Felixstowe to Peterborough section has now been funded.

Electrifying the Barking to Gospel Oak line would fill a small but significant gap in the electrification network, allowing many diesel-hauled freight services to become electrically-worked. This is desirable, as electric haulage to the Thameside ports is more reliable, it adds a diversionary route, and it reduces the amount of freight traffic crossing the Great Eastern main line at Stratford. If this section was to be electrified, then the LO service would also be converted to electric traction – opening up the possibility that some could be extended west of Gospel Oak (in place of those coming from Stratford). While this would better integrate the Barking route with the rest of the network, it might not be without its problems – it is difficult and expensive to construct platforms at Gospel Oak on the through alignment, so the Barking service might have to cease calling there (or some trains might still terminate there, with the terminal platform effectively a branch). TfL continues to press for the electrification project – recommended in Network Rail’s electrification route utilisation strategy - to be funded.

TfL would like to extend London Overground service standards (although perhaps not the actual brand) to other National Rail routes in London. Already, Oyster Pay-As-You-Go has been extended to the entire London rail network – something that was relatively easy to do technically, but far more difficult to do commercially (with various Train Operating Companies arguing about revenue share)! Overall, TfL is very proud of what it has achieved so far.

David Connor