



Response to

Network Rail

East Coast Main Line Route Study – Rail Investment Choices

Submitted by email to ECMLRouteStudy@networkrail.co.uk on 25th February 2018

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1. Introduction

1.1 This is SENUG's response to the above referenced Route Study, which is currently available on Network Rail's website at:

<https://www.networkrail.co.uk/running-the-railway/long-term-planning/>.

Responses are required by Friday 16th March 2018.

1.2 This response is only concerned with the Borders section of the Route Study (Newcastle to Berwick-Upon-Tweed) and related capacity issues directly affecting provision of rail services to communities in this corridor.

1.3 SENUG is The South East Northumberland Rail User Group, an unincorporated voluntary organisation that promotes rail travel and campaigns for better rail services in, within, to, from and through South East Northumberland, representing the interests of both existing and potential rail travellers in the area. By 'potential', SENUG means those who would use rail services if only the trains went where they want to go, at the time they want to go, at a price they can afford, and in a clean, safe, secure, accessible and easy to understand manner. SENUG has 222 personal members and 13 corporate or business members including 7 Town or Parish Councils (as at 31st Jan 2018).

2. High Level Factors

In the Summary of Choices Section (page 4) The Study mentions two major external factors that will define the investment choices for the ECML from now until 2040:

2.1 Significant Increase in Demand for Commuting into Major Cities.

SENUG acknowledges this is indeed the greatest short-term need, which will drive investment choices.

A number of communities in Northumberland either have very poor commuter service to Newcastle, or none at all. There is now recognition amongst local stakeholders and train operators that these issues must be addressed, to drive the re-invigoration of the local economy. The route study must ensure there is capacity to meet these stakeholder aspirations, which are set out in Sections 3.1 – 3.3 in the short term, and not permit all the available investment finance to be directed into the commuter belts of the larger cities such as London or Leeds.

SENUG also wishes to point out the strong community of interest between Northumberland and Scottish Borders and Edinburgh. There is significant cross-border commuting, leisure and business flows from Northumberland to Edinburgh and from Scottish Borders to Newcastle. Again, these demands have in the main been neglected by current rail service provision which tends to assume passengers only ever want to travel south towards London. There are now plans to address this imbalance (see Section 3.3), and the Route Study must ensure there will be capacity available to do so.

2.2 Introduction of HS2

The introduction of a High-Speed route from Leeds to London will have little impact on the Newcastle – Berwick corridor as it will not remove London and CrossCountry services from this section of the route.

However, it may well lead to a demand to remove stops at some of the mid-sized regional commercial centres such as Morpeth and Berwick, to give such trains a “high speed” feel throughout, even when travelling on heritage tracks. It is therefore important that investment is made to support the growth of local services that would connect with these high-speed services at larger regional locations such as Newcastle. The Study proposition that smaller stations requiring an enhanced level of service could be served by more stops on inter-city type trains seems contrary to the logical consequence of the introduction of HS2. Investment must be made to support capacity for additional local services within the Newcastle to Berwick corridor.

3. Increases in Demand (Newcastle to Berwick)

3.1 Newcastle to Ashington

The Study recognises the intention to re-introduce passenger services between Newcastle and Ashington via the Ashington Blyth & Tyne freight route, and notes there is capacity available to do this, which is most welcome. Specifically, the proposal will require 2 train paths each way in peak hours, and 1 train path each way

in off peak hours, between Newcastle and Benton Junction.

There may well be an aspiration for these services to call at Manors. Noting that only 2 of the 3 running lines through Manors station have a platform, the Study does not mention whether this will be possible at present. An intervention at Manors to support this aspiration alone is unlikely to be cost justified, but when coupled with other aspirations and capacity opportunities, the recommended intervention at Section 5.1 may well be required and justified.

3.2 Cramlington

Cramlington only has an hourly local service which is no longer sufficient for its needs. The service needs to be doubled to half-hourly. SENRUG's proposal to accommodate this is for the TPE service, which is being extended from Newcastle to Edinburgh from December 2019, to additionally call at Cramlington. If, however TPE decline to do this, there will be a requirement for a 2nd Northern train path per hour between Newcastle and Morpeth.

3.3 Morpeth to Berwick Local Services

Pegswood, Widdrington, Acklington and Chathill have just one commuter service into Newcastle in the morning and one return in the evening. This is woefully inadequate. Additionally, communities at Belford and Beal are not served by rail at all, their former stations having been closed

SENRUG's proposal therefore is that the current Newcastle – Morpeth local service should be extended to Berwick, providing an hourly service to these stations throughout the day, with Belford and Beal eventually re-opened.

This will require an additional train path each way per hour between Morpeth and Berwick. This aspiration is supported by Northumberland County Council and Northern.

Although Northern's new rolling stock (both electric and non-electric) will be capable at running at line speed for most of the route, the dwell time at stations means the trains used for this service will need to be looped at certain places by non-stop or limited stop trains.

3.4 Long Distance Services

The Study notes the aspiration, from a variety of operators, to run yet more non-stop services between Edinburgh and Berwick. However, SENRUG believes that by December 2021 (when the First open access service will start), the level of such services will be quite high, and priority for remaining capacity must be given to the local service requirements set out in 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.

3.5 Freight

Freight on the line is expected to increase. In particular, if planning permission is granted for the new Highthorn Open Cast mine (decision expected March 2018) it is understood the operator will want to load coal at Butterwell and send it south down the ECML, creating additional freight movements.

3.6 Traction

The cancellation of electrification projects elsewhere in the north is likely to create a shortage of non-electric rolling stock. This in turn may create a knock-on requirement for the current diesel units operating between MetroCentre and Morpeth / Chathill, to be re-deployed elsewhere and replaced by electric units.

3.7 Implications of Increases In Demand

Taken together, SENRUG doubts Network Rail's assertion that there is sufficient capacity on the line to cope with future demand, and believes that some interventions will in fact be necessary.

In particular, SENRUG does not accept (beyond an immediate quick fix) that additional commuting requirements from smaller stations can be served by long-distance trains making additional stops at such stations, because such smaller stations would not necessarily get an hourly service, would not get connectivity with each other (because of skip-stop patterns) and it would only cover a few of the smaller stations: Cramlington and Widdrington might be lucky; Pegswood, Acklington & Chathill are unlikely to be. Neither would such an approach permit the re-opening of stations such as Belford or Beal, which the local service could otherwise serve.

4. Unrecognised Opportunities For Creating More Capacity

There are major opportunities for cost-effectively creating additional capacity on the ECML which the Study does not recognise, and which SENRUG believes will be required.

The Ashington Blyth & Tyne freight route already acts as a freight and diversionary route for the ECML between Benton and Morpeth North junctions. With the growth in traffic (both passenger and freight), this route could be utilised to take some freight and passenger services off the ECML, but some upgrades and modernisations will be required to allow the full potential of the route to be exploited.

An even longer relief and diversionary route, between Benton and Butterwell junctions is possible by utilising the privately owned (Harworth Estates) line from Ashington to Butterwell Junction. This would need a new north to east facing junction at Butterwell, and reconnection of the southern section of the line to the Network Rail route at Ashington. This possibility is recognised in the Nexus "Metro & Local Rail Futures" publication.

These 2 possibilities for creating additional capacity on the ECML are demonstrated in Fig 1 below.

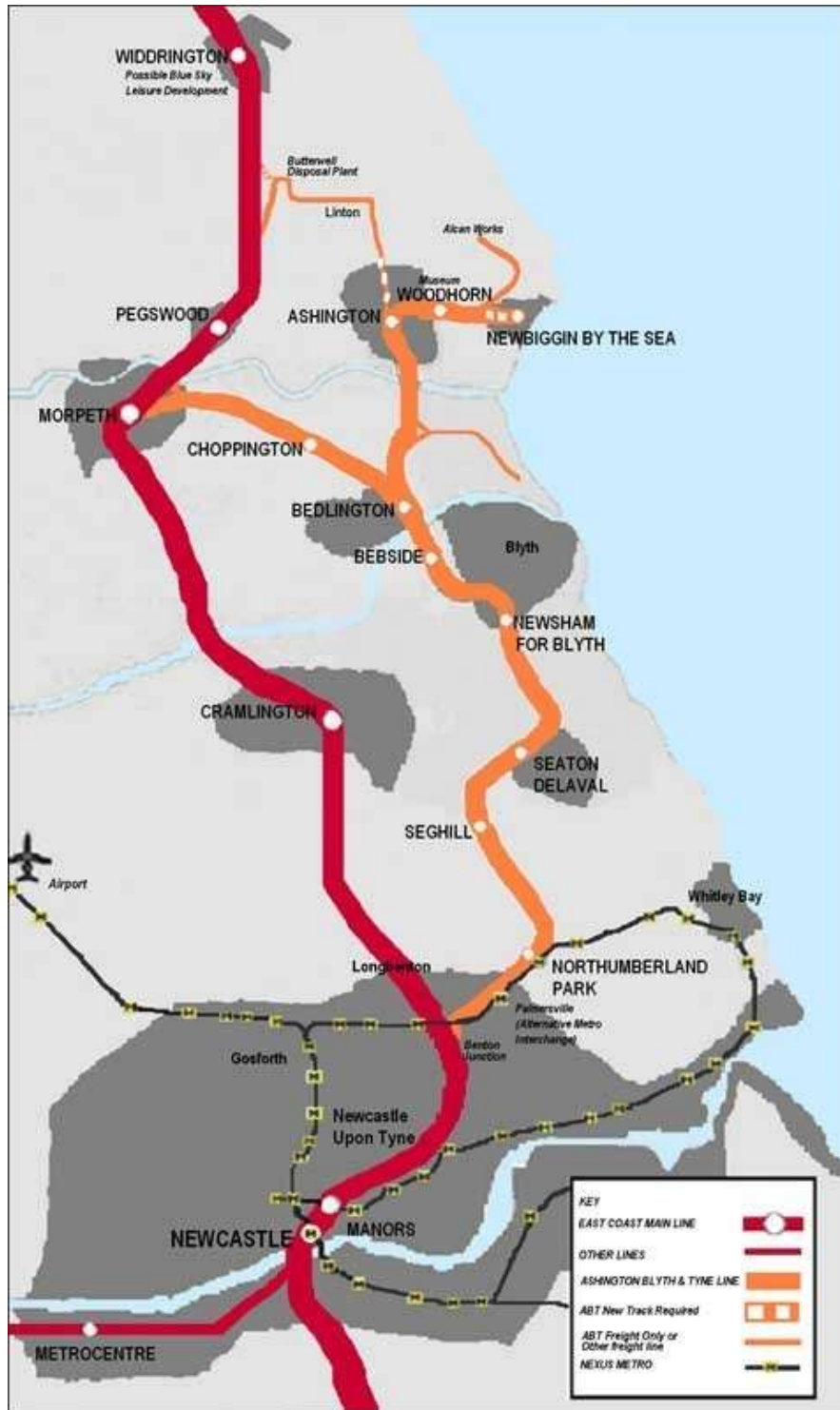


Fig 1: ECML (shown in red) and potential additional capacity offered by Ashington Blyth & Tyne line and Ashington to Butterwell line (both shown in orange). Map copyright of SENRUG.

5. Recommended Interventions

5.1 Newcastle – Benton Junction and Manors Station

Consideration should be given to re-instating the 4th running line between Newcastle and Benton Junction to enable full advantage to be taken of the ability of the Ashington Blyth and Tyne line and Ashington – Butterwell Junction lines, to take traffic off the ECML between Benton Junction and Morpeth North Junction, or Butterwell Junction (see 4.1 and 4.2 and fig 1)

At the same time, a second island platform should be created at Manors so that local trains on any of the 4 running lines can serve the station. Whilst this is being done, level access at the station should be provided by ramps from the footbridge level to the platforms, and by a walkway from the footbridge level to the adjacent Manors multi-storey car park (owned by Newcastle City Council) which has lift access to street level and a further series of pedestrian bridges into the town centre.

The enhanced train service at Manors and direct access from the multi-storey car park with its direct access from the A167(M) central motorway, could also provide an overflow park and rail service for Newcastle station itself where there is currently insufficient station parking and limited capacity to extend.

5.2 Northumberland Park to Newsham

The Ashington Blyth and Tyne line is single track between Benton Junction and Newsham. Whilst the section between Benton Junction and Northumberland Park would be difficult to double (due to the adjacent Metro line), there is ample space for the Northumberland Park to Newsham section to be doubled, and this should be done to gain maximum advantage of the additional capacity to the ECML that the Ashington Blyth and Tyne route offers.

5.3 Ashington to Butterwell

This 4-mile line is in private ownership but it has considerable ability to provide relief capacity to the ECML between Benton Junction and Butterwell Junction, when linked to the Ashington Blyth & Tyne line, and subject to the creation of a north to east facing junction at Butterwell Junction. Harworth Estates may be willing to relinquish ownership of the line when open-casting operations cease in a year or so's time. SENRUG believes this presents a major opportunity for Network Rail to solve a significant range of capacity issues that will develop on the ECML. Network Rail should therefore take action now to acquire the line, noting that a heritage group is already interested. The line could then be double tracked and would, in conjunction with interventions 5.1 and 5.2, provide Network Rail with a four-track railway between Newcastle and Butterwell Junction, comprising 4 lines from Newcastle to Benton Junction, 2 lines on the ECML from Benton Junction to Butterwell Junction, and 2 lines on the AB&T from Benton Junction to Butterwell Junction – the last being with the exception of a small section between Benton Junction and Northumberland

Park, where doubling the existing single-tracked Ashington Blyth & Tyne line would be difficult due to the adjacent Metro.

5.4 Passing Loops

The extension of the Newcastle – Morpeth local service to Berwick, hourly throughout the day, may require re-instatement of or provision of one or two new passing loops, in addition to what already exists. Any new loops required should be electrified, to permit the Newcastle – Berwick service to be operated by electric trains. (The existing passing loops are already electrified).

5.5 Morpeth Reversing Siding

To facilitate electric trains on the Morpeth to Newcastle route, the reversing siding at Morpeth should be electrified.

5.6 Newcastle to MetroCentre

To facilitate through running of electric trains from Chathill / Morpeth to MetroCentre or from Berwick to MetroCentre, the route between Newcastle to MetroCentre should be electrified.

5.7 Power Capacity

Interventions may be necessary to ensure the power supply to this section of the ECML is sufficient to carry the additional electric services planned for the route, along with conversion of the current local service from diesel to electric, and its extension from Morpeth to Berwick.

6. Conclusion

SENUG believes that the Route Study as it stands does not take recognition of the aspiration to provide an hourly local service between Morpeth and Berwick and anticipates some modest interventions will be necessary to support this and other growth requirements.

Additionally, SENUG believes the Route Study fails to grasp the opportunity of doubling capacity between Newcastle and Butterwell Junction through utilising the Ashington Blyth and Tyne and Ashington – Butterwell Junction routes, with complimentary interventions on both the routes themselves, and the section of the ECML between Newcastle and Benton junction.

End