



Introduction

This document contains SENUG's response to the proposed North East Rail and Metro Strategy (NERMS). SENUG is The South East Northumberland Rail User Group, an unincorporated voluntary pro-rail organisation that promotes rail travel and campaigns for better rail

services in, within, to, from and through South East and 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. Whilst we have a general interest in all rail services within the North East our particular campaigns have concentrated on the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne Line (now known as the Northumberland Line) and the East Coast Mainline. SENUG has 209 individual and 13 corporate members including 5 Town or Parish Councils along with 1,546 Facebook, 293 Twitter and 52 Instagram followers. We can be contacted via our website <https://www.senrug.co.uk/Contact> and all enquiries relating to this paper should be directed to our Chair.

Whilst we welcome the draft of North East Rail and Metro Strategy and feel that could form the basis for a considerably improved Metro/Rail system in the North East this paper outlines some of our concerns.

- Both the length of the paper and its structure make it difficult to get a clear understanding of what services are actually proposed for the rail lines and other issues in which we are principally interested. If the structure of the paper is to remain unchanged the least that is required is that a comprehensive index is provided that would allow us to see., for example, all the proposals that would impact on services to each station on the ECML.
- If it were to be possible to restructure the paper it would be better to do so from a perspective that would allow a passenger, or a prospective passenger, to see exactly what was being offered to them and to do so in plain language.
- As with all strategies one of the dangers is that it will simply be seen as 'words' that may never amount to action. To deal with this issue consideration should be given to prioritising some "quick wins" based on projects where the infrastructure is already in place or could be easily put into place.

None of the above means that we do not agree with the overall strategic aims outlined in the strategy but we do think that further information will need to be made available on each of the individual projects and that some additional projects need to be added.

Comments on Individual Projects

1. Enhancements to service frequency in Northumberland on ECML and An Enhanced service between Berwick and Newcastle and Major upgrade to the East Coast Mainline - major upgrade via East Coast Main Line and Leamside reinstatement to include provision for 7/8 trains per hour.

SENUG says that these three projects should be listed under the heading of an overall plan/strategy aimed at improving the use of the ECML. One of the problems with the ECML is that the line is shared between several passenger routes and operators as well as needing to have suitable provision made for freight. With this range of demand there will inevitably be conflict between

possible uses which can only be resolved by a clear strategy covering the use and development of the line as both a national and local asset. For long distance services we want to see a rational and stable pattern of station stops covering Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick and our views on this have been set out by Railfuture North East in their recent paper. This paper points to the importance, for people living in Northumberland, of having both direct access to national rail services that extend beyond the region and to local and regional services. We say that Northumberland needs 1 train per hour connecting Morpeth, Alnmouth & Berwick to each other, plus northwards to Edinburgh and southward to Newcastle and beyond to York then either Manchester, Birmingham, or London. Alnmouth and Berwick also need a train to London every other hour and a train to Birmingham every other hour, evenly spaced so that the stations have a train at least approximately every hour. Morpeth also needs at least 2 morning peak, 2 evening peak and 2 between peak trains to / from London and Edinburgh, plus 2 trains per hour to / from Newcastle.

In addition to the national services currently running on the ECML we want to see an hourly regional service between Newcastle and Edinburgh by upgrading the current TPE service to hourly and reconnecting it to the Newcastle Liverpool service, as per the December 2019 timetable, to provide a direct link from Northumberland to both West Yorkshire and Manchester. We also want to see an hourly local service calling at all stations between Newcastle and Berwick with the capacity to add new stations including at Belford. This service could also be extended South the Team Valley, via a re-opened Bensham Curve, and North to Edinburgh by combining it with a similar ScotRail service that is planned to improve rail connections in this part of the borders. These proposals would greatly improve connectivity between populated areas around the ECML and should also include early and late trains to improve employment opportunities and allow for access to the cultural resources offered by both Edinburgh and Newcastle.

In respect of the local service, we note that the recent Systra Report (part funded by SENRUG and jointly commissioned by Northumberland County and Northern) showed that paths were available on the ECML in Northumberland and that it was likely that the service could run without public subsidy. We say that this should be one of the quick wins that the strategy could deliver – especially because we understand that surplus Electric Multiple Units are available in other parts of the UK and would be suitable for use on the ECML.

Finally, a local freight strategy should be able to encompass not just the existing flows but should look at the possibilities that will come from, for example, the BritishVOLT plant in Cambois.

It will be vital that consideration within these projects to car parking at stations, use of stations as base for active travel, and the need for bus integration.

2. Expanding the number and role of Community Stations – regenerating unused stations at community hubs.

We strongly support the idea of stations as community hubs both on economic grounds and because a well-used station is likely to be seen as a safe station by passengers. We need to know which stations are proposed as community hubs and emphasise the importance of finding tenants who will provide activity on stations over as much of the working day as is possible.

3. Local rail Diesel fleet replacement.

Green electricity and hydrogen are going to be important in the future both from a green perspective and as part of a wider industrial strategy for the NE. However, the replacement programme also needs to be linked in to an electrification strategy. We have noted, in our comments on the project that aims to enhance service frequency in Northumberland on ECML, that our understanding is that suitable EMUs are already available because of service changes and

replacements to the stock used by other TOCs. A new local service on the ECML could be a real “green” winner in terms of both DMU replacement and encouraging modal shift from the motor car.

4. Introducing earlier and later local rail services – aim to match working patterns and leisure needs.

We welcome the aim to match travel opportunities with working patterns and leisure needs. It is an issue that, particularly in respect of services to and from Cramlington, we have raised on many occasions over the years. SENRUG believes that the leisure market is one that will grow over the coming years, and that an important component of this market will involve improving public transport access from urban Tyneside to many areas of the Northumberland Coast. The visitor economy is important to people in rural areas. Good rail access, coupled with connections by bus to destinations such as Seahouses, could allow this part of the economy to develop without the congestion and parking problems that almost inevitably arise when cars are the only way for visitors to arrive in these areas. The other aspect of the leisure market that requires attention is to ensure that it is possible to return to destinations in Northumberland after attending evening cultural events in either Newcastle or Edinburgh with trains that leave both Central Station and Waverley at around 11:00 pm. Above we have referred to the need for “quick wins”. In this respect a local rail service in the ECML would offer, not only “green” benefits but could contribute greatly to the local economy.

5. Increased Park and Ride at Public Transport stations and car park maintenance.

In the detailed design we should ensure that park and ride facilities are both of sufficient size and are close to stations, but that the need to achieve this aim should not result in stations being distant from pedestrian and bus routes

6. Improved Information facilities at North East stations.

Information is not just a technical issue – stations need to be staffed and it is vital that there is a reliable system that can be accessed by all passengers and potential passengers. Within the document there are six separate proposals relating to information and ticketing that should be rationalised into one strategy with its own implementation plan. The single project should include information provision, timetables, live information, and ticketing.

7. Cramlington Station Improvements – infrastructure improvements required to facilitate improved frequency of services and better station facilities.

We say that this project is not ambitious enough given the amount of work that would be required to bring the present station up to the standards implied elsewhere in the strategy, and the need to make the station more accessible and relevant to the wider area. We believe that the current station is in the wrong place to meet 21st Century needs given the changes that have happened in the area since it was built in the 19th century. Space exists to build a new station closer to Manor Walks Shopping Centre that would also allow for much better interchange with local buses and would provide much better access, from both North and South, to both the shopping centres and some of the more recent developments in Cramlington. Coupled with bus integration to provide good connections to the Emergency Hospital, integration that seems to be problematic at the present station, we say that rail could greatly improve access to the services offered by largest town in Northumberland and so improve the economic prospects of both the town and the people of the area. We also think that it is important to ensure that the timetable for Cramlington includes a sufficient level of both early morning and late evening services.

8. Metro and Local Rail Enhancements and Extensions.

We support the principle improving access to Cobalt and Silverlink. However, it is important that this improved access is also available to people living in SE Northumberland. It might be better to operate this connection as shuttle between Northumberland Park, connecting with both the existing Metro and Northumberland Line Services, and Percy Main. Consideration should be given to operating this route in the form of a tram service that could also offer some on road running around Cobalt.

We don't see an Airport Link as a good use of scarce paths on the ECML given the existing Metro Link to the Airport from Central Station. As a regional airport it is important that access is made easy from all parts of the region and the areas with the most difficult access appear to be North and South East Northumberland. Access from North Northumberland requires what amounts to "doubling back" from Central Station via the current Metro service. From SE Northumberland, once the line from Ashington is open, passengers would need to change at both Northumberland Park and South Gosforth, with both involving stairs or lifts to allow the move between platforms, or travel all the way to Central and then catch to existing Metro service to the Airport. Rather running heavy rail services on the current Metro Line from Benton South Junction, services that could only benefit airport customers that live to the south of the Tyne, SENRUG would like to see a two-level Benton East Station with platforms, connected by escalators, on both ECML and Metro. Services on the ECML from both north and south would connect with a new metro service from Central Blyth to the Airport using the existing alignment from Blyth to Newsham, the Northumberland Line to Northumberland Park, then via a new connection to the existing Metro track as far as South Gosforth Depot and then using the 'depot avoiding line' to Regent Centre and the Airport. We say that this proposal would allow for much improved access to the airport from a wide range of destinations, including from South East and North Northumberland, whilst allowing space on the ECML to be allocated to local services (see above)

9. Future extensions for the Northumberland Line - Improving accessibility to South East Northumberland by rail.

We want to see, in addition to a new service between Central Blyth and the Airport (see above), the following extensions:

- A passenger link between Morpeth and Bedlington.
- An extension from Ashington to Woodhorn using existing track and then to Newbiggin using the former alignment that is still extant.
- Reinstatement of the link from Ashington to the ECML via existing track to provide additional diversionary route and open the possibility of additional services connecting North and South East Northumberland, and a passenger service to Cambois from Ashington to serve new industrial developments.

Proposed additions to the strategy.

1. As we have said earlier in these comments, we would like to see clear proposals to improve access to the Airport from North Tyneside, SE Northumberland, and North Northumberland
2. The strategy needs to include clear statements about the need for integration between Rail and Metro and bus integration into the system in both the short and longer term. We have argued that the Northumberland Line needs to be extended initially to Woodhorn and, in the longer term to Newbiggin by the Sea, but until this happens it will be important to ensure that there is an easy bus connection from Ashington to both above destinations. By easy we mean that ticketing should be integrated and that the walk from station to bus should not require a long walk through, for

visitors, a strange town. In this context it is important that both Morpeth and Cramlington should be included in the proposed new Metro Zone that will include stations on the Northumberland Line. We have welcomed the use of Northumberland Park as an interchange point between Rail and Metro and would suggest that a wider integration policy would also include improvements to Manors Station, as well as finding ways to present both Metro and Rail stations as an interchange point. Manors needs to be linked to the existing multi story car park as well as to the walkways to the City Centre. It also needs 4 tracks through the station to allow for two platforms to be available for local rail services. The issues about seamless bus integration would also arise once a local service between Newcastle and Berwick was introduced. It would be commercially important that such a service was easy to use both passengers heading into Newcastle for work and/or leisure, as well as for those from Tyneside wanting to use the leisure facilities on the Northumberland Coast. In the immediate future buses should serve the station turning circles at Cramlington and Morpeth as well as providing immediate and easily walkable connections to stations on the Northumberland Line.

3. A clear statement is needed about the need to maintain cross city services and a commitment to using this to drive some of the infrastructure improvements. In this respect we say that the current service connecting the Tyne Valley and Morpeth, a service that offers easy access from Morpeth and Cramlington to shopping and job opportunities at the Metro Centre and to the many leisure opportunities on offer in Hexham and the Tyne Valley should be maintained. Our experience has been that a timetable requiring passengers undertaking these journeys to change at Newcastle will only result in a modal shift to the car to avoid the delays that come from changing trains.

4. Public Engagement. We say that the key to progressing the strategy and maintaining public support should be a Public Engagement Strategy. This needs to be more than just consulting over proposals (that are often set in concrete at the point when they are made public) but finding ways to involve the public at all stages in the process. Transport North East might consider use of Citizen Panels as well as ongoing engagement with interested organisations – including SENRUG.