



34 Front Street East
Bedlington
Northumberland
NE22 4AA
Tel: 01670 825500
E: dennis.fancett@btopenworld.com
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Mr Paul Woolston
Chair
North East LEP
Partnership House
Regent Farm Road
Gosforth
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE3 3AF

**Recommendations of North East Independent Economic Review:
Extension of Rail Network to Ashington**

I was delighted to note the recent North East Independent Economic Review commissioned by the Local Enterprise Partnership and chaired by Lord Andrew Adonis has called for the extension of the passenger rail network to Ashington and other communities in South East Northumberland.

This is an objective that SENRUG, the organisation of which I am Chair, has been campaigning for some time, so it is heartening to note the business case is now being recognised by such transport grandees as Lord Adonis, and before this, by ATOC's "Connecting Communities" Report in 2009. Because the line is a working, fully maintained freight line, we have argued that heavy rail passenger services between Newcastle and Ashington could be introduced almost immediately, with very little needed in terms of track upgrades. In 2008, as you may know, we organised a charter train with assistance from Northern Rail and made 3 round trips to Ashington, with a specially invited guest list of 150 stakeholders – MPs, MEPs, Councillors, Council Officers and representatives from

Regeneration Agencies, CBI, Chamber of Commerce, local business leaders, TUC and of course the press on the first train.

As Chair of SENRUG, I previously met [former] Secretaries of State for Transport [Tom Harris and Geoff Hoon] to discuss the scheme and they advised of the background preparatory work that would need to be undertaken by Northumberland County Council, before the scheme could be taken forward by the DfT. That work [Demand Assessment and Market Appraisal Reports] is now largely complete and I was present when the reports were presented by Northumberland County Council to DfT officials last August, followed by a tour of the station sites. DfT officials were impressed at the robustness of the work and advised the Council to progress to a formal Network Rail GRIP 3 costing study as rapidly as possible, noting the date for publication of the specification of the next Northern Rail franchise was [at the time] about a year off. It is my understanding the Council are finalising contract details with Network Rail and will be formally commissioning the GRIP 3 study from them any time now.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that in the light of the work already underway, the review suggests a Metro extension rather than the heavy rail scheme which is being progressed at present, without any explanation as to why a change of approach might be preferable.

Ultimately, SENRUG would welcome the rail extension to Ashington however it is achieved. We have not linked our campaign to a particular technology. But we make the following observations on the Metro extension option:

1. A Metro extension is likely to be more expensive as it would require electrification of the line and new Metro rolling stock. Whereas a heavy rail extension could be introduced very quickly without electrification or significant line upgrades. Existing Northern Rail rolling stock could be used for Ashington as new stock is cascaded down into the current Northern Rail routes.
2. A Metro extension is unlikely to achieve the passenger benefits for Ashington as overall journey times to Newcastle would be too long (due to the 10 Metro stops between Northumberland Park and Central Station). If passenger benefits for Ashington – the largest community that can be served without laying new tracks – can not be delivered, it is likely the business case for the scheme as a whole will flounder. Whereas the heavy rail system can achieve an Ashington to Newcastle journey times in 25 minutes and the current service proposal of 1 train every 30 minutes in morning and evening peaks and one train every hour during the day, evenings and weekends will deliver real regeneration benefits along the transport corridor.
3. Metro service does not offer the same possibilities for through ticketing and integrated timetables to other National Rail destinations that can be reached from Newcastle, making longer journeys eg business connections to London and Birmingham more difficult (though we are pleased to note the Report's call for Smart Ticketing which would ease the problem for within the North East journeys).

4. But perhaps most importantly, having spent 4 years persuading the County Council to include the scheme in its Local Transport Plan, then commission and review the Demand Assessment and Market Appraisal studies as required by the DfT, and commence negotiations with Network Rail re the GRIP 3 study, we are most concerned that to start again with a different methodology would mean re-doing all this work again and would set us back years. This scheme really does need to be progressed urgently. As you are aware, periodically central government allocates fresh money for capital infrastructure projects and we need to be at the point where capital costs are finalised and the project is “shovel ready” and able to attract central government funding, breaking the current pattern of new rail passenger services being exclusively in London and The South East, rather than starting again with a different solution.

Over the last 5 years of our campaign, we have seen local authority responsibilities change, council officers leading on the scheme move on and be replaced, regional development agencies disbanded and new ones established in their place and of course changes in elected political representatives. It is our belief that SENRUG is the only organisation that has provided any consistency in the development of the plans to re-open the line, though we ourselves have been frustrated at the painstakingly slow progress. To this end, we have recommended to Northumberland County Council they establish a Stakeholder Group of interested parties to drive the scheme forward, and it is my understanding they intend to do this. If in fact leadership of the scheme and indeed regional transport issues in general is to be taken over by the LEP, I trust your organisation will similarly set up a Stakeholder Group along the same lines as I have suggested to the County Council.

I hope you will take these points on board and ensure the LEP engages in a constructive dialogue with SENRUG as it considers how to carry forward the excellent work of the Independent Review.

Dennis Fancett

Chair, SENRUG: The South East Northumberland Rail User Group

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| Cc | Cllr Jeff Reed | Northumberland County Council |
| | Cllr Grant Davey | Northumberland County Council |
| | Mr Ian Lavery MP | (Wansbeck) |
| | Mr Ronnie Campbell MP | (Blyth Valley) |

Re-open the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line: View this short BBC video of our campaign:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/politics_show/regions/north_east_and_cumbria/7444010.stm