

# The Barking to Gospel Oak Line User Group

Evidence to the GLA Transport Scrutiny Committee - May 2010

## Continuing development of the London Overground Network

Barking - Gospel Oak Line User Group (BGOLUG) is pleased to be invited to discuss the developments of the Overground Network promoted by Transport for London (TfL). London Overground Rail Operations Limited (LOROL) became the service provider from 11<sup>th</sup> November 2007.

Transport Scrutiny Committee members have supported the Overground proposals, promoted in the 2001 Mayor's Transport Plan as *Orbirail*. Both Mayors, Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson have recognised the importance of 'overground' trains; the problem was that while promoting Network South East as a coherent, cohesive operation, integration might have been achieved rather more quickly.

The machinations of ill conceived rail privatisation and a widely intransigent railway management, entrenched in their own methodology - 'this is the way we do it' - did not help. Both the North London Line (NLL) and Gospel Oak - Barking (GO-B) Line suffered years of neglect under British Railways' management. The routes were not a priority, limited importance being given only to facilitate cross-London freight movements. Limited investment went in during the Railtrack - Silverlink period (1997 - 2007) with some financial assistance from supportive local authorities towards basic station improvements.

Services were basic, the NLL with its 20 minute interval service, finally improved to quarter-hourly in the late 1990s, but at a cost, losing the Watford - Liverpool Street service from September 1992. The GO-B Line operated just a half hourly 2-coach service for over 20 years, until TfL funded additional peak services from December 2005, during the latter period of the Silverlink franchise.

The East London Line (ELL) project however came from London Underground twenty years ago, as a means of using an existing line and some precious abandoned railway infrastructure in a more effective way.

### Issues arising from the improvements to the Orbital Network

- 1 Significant passenger growth led to very serious peak overcrowding on all three sections of the North and West London and Gospel Oak - Barking group of lines. Oyster and Tube Map inclusion unlocked latent demand; growth BGOLUG warned TfL about, but apparently not heeded?
- 2 Insufficient preparation had been made to accommodate this growth; it seemed as though TfL London Rail were surprised by this sudden passenger influx. Had TfL undertaken sufficient evaluation of the suppressed demand and the short term passenger growth on these services once Oyster and the Target roundel logo was applied to marketing and service information?
- 3 While the existing rolling stock was totally inadequate for the job, TfL failed to discuss and consult users about the most suitable design for new trains. Passengers on the NLL are concerned about the unsuitable internal layout, poor and inadequate seating, lack of facilities for cycles etc. on new trains.

### The future development of the *Orbirail* network, now the Overground.

The Committee wants to make suggestions to the Mayor for the benefit of users and other Londoners. It is crucial to consolidate and improve the existing network, which should be mainly complete by May 2012. This should include initially works to complete current network proposals, continuing on to 2014.



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- 1 The ELL - South London Line (SLL) link to Clapham Junction, estimated at £75m, to be completed by 2012.
- 2 Electrification of the Gospel Oak - Barking Line to provide improved passenger and freight services, incorporating these into wider regional or national service networks. This small project is at the top of Network Rail's electrification priority list, and could now be completed for under £30m, possibly by the end of 2011, as part of the line is to be electrified for the Thameslink project.
- 3 Complete the North London Line upgrade, rebuilding bridges and the station at Camden Road to provide a full four-track railway. This is essential to accommodate both more intensive passenger train services and also handle increasing volumes of rail-borne freight. This is apparently funded by a grant of £54m from Department for Transport (DfT), but neither the DfT nor TfL can explain how this figure is calculated.
- 4 Review, boost and continue the stations upgrade programme to provide adequate passenger facilities, and have a dialogue with stakeholders on facilities and standards.

### **Improving Interchanges**

One attraction of the Underground is ease of changing trains between different lines. Passenger facilities at interchanges are crucial to encourage passengers to use local rail in the same way as the 'Tube'. It is now time to market the network as a whole, as Chris Green's Network South East tried to do. TfL and Train Operating Companies (TOCs) must ensure that passengers understand the need to change, provide facilities for them to do so, and ensure shelters and waiting rooms are adequate for when it is cold or wet!

Canopies should cover 60 - 80 metres of platform surface, the full length of a typical 3 or 4 coach train. Alternatively TfL or LOROL should ensure passengers can sit in lit and weatherproof shelters, even if waiting only for 5 - 10 minutes. On the present network several opportunities exist, particularly at New Cross Gate, Norwood Junction and Crystal Palace, and of course Clapham Junction.

Over the next two years, the Mayor and TfL have the opportunity to develop good practices with the initial Overground network. If trains run at 10, 15 or 20 minute intervals, these are reasonable frequencies for passengers not to have to check a timetable. Where exceptionally trains may run at 30 minute intervals, either due to route capacity limitations, or at the extremes of the day, these trains must still have a consistent operating pattern with the core route service.

While the GO-B line operates as a separate entity, interchange facilities at Gospel Oak and Blackhorse Road are crucial, but the considerable passenger growth at several intermediate stations, where passengers change from buses to trains, amply demonstrates the need for improved passenger facilities, using where possible prefabricated shelters or canopy systems; several systems exist and are commercially available.

### **Working with Network Rail**

Two years ago, a senior TfL London Rail manager commented that “.. the problem with the North London Line is it's not our railway, it's Network Rail's ..” BGOLUG and other user representatives endorse this view. The same concern is voiced over the Watford DC Line, West London Line (WLL) and the new sections of ELLX.

Network Rail has continued with many of the unsatisfactory practices inherited from Railtrack.

- A complex management structure at divisional level, with many inexperienced managers whose understanding of local operations is often limited and their inability to



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manage staff is sometimes a problem for those 'at the sharp end'.

- There is little 'transparency' in their decision making process, or their costings. It seems neither TfL nor the DfT has detailed information about their cost structures, even though these bodies are paying for a major NR managed project.

### **Managing overcrowding**

Overcrowding has become a very serious problem on Overground services operating over the last two and a half years, exacerbated by the introduction of Oyster and Overground branding. This has always been a problem in peaks over the last fifteen years, increasingly a problem off-peak as the very short trains on the GO-B route quickly fill up, or the infrequent trains on the WLL fill up at busy times, and all fill up if trains are late or cancelled.

Occasional users surprised by the short trains, basic facilities and infrequent services also do not realise they need to check trains in a timetable.

### **Alternative travel arrangements during closures.**

Passengers unable to use Overground trains during route blockades and weekend closures have been provided with minimal replacement bus services. TfL's staff have tried to minimise travel or ticketing problems but lengthy blockades are a considerable inconvenience to passengers on essential journeys to and from work or school. In many cases passengers were left to their own devices to sort out an alternative route which suited them, even though their journeys would take considerably longer.

Replacement buses should have been more frequent on weekdays, at least every 15 minutes, 10 at peaks. The NLL bus timetable '..about every 20 minutes ..' was rather vague. Compared with bus replacements for Tube services, very frequent even on Sundays, these were unsatisfactory. Replacement buses were cut, the victim of cost savings during the 2008 blockades.

### **Network Rail and work strategies.**

The extent of improvement works needed meant that total route possessions were necessary. But Network Rail (NR) has not developed a strategy to undertake work-streams in parallel. NR failed to prepare plans for signalling and station works concurrently with track and tunnel works on the Hampstead Loop.

This meant that certain work-streams could have been undertaken while the Hampstead Tunnel gauge enhancement track works were in progress between August and November 2008. This is a serious management failure by all parties concerned. Even though NR had problems with both signalling design and installation, changing a contractor early in 2009, the need to extend station platforms to accommodate at least 80m length 4 coach trains, and in the longer term, 100m 5 car trains was already accepted. Regrettably these were not undertaken.

Again the lack of coherent co-ordinated planning by either TfL or NR suggests a piecemeal 'hand-to-mouth' approach to undertaking the North London projects. Project management and co-ordination is sadly lacking here, and similar issues could be raised relating to the one month closure of the Gospel Oak - Barking line back in August 2008 when other works were possible.

By contrast the ELL project with one main contractor supervised by TfL has fared rather better, the line opening on time although some details require further attention.

### **Passenger benefits from the current improvement programme**

The ELL is open and the NLL programme is coming on-stream. Eight 4-car trains per hour



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at the peak from 2011 will be a major benefit to passengers in the very busy Camden to Stratford corridor. However there is rather less optimism that the proposed service levels may meet latent suppressed demand on other parts of the system. Quarter-hourly trains on the Richmond branch are often heavily loaded, as is the existing 4 tph service on the West London Line, particularly if popular exhibitions are held at both Olympia and Earls Court.

One concern of users is the inadequacy of station facilities on the former Silverlink NLL and GO-B lines, and at some stations on the Watford DC line. This aspect needs urgent review to compare these facilities with the very high standards introduced on the rebuilt ELL, where 'gold-plating' the new infrastructure had been commented on. This has not been delivered in the various phases of the TfL / LOROL station upgrades programme so far.

BGOLUG has sought to discuss the station upgrade programme with both TfL and LOROL's staff but to no avail. We have identified several manufacturers' products that may be suitable, such as the new shelters installed at Forest Hill. Adequate shelters, canopies and seating are crucial to ensure waiting passengers are distributed along platforms and use all available doors when trains arrive.

### **Electrifying the Gospel Oak - Barking route**

BGOLUG has commented many times on this crucial infill electrification scheme. Failure to complete this essential element of the Overground project is unsatisfactory, as this was always part of the wider orbital network plan. TfL's decision to accept LOROL's proposal for inadequate diesel units is surprising. The lack of initiative by both TfL and Department for Transport, borne out by a Freedom of Information enquiry, and subsequent conversations with Ministers and MPs, the Mayor and AMs and TfL staff suggests poor management and planning at various levels.

Benefits are numerous; electric trains could operate the service more efficiently than diesel units, operating some or all services beyond Gospel Oak to either Clapham Junction or Richmond. 3-car electric trains would accommodate the likely passenger growth on this route for the foreseeable future; a potential capacity of about 1200 passengers per hour on a quarter-hourly service.

### **Future improvements and the potential for developing services beyond 2010**

The Transport Committee is familiar with issues surrounding the decision to fund the Surrey Quays - Clapham Junction extension by sacrificing other train services. Re-vamped in the mid-1990s., the South London Line has made a valuable contribution to improving rail access to depressed inner South London, serving important traffic objectives like Kings College Hospital.

BGOLUG has consistently supported the efforts of the local campaign groups, as it is clear that TfL had not fully evaluated present passenger movements, nor the latent demand that would inevitably emerge once services operated all day at quarter-hourly intervals.

Maintaining links from Victoria and Battersea Park to all SLL stations eastwards is essential. As with NLL and GO-B line stations, SLL stations must have substantially improved interchange facilities so passengers will be happy to wait while changing trains. This will be necessary to maintain links to London Bridge from the South London Line, at Peckham Rye and Queens Road.

### **Liaison with stakeholders**

TfL seems to congratulate itself on the way it claims to consult passengers, stakeholders,



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Local Authority representatives, etc. This is far from satisfactory as so called 'consultation meetings' are infrequent and invariably take on a presentation format with a limited period for questions. Some of these events are delegated to LOROL.

TfL must develop dialogues on issues, meet users representatives, as well as LA members and officers to discuss their strategies more fully, engage and exchange viewpoints. TfL has developed a limited dialogue with Local Authority representatives through North Orbital Rail Partnership. It is not entirely clear as to what the exact role of NORP is, its 'activities' are not entirely clear. NORP is involved with allocation of funds through the Local Implementation Plans.

An LA led group should have greater involvement with passengers, ensure they have communicated their activities back to Council members and also to the 'voting public' who are also involved with local transport matters. However their involvement with local station access projects is apparently ongoing but little information is available. What influence has NORP had on the station renovation programme?

BGOLUG offered to discuss standards for Overground network interchange and local stations where facilities were very inadequate. Stations throughout the London Rail surface network need careful revaluation to ensure facilities are adequate for both passengers' and operational needs.

TfL's reluctance to involve its passengers for advice is regrettable. The attitude of one senior manager was "... we wouldn't use you for advice on stations, we have consultants for that; if they get it wrong we can sue them, we cant sue you!" Might this suggest an attitude or communication problem?

Amusing as we found this comment, it is a sad reflection on TfL's less than effective performance on station design and refurbishment so far. It indicates a very cavalier management attitude, almost contempt for both stakeholders and passengers, particularly when one sees the results of their ongoing works programmes so far.

### **Overground service developments - LOROL's Operations**

The current strategy covers the linkages to the present development phases which takes Overground through to 2012. TfL's objective is to ensure services function adequately down to the 2012 Olympiad, and be ready to start the medium term projects, such as the Camden 4-tracking immediately after those events.

### **Medium term service developments for 2012**

Present plans do not include any service extension from Camden Road towards Willesden Jct., Wembley and Watford via Queens Park. This emergency service operated very successfully during the August - November 2008 Hampstead Loop blockade, to the surprise of both user representatives as well as management.

Even without the Camden 4-tracking, this service should be considered before 2012 to evaluate its benefits to the Olympic Transport Strategy. A Stratford - Wembley service could be a very major plank in the Olympic Transport Plan, glossed over until now, particularly as more events are scheduled for Wembley to save money. This link, with or without the desirable reopening of Primrose Hill station offers a useful Olympic link, Stratford - Wembley direct every 30 minutes.

### **Longer term developments - beyond 2014**

Another suggestion has been to extend the Crystal Palace trains on into the Southern (South Central) area and perhaps on to Clapham Junction. TfL London Rail needs to look again at



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the London Rail network concept, which emerged from a brief effort by train operators to market lines with 10-15 minute frequencies, such as South Eastern to Greenwich and Woolwich, as 'ON' routes, the 'Overground Network'.

London Rail could slowly develop some corporate identity, reintroducing the Blue and Brown Target, with London Rail in the branding. This would assume a 15 minute service for at least 14-15 hrs every day, and adoption of the common zonal fare structure by train operators. Interchanges could include stations a few hundred yards apart, provided Oyster users follow the rules.

With Overground there is enough for TfL and LOROL to do to get the existing network, along with the service developments noted running effectively. The next major project is the Camden Road bridges and signalling following on from the South London Line and developing quality interchanges.

**Barking-Gospel Oak Line User Group, May 2010.**

