

## BACK-ON-TRACK

### REPORT OF MEETINGS IN BRUSSELS JANUARY 28<sup>TH</sup>-29<sup>TH</sup> 2020

Twelve Back-on-Track colleagues from France, Belgium, the UK, Denmark and Germany were in Brussels on January 28th/29th for a series of meetings with Transport & Environment, Members of the European Parliament, DGMOVE (European Commission civil servants) and the Community of European Railways.

Back-on-Track was represented by Poul Kattler, Trevor Garrod, Julian Hirschler, Nicolas Forien, Francis Genon, Raphael Winkler, Alexander Gomme, Charles-Henri Paquette, Fionn Hallemann, Clemence Gillion, Nigel Perkins and Ian McDonald.

This is my report of our discussions.

TRANSPORT & ENVIRONMENT - They do not at present have a dedicated rail campaigner, but Dr Lucy Gilliam deals with transport matters, mainly air. She told us of a project "Air to Rail" recently started and being pursued by consultant Arie Bleienberg. It should be published in March, but it was difficult to get figures for usage of specific services.

T&E were aware of the problems of booking long-distance train journeys and the issues of kerosene taxation and VAT. For the EU to act there had to be unanimity, but some bilateral initiatives could be possible.

T&E has a strong focus on reducing emissions and so far a less strong belief in the effectiveness of railways in that respect.

Improvements to rail had broad NGO support in Brussels, and T&E wanted to see some of the "Green Deal" funds invested in rail. Some airlines were now selling rail tickets for shorter journeys because airports were full to capacity. SNCF was working to increase rail capacity between Paris and Lyon. Crossing Paris was a disincentive and anything that could be done to make this easier would be welcome for long-distance passengers.

The busiest routes for air travel within the EU were London - Dublin; London - Amsterdam and Paris - Madrid.

We were advised that a youth coalition "Rail to the COP" had been formed - [info@railtothecop.org](mailto:info@railtothecop.org)

#### EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Three meetings were held - one large one with several MEPs and/or their assistants from

Germany, France and Luxembourg; and two smaller ones just for German MEPs.

The following MEPs and assistants took part in these meetings: Karima Delli, Hildegard Bentele, Gabriele Bischoff, Tilly Metz, Hannah Neumann, Nikolaj Villumsen, Rasmus Andersen, Leila Chaibi, Benoit Lutgen, Daniel Freund, Anna Deparnay-Grunenberg, Jan-Christoph Oetjen, Martina Michels, Louisa Geisman, Constantin Lehnert, Elmar Widder, Julia Bayer, Christian Beck, Thomas Kieschnik, Stefanie Enders, Lucas Francou, Hana Rihovsky, Patrick Cummins-Feipodi, Frederika, Aude, Julias, Laure, Pierre Marion, Marion Aubry

The MEPs said they welcomed the opportunity to speak with us. We gave them a summary of the 5 points which Back-on-Track had submitted to the EU, covering level playing field, simplified fares and ticketing, boosting international services, new rolling stock and marginal infrastructure usage costs.

The German MEPs who had launched a petition for a Berlin - Brussels overnight service said that this was feasible in the shorter term - initially twice a week like the newly introduced Vienna - Brussels service. They also stressed the need for easier "final mile" mobility, for caring for persons of reduced mobility, and for greater harmonisation.

Karima Delli MEP (Chair of the Transport & Tourism Committee) said that she and her colleagues would be studying public service contracts, ticket prices and the sources of investment. They needed a proper EU Plan for these matters.

In response Back-on-Track representatives pointed out that Eurofima, as a non-profit leasing company, could help with stock and that some old stock may be suitable for renovation over a 4-5 year period. Companies such as BTE which ran charter trains might also be able to advise on this matter.

New stock could be used for up to 40 years and most services would pay for themselves, but investors needed to be convinced that stock would have a long-term use. The public sector, such as the European Investment Bank, also had a role to play in providing investment. Government input was expected to help with the investment in new night trains in Sweden.

If flights were to be taxed, it was pointed out, people would expect an alternative mode of transport to be developed. Research was needed into how many of the flights leaving France could be replaced by night trains. Information was also needed on the overall cost of an airline journey - including hotel accommodation and/or travel to and from the airport. Reference was also made to Raphael Winkler's recently formed group "Night trains for business": and to the website [ecopassenger.org](http://ecopassenger.org) which gave comparisons between modes.

Back-on-Track colleagues also stressed the need for the railway industry to be innovative and more customer-focussed, and that if the operators did not improve their offer within, say, three years, the European Parliament should legislate. We also considered that the European Parliament could do something on each of the five points in our Green Deal paper.

The political level in the EU must take overall responsibility to secure progress in this area. A “blame game” must be avoided, as must the idea that “someone else will run with the ball.”

The MEPs asked for statistics about usage of those night trains which already existed; how profitable these were and whom the petitioners for a Brussels - Berlin night train should target. They also referred to a new rule that no Berlin city employee was now allowed to fly on business within Germany, but was expected to take the train. It was suggested that the MEPs should talk to both DB and OeBB. It was also reported by French colleagues that SNCF had a new Board and CEO who might be more receptive towards new night train proposals.

The other meeting with MEPs focussed on the German experience of both internal and international services, and the need for these to be financially viable. Discussion also covered capacity issues - including whether there was room for extra night trains if tracks were needed for freight. Standardisation was important, but there was no single "right solution" for all routes. It was stated that the Zurich - Berlin service did not make large profits but it did cover its costs.

Sometimes a night service was justifiable for the development of remote regions, but it was then really a responsibility for national governments.

Combining a motorrail and a sleeper service was sometimes logical and could be financially viable. A locomotive could be more easily changed at the border, if necessary, and suburban stations such as Berlin-Lichtenberg or Hamburg-Harburg used for loading and unloading.

Concern was expressed about recently introduced fire safety regulations in Italy, while the need to book a long way in advance was a problem for some passengers. There was some support for an all-European union of trains to make the system function better, especially as some countries were very protective of their own markets.

## DGMOVE

We met Elisabeth Werner, Dr Maurizio Castelletti and Dino, officials of DGMOVE for a 90-minute discussion. They were also given Back-on-Track's five point response to the new Green Deal. We were informed that the EU was to publish a new comprehensive transport strategy towards the end of 2020.

The EU was keen to see a level playing field between different modes of transport and if the competition fairer (for example, with air tickets at more realistic prices), investors were more likely to invest in rail. We were also told about the EU study into internalisation of external costs, published in June 2019, and the concern of DGMOVE about different VAT rates, and differing track charges in different Member States.

We pointed out that the technology for night trains was already there, so was it not a question of low-hanging fruit? DGMOVE were concerned about lack of rolling stock, for example for new entrants into the market, with some incumbents scrapping coaches instead of selling them on to

other operators. They were investigating the Luxembourg Rail Protocol to see how the market in rolling stock could be boosted. Manufacturers should be encouraged to produce more off-the-peg stock in larger quantities. Meanwhile, we considered that more information was needed about suitable stock that might be in store such as at Mukran, Hamm(Westfalen) and Neumunster in Germany.

Over two decades, the four Railway Packages had been produced in a bid to stimulate competition, but not all of the measures had yet been implemented. The sector needed to be told that customers were impatient for improvements and the European Railway Agency should be supported in its standardisation efforts.

One of the current priorities of the European Commission was digitisation, which was better for consumers and improved the performance of European industry. An argument could also be made to encourage the railways to share data. We pointed out the difficulties in trying to obtain data about the usage of night trains, particularly in France. More information is needed on the ease or difficulty of obtaining such information in different countries.

DGMOVE said that there was no necessity for the rail sector to sell tickets; but we pointed out that professionals selling tickets were getting increasingly frustrated over complications. The fact that different train operators had different booking windows, for example, caused problems. We also pointed out that if travellers who had not used long-distance trains for many years were to be won back, it was important to have well-trained and well-informed agents.

DGMOVE had set the industry a 2022 deadline to present a standard on through ticketing. They did not want to get involved in who sold the tickets, but the "right to sell" was important and no company should be in a position of forbidding someone from selling a ticket.

For nearly 2 years, DGMOVE had been considering how to help long-distance cross-border trains, including night trains. They had been studying technical operability issues and cross-border Public Service Obligations, for example, but these issues applied to day trains as well as to night trains. Should a night train be a niche market and operated purely commercially? Were there hindrances to this aim and should these hindrances be removed?

Safety regulations were also within the remit of DGMOVE. The officials mentioned that safety sometimes played a role in the matter of delays and could unnecessarily raise railway costs – unlike in other places in the transport sector.

If ticketing issues are not solved by the incumbent operators, there is the likelihood that Google will move in – which could worry some players. In the sector.

Back-on-Track asked what both DGMOVE and ourselves could do to persuade the railway industry to achieve a modal shift from air to rail. DGMOVE said that reliable and frequent services between large cities were needed, and often these were within countries, such as between Barcelona and Madrid. This may include new or upgraded tracks. Back-on-Track considers that the need to improve connections on existing lines should not be ignored, however..

Back-on-Track raised the issue of track access charges, which were not conducive to long-distance travel. DGMOVE said this might need legislation but they would discuss it with infrastructure managers. We also asked how EU institutions could establish a structure to oversee such actions. DGMOVE said that they did not have such authority over road transport which was a matter for national governments. On rail access charges small interventions to change secondary legislation could improve things in the short term.

The officials urged us to “make more noise” about the VAT on railway tickets.

We asked if the European Rail Agency needed more capacity and a wider remit, and were advised that it now received more income from its authorisations and that this could enable it to do more.

Officials asked why there was a general rule that regional trains nowadays had a priority over international trains and night trains to access busy railway stations.

A proposal had been made to DGMOVE by an organization in Belgium that 2021 would be “The Year of Railways.”

#### COMMUNITY OF EUROPEAN RAILWAYS

On January 29th four Back-on-Track colleagues met CER's Director Dr Libor Lochman and Ulrich Fikar, CER's Senior Policy Advisor Passenger. They presented the five-point summary of Back-on-Track's response to the Green Deal and summarised points made during the previous day's discussions.

CER said that their annual reports contained data about overall passenger numbers in each European country, but they did not have data on specific routes within or between countries. The national operators would have this and they might regard it as commercially sensitive.

On the Green Deal they had already held a useful meeting with Frans Timmermans and were due to meet him again on February 19th. CER's priority was to address infrastructure capacity, completing the high speed network; control and traffic management to improve capacity; a level playing field including kerosene taxation; and innovation in the rail sector.

Back-on-Track raised the issue of the COP 26 conference in Glasgow from November 9th - 20th and encouraging attendees to travel to it by rail where feasible. CER said that the introduction of new scheduled night trains in 2020 was unlikely, but that trains could be chartered as had happened for the Paris climate change conference; and that UK operators and Eurostar could be pressed to put on additional services at this time. They also said, in this context, that the Vienna - Brussels night train would run until June, after which it would be evaluated - not only from the point of view of usage but also for any operational problems and possible re-timing.

It was important for both sides to promote what was already there and encourage travellers to Glasgow to book well in advance. Back-on-Track would spread this message through its member associations. It was suggested that operators could also co-operate in offering a special through

ticket to Glasgow from cities on the Near Continent. We were also advised that DB's through ticketing to London, in which there were IT problems, should be sorted well before November.

Discussion also took place about issues and proposals in Germany, Italy and Sweden, covering such matters as train slots, rolling stock and government financing.

A further meeting took place later in the day to discuss conventional international daytime trains and the standards for these; based on a discussion paper which had originated among members of the European Passengers' Federation. The paper had been produced partly because, even when the planned high speed network was complete, there would still be journeys, especially in eastern Europe or less heavily populated regions, where attractive conventional trains had a role.

It was made clear that CER could not force its member companies to run particular types of service or adopt particular branding; but that it could lobby the institutions and help its member companies to increase their business. CER's Customer Liaison Group, which met twice a year, also had an important role here. The European Passengers' Federation normally send two representatives to its meetings.

It was suggested by Back-on-Track colleagues that neighbouring regions or countries could work together to develop such services and examples were cited between Italy and Austria and Italy and Slovenia. There were also examples of open access operators such as Regiojet developing new cross-border services between the Czech Republic and Poland; the Kulturzuege between Berlin and Wroclaw; and some Member States, such as the Netherlands, encouraging new cross-border services in order to reduce short-haul flights and free up airport capacity for long-haul traffic. Mention was also made of the KCW report (including work by EPF) on reviving key cross-border links especially when neighbouring regions could benefit. The report "Mind the gap" by former MEP Michael Cramer was also relevant.

#### THE WAY FORWARD

Back-on-Track wishes to thank all the people with whom we had dialogue in Brussels and with whom we hope to work productively in the future.

We shall hold a major conference there from October 15<sup>th</sup> to October 17<sup>th</sup> as part of our ongoing work to improve international night trains as part of a 24/7 network.

Trevor Garrod and Poul Kattler  
07/02/2020