

Email to Ian Levy, MP for Blyth Valley, dated 14th August 2022

Subject: Rail Services at Cramlington

Hi Ian

As I'm sure you are aware, Northern Trains have not yet re-instated the full hourly pre-Covid hourly train service at Cramlington. There are still 4 occasions during the day (twice northbound and twice southbound) where there are 2-hour gaps in their services.

For one of these occasions, SENRUG has successfully negotiated with another operator – TransPennine Express – for their service to call at Cramlington, but their other services – even if they stopped at Cramlington – do not bridge the gaps left by Northern, so the 2 hour gaps in services at Cramlington remain.

Northern's reasons for being unable to re-instate services have changed over the months since lockdown finished. First, they said they needed extra time to deep clean trains between journeys. Then they said drivers needed to re-gain "route knowledge" (a driver has to be qualified to drive over a certain route, and the qualification lapses if not used for a certain length of time). More recently, they are saying they simply don't have enough drivers employed. This despite the massive exodus of staff from the aviation industry during lockdown creating significant recruitment potential for rail companies, which most other train companies capitalised on.

What is clear however is that Northern seem to have no appetite or management focus whatsoever in returning Cramlington to an hourly service. For instance, they have been unable to share time lines for completion of additional driver recruitment or completion of route knowledge training. They have indicated hourly service will not return at the December 2022 timetable, but have been unable to offer any date or target as to when it might.

Worse, Northern have been experiencing a number of cancellations of late. On some occasions a train either side of the 2-hour gap is cancelled, meaning Cramlington passengers must wait over 3 hours for their next train. For instance, on Tuesday 26th July (not a strike day), the cancellation of the 14:59 Newcastle – Morpeth service meant there were no trains from Newcastle to Cramlington for the 3 hour period between 12:57 and 16:05. No-one in their right mind would consider travelling by train if there is likely to be a 3-hour gap in services. Such

a poor service will undoubtedly result in a permanent loss in the market for rail at Cramlington, as passengers have no alternative than to find other ways to travel, which they may then keep to permanently.

It's easy to imagine a conspiracy theory in all of this. Northern Trains are directly owned by DfT through OLR Holdings, as are LNER, and one can't help thinking that DfT are deliberately discouraging rebuilding of the local rail market to justify permanent cancellation of local trains on the East Coast Main Line to make room for more fast trains between London and Edinburgh, with no stops in Northumberland at all. This is simply unacceptable and would be a clear example of "levelling down", prioritising the needs of London over regeneration of local, northern communities. The fact that DfT have appointed the same person to be their representative on the boards of both LNER and Northern is a clear conflict of interest and could perhaps explain why Northern appear to have no board level focus on restoration of pre-covid timetables on local services on the East Coast Main Line in Northumberland.

Accordingly, I would be grateful if you could ask the Secretary of State for Transport to:

- a) Demand Northern provide a clear time-lined plan for restoration of the hourly service at Cramlington, which should be no later than December 2022.
- b) Instruct Network Rail to make space in their schedules for all 5 of the TransPennine Express services that pass through Cramlington (5 northbound and 5 southbound per day) to actually stop there. As has already been explained, this won't alleviate Northern's 2-hourly service gaps, but will provide an overall increase in rail services at Cramlington, as well as linking the town to Berwick and Edinburgh (it should be remembered that Cramlington's A&E hospital services Berwick). We reject Network Rail's assertion that there is insufficient space in the operating schedules for TPE to call at Cramlington and observe TPE's services often arrive at Morpeth 5 minutes early and then wait there before departing, because they are ahead of schedule.
- c) Strengthen Northern Trains Executive Board by appointing a Director with a clear and uncompromised focus on the North East. I would suggest a political representative from the North East Joint Transport Committee, or perhaps a passenger representative from a stakeholder group such as Railfuture North East Branch or SENRUG.

As you know, Cramlington's population is 35,000 and it is the largest town within the county of Northumberland with a rail station. It would be interesting to know whether any other county in England has a rail service less frequently than every 3 hours to its largest town.

Thank you for your time in considering these issues and please do get back to me if you would like any clarifications on the points I've raised or would like to discuss further.

Kindest regards

Dennis Fancett

Chair, SENRUG: The South East Northumberland Rail User Group
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Campaigning for The Northumberland Line (previously known as Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line) since March 2005

See our campaign chronology [here](#)



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Your Ref: IL5915

Dear Ian

Thank you for your email of 22 August, enclosing correspondence from your constituent, Dennis Fancett, Chair of the South East Northumberland Rail User Group, about rail services from Cramlington.

I appreciate you raising Mr Fancett's concerns with me about the frequency of Northern services at Cramlington.

I am pleased to confirm that from the December 2022 timetable change, Northern's Newcastle to Morpeth service, which serves Cramlington, will return to one train per hour.

Thank you again for your email, and I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours ever,

WENDY MORTON MP

MINISTER OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT