

MINUTES OF MARPA AGM HELD ON 23rd MARCH 2024 at 2.30 pm at FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, ST JOHN'S STREET, BURY ST EDMUNDS

Present: 15 including 7 committee members

1. Welcome, introductions & apologies

The secretary welcomed members and guests. The meeting observed a minute's silence for John Drake, former Hon Chair and Secretary, who died at the end of December 2023.

Apologies: Trevor Garrod, Ann Henderson, Peter Hulbert, Keith Jobson, Julia Mann, John Matthiesen, Bryan Moss, Jen Overett, Roger & Stella Wolfe

2. Presentation by Alan Neville, Customer & Community Engagement Manager, Greater Anglia.

Alan began with some personal reminiscences of John Drake. They illustrated the aptness of choosing Ely station as the location for a planned memorial plaque.

The focus of the talk was on Greater Anglia's current performance and future plans, particularly as they relate to the Mid Anglia route. The reliability of the bi-mode train fleet means that services now enjoy unprecedented levels of punctuality, as well as superior facilities for travellers. In terms of ongoing challenges, Alan highlighted both the impact of COVID on passenger numbers for 2020/21 and the subsequent recovery, pointing out that this has largely involved leisure travel, with commuter and season ticket business still below 2019/20 levels. He also noted that over the 20 year period 1998 - 2023 passenger footfall at many stations had doubled and in a number of instances more than trebled. This growth was associated with the ongoing expansion of settlements along key routes, and he cited the Mid Anglia experience as typical - extensive house building continued in all the towns and villages served by the line. So passenger numbers were bound to go on increasing as settlements expanded and car travel to and from major regional centres became less attractive in terms of congestion, journey times and parking charges.

He reminded the audience that since the end of the pandemic the train operating companies were no longer franchisees as such but instead received direct award contracts from the DfT. One drawback to the current arrangement of recurring one year contracts was that it offered train operators little incentive to undertake long term planning. In terms of service improvements, the meeting was informed that expectations from any new timetable would need to be managed. The constraints on introducing additional and faster services included a range of factors, including Network Rail restrictions on sectional running times, single line running on most of the Newmarket branch, freight operations and growing platform congestion, especially at Ipswich. Any recast timetable would commence no earlier than December 2025. Preparatory work was already in train, so it made sense for MARPA to submit its wishlist as soon as possible.

Regarding the prospect of a Community Rail Partnership, Alan emphasised that it was now a case of when rather than if. Extensive discussion had already taken place with relevant local authorities. A launch at some point later in 2024 seemed a realistic goal. The Mid Anglia CRP will be the sixth set up in the East. Once agreements with contributing local authority partners had been confirmed, an early priority would be the appointment of a community rail officer to initiate projects in towns and villages across the route. It was acknowledged that the establishment of a CRP represented an important milestone in the continued development of the Mid Anglia route.

Points arising from questions and answers included:

It was hoped that an opportunity existed at the soon to be opened Cambridge South station to establish better bus-rail integration by installing real time information screens for feeder bus services on the station forecourt.

Concerns over Thurston station were again raised. In terms of the long neglected station building, the efforts of CATs, the local campaign aiming to bring the building back into use, had so far yielded no results. Despite some initial interest early on, no serious offers had yet been made for the tenancy of the building. The meeting was reminded that GA received no funding earmarked to rehabilitate disused station buildings. It was agreed that a meeting of key partners to agree a way forward made sense.

Could trains potentially cross at Newmarket? Apart from other considerations, the platform currently in use would need to be extended westwards.

Suggestion made that an Ipswich - Ely service be set up to complement the existing two hourly Ipswich - Peterborough, creating an hourly service between Ipswich to Ely. Question was asked about Great British Railways (GBR) in terms of when it might start operating and what impact it might have. There were no immediate answers.

3. *Minutes of 2022 AGM (15/10/22)*

Approved without further discussion; no matters arising. (Proposed B. Walsh, seconded L. Butler)

4. *Chairman's Report 2023/23*

The report was tabled at the meeting. Attention was drawn to MARPA's recent success in encouraging a number of councils along the route to join as corporate members. The report was approved. (Proposed B. Walsh, seconded P. Rutt.)

5. *Treasurer's Report*

The report was tabled at the meeting. Finances were sound, with the current balance in the region of £1000. This could be useful in terms of supporting small scale projects undertaken by the CRP once in action. The report was approved. (Proposed by R. Ellis and seconded by P. Wakefield.)

6. *Election of chair*

R. Taylor was nominated as new chair in succession to J. Drake Proposed and seconded by R. Ellis and P. Wakefield respectively. All in favour.

7. *Election of officers & committee 2022/23*

Current committee re-elected unopposed. Proposed and seconded by R. Stripe and M. Feeney respectively.

8. *Any other business*

The Meeting agreed it was important to finalise a 2025 timetable wishlist asap. It was recognised that MARPA needed to keep challenging GA to consider developments a little "outside the box" to attract new markets and grow the passenger footfall (e.g. the suggestion that Felixstowe become the eastern end of the route).

Meeting closed at 4.15 pm