

Cross Country: Morpeth Service Under Threat?



Cross Country at Morpeth. Will the DfT axe them? Photo by John Brieley

The DfT is currently consulting on the next Cross Country franchise. One of its proposals is that Cross Country services should no longer stop at smaller stations, such as Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick, to speed up journey times and reduce disruption to passengers on longer journeys caused by frequent stops. SENRUG has objected to this proposal and its formal response can be viewed at:

<http://www.senrug.co.uk/DocumentsIssued.php>.

SENRUG agrees that the biggest problem with Cross Country is crowding. However, at Morpeth, whilst there is an hourly local service south to Newcastle, there is no local service north (apart from the single morning and evening peak service to Chathill). But the market between Morpeth and Edinburgh is strong, with Cross Country providing 5 of the 11 services per day, almost 50%.

At Alnmouth and Berwick, Cross Country accounts for 50% of the total service. Berwick has no local services and Alnmouth has just one morning and evening peak local service to Newcastle.

Thus, if Cross Country calls at Northumberland stations were withdrawn, DfT would need to arrange for another operator to backfill. If this is achieved through more stops on other existing

services such as LNER, the problem DfT is trying to solve will simply be transferred to the other operator. Franchise renewals will become no more than an opportunity to push a problem from one franchisee to another, without addressing the underlying issue.

Alternatively, DfT could backfill with an entirely new service. But at present no operator has any spare rolling stock, and it would have to be procured. SENRUG believes it would be more sensible to feed the required rolling stock investment into Cross Country and solve the crowding problem by introducing longer trains. As the Hitachi fleet is rolled out on LNER and Great Western, the HST sets surrendered by these operators could be acquired by Cross Country so that all their services are either a double Voyager unit (8 coaches) or an HST (9 coaches).

Neither does it follow that eliminating calls at smaller stations would improve journey times between Newcastle and Edinburgh. Cross Country trains are constrained by other operators on the line. The current Cross Country stops at Morpeth were introduced without worsening Newcastle to Edinburgh journey times.

Furthermore, if Cross Country calls at smaller stations are replaced by a new service from a different operator, this would require more train paths. It is by no means clear such paths are available. Even if they are, more trains on the line and greater platform congestion at Newcastle and Edinburgh, could very well slow the current Cross Country services down, not speed them up as hoped. ■ *Dennis Fancett.*

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Ashington, Blyth and Tyne: What's Next?



Our charter train at Bedlington. Photo Dave Shaw

Back in September 2016 Northumberland County Council received the GRIP 2 Report on the Re-opening of the Ashington Blyth and Tyne line from Network Rail, and campaigners are entitled to wonder what's been happening since then.

Just to re-iterate, GRIP is the 8-stage Network Rail process for rail enhancements which the scheme sponsor must progress through sequentially. Only at Stage 4 does Network Rail give the final price, allowing the Council to sign on the dotted line.

In October 2016 the Council announced they were proceeding with the next stage - GRIP 3. However, this did not mean they had signed the contract with Network Rail, only that staff were authorised to negotiate terms and the price with them.

The delay was frustrating, yet most SENRUG members are Northumberland Council Tax payers, and given Network Rail's propensity to overprice, SENRUG acknowledges the Council has a duty to challenge Network Rail's cost and achieve value for money.

In May 2017, the Conservatives took control of Northumberland Council from Labour. It is reasonable that a new administration will take a few weeks to evaluate its priorities and not a forgone conclusion that projects being progressed by the previous administration will survive. However, SENRUG was delighted when, a month later, the new authority confirmed its commitment to the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Re-opening, indeed saying it was their number one priority.

This means SENRUG's campaign to re-introduce passenger services on this fully operational freight line has been supported and progressed in turn by a

Lib-Dem, Labour and now Tory administration. SENRUG can truly say that it has won genuine cross-party support

Nevertheless, the new authority expressed alarm at both the costs being quoted for the GRIP 3 Study itself, and for the ultimate full re-opening project, and wanted to see how both could be reduced, even if that meant implementing a simpler scheme, possibly without all the stations initially.

Accordingly, the Council asked Network Rail to undertake a further report, prior to the full GRIP 3. This additional report, dubbed a GRIP 2B, was commissioned around November 2017 and completed in May 2018. SENRUG understands the results are disappointing, not offering the level of savings anticipated.

So, what now? The Council has assured SENRUG it remains committed to finding a way of proceeding. This includes continuing with the GRIP process and further challenging Network Rail's costs, whilst simultaneously investigating alternative methods which are emerging both for progressing and funding rail development schemes.

Meanwhile, the scheme was specifically mentioned in the government's November 2017 paper "A Strategic Vision For Rail" and subsequently featured in both *Modern Railways* and *Rail Magazines*. A comment on the Chief Economist to the Bank of England's blog saying his hunch was the economic benefits of the Ashington re-opening would be "whopper" prompted a slot on the Channel 4 News. All three items featured myself as SENRUG Chair. The challenge remains to turn that hunch into reality, and SENRUG is hopeful the Council will be making a positive announcement soon. ■ *Dennis Fancett.*

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The New Northern Timetable: Jam Tomorrow?



Northern DMU stopping at Cramlington. Photo John Brieley

SENUG is not shy at blaming train operators when it believes them to be at fault. But in the case of the May 2018 timetable fiasco, Northern has SENUG's sympathy.

That might be an extraordinary thing to say, but SENUG saw the DRAFT timetable Northern hoped to implement, and subject to a few minor tweaks that were fed back for further attention, SENUG considered it to be a significant and innovative improvement on what we had before.

So, what went wrong? In brief, Network Rail failed to deliver an electrification project over on the West Coast on time, and this meant that the extra diesel units due to be handed down to the North East had to remain where they were.

With less trains than they expected and franchise commitments to fulfil elsewhere, it was once again Northumberland that had to suffer. Direct off peak through services from Morpeth to MetroCentre were lost, with passengers now obliged to change at Newcastle. Morpeth to west of Hexham and Carlisle passengers now find a full hour added to their journey, as the re-timed trains from Morpeth arrive at Newcastle a minute after the Carlisle services depart. Clock-face departures are also lost, a depressing reversal of one of SENUG's earlier campaign successes. But the evening service has been introduced as promised, and we are grateful to Northern for responding to SENUG feedback and plugging a proposed gap in northbound trains from Newcastle at 19:20 that appeared in the earlier draft, maintaining an hourly service throughout both daytime and evening.

The late notification of the delayed electrification project meant that Northern had insufficient time

to implement its hastily revamped timetable. Drivers trained to operate electric units had to re-qualify for diesel and vice versa. This, and similar operational difficulties caused the massive number of cancellations in the first few weeks of the new timetable. By now, most of the operational teething problems have been overcome and Northern has announced a compensation plan for season ticket holders, including those on the Chathill - Morpeth - Newcastle route.

But what of the original draft timetable? Will that be re-instated once the electrification project is finally complete and the North East finally gets the number of train units expected? Or will Northern, having been sharply stung by the May 2018 fiasco, be wary of doing anything it doesn't strictly need to do? We'll have to wait and see. The issue of our off-peak MetroCentre services is our major concern and we are hopeful these will be re-instated by May 2019 at the latest. SENUG are also asking for an earlier morning train from Morpeth to Newcastle, mainly for the benefit of Cramlington passengers whose current first train is not until 08:05 and is heavily congested. Let's hope Northern can deliver that too. ■ *Dennis Fancett*

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You can join us or renew your membership online using your debit card, credit card or PayPal. Just go to www.senrug.co.uk/Join-Us.php or download a Membership Form using the same internet address

What would you like to see in the next SENUG Newsletter? Let us know or, even better, start researching and writing an article for us.

China: Xi'an to ZhangZi and HanCheng by Train

By Anna Fancett

Two years ago, I moved to the city of Xi'an. As well as being the ancient capital of China, Xi'an is famous for transport; it was historically the end (or start) of the great silk road. My journeys involved, not camels and donkeys laden with silk, spices and precious stones, but two very different trains on two very different trips.

The first journey was part of a trip to a small town in ZhangZi, Shanxi province. I went to volunteer with disadvantaged children. Getting to Xi'an's northern station involved two subway trains – first from my local stop and then from a subway-hub. With thousands of passengers and trains every two minutes, I was anxious about meeting my team at Xi'an North, so I was pleased to find them in the very same coach of the metro I joined at the subway-hub. North station was clear, modern, and easy to navigate, reminding me of both a sci-fi film and an airport.



Xi'an to ZhangZi Train Catering Offer. Photo Anna Fancett

On the bullet train, we sat in clean, neat rows. Each coach had an illuminated sign with its coach number, a word in Chinese, and the train speed, which stayed at 303km/h for most of the journey. There was no trolley service but a café on board from which my friends bought a meal. It looked like something you might be served in school – a plastic tray with compartments with rice, two types of vegetables, and chicken. We returned two days later the same way. A comfortable and efficient travel experience.

My second train journey was very different. This time I was going away for the weekend to the nearby historical city of HanCheng. I took an old-fashioned slow train from the old station. I

had used this station before and had memories of an overcrowded, over-heated nightmare, but the whole area has been renovated since then. Instead of queuing outside in the heat to enter the station, it took us less than five minutes to show our passports at ID booths and pass through security checks. The station was clearly older than the northern one but had plenty of seats and little shops inside.



Old Xi'an Stn from the City Walls. Photo Dennis Fancett

The train itself was a bit shabby. When the three of us arrived at our chairs (in a block of eight around a little table), there were seven young men sitting there. They piled onto each other's laps to make room for us, but the conductor soon came by and moved them to other seats. However, seeing that there were spare seats, we moved onto a four, allowing the students to sit together, whilst we talked to a HanCheng native about the best things to see in her town.

The train was slow with no advertised speed, and we could have overtaken it by foot at times. There were no catering facilities, but salesmen came through the carriages shouting out and illustrating their wares. The most memorable was a gentleman selling a device for slicing vegetables into long swirly shapes. He demonstrated it by cutting a cucumber like this and then wearing it on his face whilst he proclaimed his product.

The journey took two hours, the same as it would have taken to drive. We enjoyed a wonderful weekend of visiting temples, drinking tea, and relaxing in hot springs. ■