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SENUG DISMAY AS CRAMLINGTON, WIDDRINGTON, CHOPPED FROM NEW RAIL SERVICE

SENUG - The group that campaigns for better rail services in South East and East Northumberland, has reacted with dismay to the news that Cramlington and Widdrington stations will no longer be served by a new train service that is being launched from next weekend.

Starting 12th December, train company TransPennine Express is commencing a new service between Newcastle and Edinburgh calling at Morpeth, Alnmouth, Berwick and Dunbar. It will also serve Reston in the Scottish Borders once this station opens early in 2022.

The 5 trains each way per day (4 on Sunday) will provide a much needed connectivity between Northumberland's key market towns, and is broadly welcomed by SENUG. But the group were originally advised that the trains would also serve Cramlington and Widdrington too, and have now found out that this will not be the case.

The exception is that Cramlington will get an earlier commuter service to Newcastle, at 07:11, relieving congestion on the current first train at 08:09, provided by Northern, which prior to the COVID lockdown normally had all available seats taken even before it reached Cramlington. So the extra capacity and the ability for Cramlington residents to reach Newcastle an hour earlier is welcomed, and something SENUG has been demanding for several years.

SENUG Chair Dennis Fancett said "we accept the assurances we've been given from TPE that they very much want to serve these extra stations on all 5 trains and are continuing to work with Network Rail with a view to possibly introducing them at a later timetable change. We also want their services to continue south from Newcastle, rather than the train from Edinburgh terminating on one platform whilst a separate TPE train leaves Newcastle from a different platform for Leeds and Manchester."

Gerry Sothcott, Chair of Cramlington's Development Trust said "it is indeed a bitter blow to discover that Cramlington, Northumberland's largest town with a rail station, a population of some 30,000 and home to the only indoor shopping centre in the county, will miss out. We recognise the efforts of SENRUG over the years who have campaigned tirelessly to improve the service here and will continue to support them as they put pressure on the rail industry to improve the situation for this town".

Andrew Carmichael, Deputy Chair of SENRUG, who lives at Linton and would use Widdrington station once the new service is provided commented: "The residents of this community have been promised a new rail service and were looking forward to it, but now find it has been cancelled. That is not acceptable. Widdrington, and indeed Northumberland's other smaller communities, deserve better than just one train in the morning to Newcastle, and one back in the evening."

Dennis Fancett added "SENRUG is actually campaigning for 2 separate new services. First we want an hourly service each way calling at the strategic Northumberland towns, similar to what TPE is now providing, but continuing onwards beyond Newcastle to Leeds and Manchester. Secondly we want an additional service, again hourly each way, to be a local train calling at every station along the line. Not just Widdrington but Pegswood, Acklington and Chathill as well, plus other stations we might want to re-open too, such as Belford. SENRUG made a financial contribution to a Feasibility Study some years back that confirmed there is capacity on the line for this, and it would be commercially viable.

So we need an independent audit function to assess whether Network Rail's claims there is no further capacity on the line are true. And if this is indeed the case, then what Network Rail should be doing is saying what infrastructure upgrades are needed to allow these services to run. Rail industry planners across the industry are currently over focussed on getting more and faster trains to and from London, but the tide is now turning and northern stakeholders are realising and indeed demanding that connectivity between northern communities, and a fair balance between long distance and local services, is more important"

SENUG will continue to campaign for better north – south rail services through Northumberland and invites those that support its campaigns to join them – details at www.senrug.co.uk.

Ends (693 words)

Notes for Editors

Attached Photo suggested caption: The welcome sight of a TPE train arriving at Morpeth. But Cramlington and Widdrington will lose out. Credit Dave Shaw

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

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