



Mr Chris Heaton-Harris MP  
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The Department For Transport  
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By email to [chris.heatonharris@dft.gov.uk](mailto:chris.heatonharris@dft.gov.uk)

**For the attention of Chris Heaton-Harris MP, Rail Minister**

Dear Minister of State

### **East Coast Main Line Timetable Recast**

I'd like to thank both you and your department for your guiding hand in leading the rail industry to defer implementation of the proposed May 2022 train timetables for the East Coast Main Line for at least a further year.

Whilst I appreciate the near universal negative reaction to the proposals from stakeholder groups across the length of the line was only one of the reasons given for the deferral, I'm sure you are aware it is an important one. We believe the proposals completely mis-prioritised the needs of the north, with several different aspects of the plan placing shorter journey times to and from London over and above direct connectivity between key Northern cities and regional centres. We believe that with high quality on-board wifi, as is now near-standard across the industry, extra time on the train is no longer time lost to business, whereas the need to change trains for journeys that can today be made by direct service, is most definitely time lost to business, involving a minimum of 10 minutes wait at most stations (more often typically half an hour) plus time to power down and pack away, then boot-up again once safely on the next train.

Nevertheless, we at SENRUG are concerned that the industry will simply come back with essentially the same proposals, or at best with only minor and unsubstantial modifications in a year's time, and we ask you to direct the industry to genuinely take into account the response from SENRUG and other similar groups. A copy of our response is on our website

at <https://www.senrug.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ECML-Draft-May-2022-Timetable-Final-Response.pdf> and in particular we are requesting:

1. LNER, in addition to its peak hour services, should retain at least 2 trains each way per day calling at Morpeth. The argument that these calls are no longer needed because an open access operator is commencing service at Morpeth is disingenuous because an open access operator's service can be withdrawn or amended at any time; there is no requirement on government to step in should it fail, it does not offer first class as is appreciated by the Morpeth business community, and it does not serve key locations such as Peterborough, again an important business (and leisure) destination.
2. TransPennine Express services should be re-instated from Newcastle to Edinburgh, hourly in each direction as per the December 2019 franchise commitment, though we ask for a service pattern that includes other principal Northumberland destinations and directly links these to Leeds and Manchester.
3. Northern's services should continue to connect across Newcastle throughout the day, retaining the key link between South East Northumberland and MetroCentre for access to jobs, and keeping the key Northumberland market towns of Morpeth and Hexham connected by direct train.

We particularly draw your attention to Section 4 of our consultation response referenced above. We believe our plan for the allocation of train paths between Newcastle and Edinburgh is both reasonable and technically achievable, acknowledging the aspiration for some London – Edinburgh services to be speeded up (we concede that perhaps one train per hour should travel non-stop on this section) but we do not accept this needs to be done in such a way as to block improvements to, and in some cases worsen, the rail service experienced at the intermediate towns and communities within Northumberland.

On this last point, we additionally wish to thank you and the sponsoring authorities for the introduction of the new service between Newcastle and Edinburgh from this December, to be provided by TransPennine Express, and which we note with appreciation is being introduced at a commendably fast timescale compared to the industry's normal 2 to 3-year lead-time for new service developments and timetable improvements of this nature.

Welcome however as the new service is, representing a very useful stepping stone or compromise between where we are today (with effectively no local service between Morpeth and Berwick), and where we wish to be, we would nevertheless stress it should not be regarded as the final solution, and wish to again state our aspiration which is as follows:

1. An hourly each way semi-fast service between Newcastle and Edinburgh, calling at all of Northumberland's principal towns, and connecting onwards south of Newcastle to Leeds and Manchester. This we believe should be provided by TransPennine Express, and is essentially the service they were contracted to and geared up to provide from December 2019 under their franchise agreement with your department, though we request stops at the other key Northumberland towns, not just Morpeth.

2. An hourly each way electric stopping service between Newcastle and Berwick, calling at every single station on the route, including Pegswood, Acklington and Chathill which are still in the ridiculous situation of having just one train service from Newcastle per day (2 for Chathill). This service should also have capacity to serve further stations that might be opened or re-opened as commercial cases are established such as Belford. Additionally, it could easily be extended south of Newcastle to serve a new station at Team Valley (Low Fell) where there is an increasing demand to re-instate a station. We understand the Newcastle – Berwick service is currently the subject of a “Restoring Your Railway” application from Northumberland County Council which your department is evaluating. Prior to the submission of this application, SENRUG contributed 2% towards the cost of a Feasibility Study undertaken by Systra which concluded the service was both technically achievable notwithstanding other services operating on the line, and commercially viable.

For clarification, we envisage this new hourly electric local service between Newcastle and Berwick would operate alongside the existing non-electric service from Carlisle to Morpeth, giving Cramlington, Northumberland’s largest town with a rail station, and population of around 40,000, at least 2 trains per hour each way. The Carlisle – Morpeth service could also be usefully extending via the existing freight track to Bedlington, connecting with the new Northumberland Line which is planned to open to passengers in early ~~2022~~ (*correction*: 2024).

These initiatives taken together will give South East Northumberland the rail service it deserves and assist the government in achieving its “Levelling Up” agenda. I do trust you will direct the rail industry to give genuine positive consideration to these requests, and myself and colleagues at SENRUG are available to work with your department, GBR, other stakeholders and the train companies themselves in bringing these proposals to reality.

Thank you for your time in considering this letter.

Kindest Regards

*Dennis Fancett*

Dennis Fancett

Chair, SENRUG. The South East Northumberland Rail User Group  
[www.senrug.co.uk](http://www.senrug.co.uk)

**Winner, Railfuture National Rail Campaigner of the Year Award, 2021**

cc: Mr Ian Lavery MP, Wansbeck  
Mr Ian Levy MP, Blyth Valley  
Ms Ann-Marie Trevelyan MP, Berwick-Upon-Tweed  
Cllr Glen Sanderson, Leader Northumberland County Council  
Mr David Horne, Managing Director, LNER  
Mr Tom Joyner, Managing Director, CrossCountry Trains  
Mr Matthew Golton, Managing Director, TransPennine Express  
Mr Nick Donovan, Managing Director, Northern Trains Ltd