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“DON’T TRASH RAIL INDUSTRY PERMANENTLY” SENRUG WARNS GOVERNMENT

SENRUG - The group that campaigns for better rail services in South East Northumberland - is calling on the government and rail companies to do more to facilitate safe rail travel during the COVID-19 crisis, and to be careful that the ongoing negative messaging of public transport does not do even more long-term damage to the industry than was achieved by Doctor Beeching.

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID 19 crisis, rail was the safest and most environmentally friendly way to travel, but SENRUG is worried that the constant reminder to stay away from rail will stick, and wants to see more innovation and flexibility to allow the industry to re-open safely, before it is too late.

“We understand the priority has to be allowing key workers and increasingly other commuters to travel to work in a safe socially distanced manner”, said SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett.

“However, on the Cramlington and Morpeth line for instance, our normal hourly 2-coach service is currently halved to just one train every 2 hours during the day. There is no reason why that train could not be coupled up with the cancelled train, currently left behind in the depot, to form a 4-coach unit. That could take twice the number of passengers than is currently possible with the social distancing measures in place.”

“Going even further, there should be a national search for all available “off-lease” units, particularly those currently in direct DfT ownership, and they should be hired under emergency powers to strengthen train length and capacity”

“And much as the Pacers, recently sent to the scrapyards, were disliked, they are better than nothing. Any unit where dismantling work has not already started should be returned

to active service immediately. If we can bring Doctors and Nurses out of retirement to beat the virus, we should be able to do the same with trains.”

“In short, if a 2-coach train can only take 20% of its previous capacity due to social distancing, strengthening it to 4 coaches or even 6 gets the safe number of passengers up to 40% or 60%. Here on the East Coast Main Line our platforms are long enough. So why are some units left idle in depots whilst passengers are being told that car is the only safe way to travel? Cycling to work won’t be practical for those with a 40 or 50-mile commute.”

“SENUG also suggests the ‘essential travel only’ message could be varied a little to suit local circumstances. On some lines there were very few passengers off-peak. In such cases the message could be changed to permit non essential travel in off-peak hours”.

Turning to long-distance trains, Dennis added “SENUG supports the recent introduction of compulsory seat reservation by some operators as a practical way of managing passenger numbers in the short term. But we look to operators to make clear this is a temporary arrangement and to give an end date, rather than letting it become a serious permanent removal rail travel’s flexibility. SENUG also want greater clarity as to what happens if a train is cancelled or if a connection is missed.”

SENUG also suggests that the trains owned by the open access operators that have been obliged to suspend operations during the crisis, and are also sitting idle in depots, could be deployed. The operators could either be funded to re-commence service, or their units hired by the franchised operator such as government owned LNER, to run more trains “This would be a significant way of increasing passenger capacity between London and York” added Dennis.

“Finally, with the holiday season now upon us, the government seems very keen to find ways of creating an air bridge between the UK and places such as Portugal. But what about supporting the UK’s own tourism industry? Why not a rail bridge between Northumberland and Cornwall, or from London to Scotland, to allow those who wish to go on holiday by public transport to do so?”

“Airlines are champing at the bit to find ways of getting passengers back. Car showrooms have re-opened, but stations remain no-go areas for leisure travellers. We need to see the same enthusiasm and innovation from the rail industry for safely getting passengers back and allowing us to spend our money, before passengers desert trains for good.”

Ends (719 words)

Notes for Editors

SENUG – The South East Northumberland Rail User Group - is a voluntary pro rail campaign group: contact Dennis Fancett, Chair, tel 01670 825500 or 07810 353651, e: chair@senrug.co.uk. www.senrug.co.uk

The group is particularly known for its 15-year campaign to re-open the Ashington Blyth & Tyne freight line for passenger services, its campaign for a local train service between Morpeth and Berwick, and its campaign to improve service frequency at Cramlington (see <https://www.senrug.co.uk/our-campaigns>). The group has achieved an astonishing increase in long distance train services at Morpeth, from 3 each way per day when it was first formed, to 28 each way per day now (prior to emergency COVID-19 timetables).