

We've done it!

Re-opening finally announced after 18-year campaign.

SEN RUG is delighted to report that Secretary of State for Transport, Mark Harper, attended an event at Newsham to finally confirm the re-introduction of passenger services to the Northumberland Line. Although some construction work has already started the announcement assures us that funding is available to complete the project. Passenger trains are expected to be running by Summer 2024.

The announcement vindicates the 18-year campaign from SEN RUG who first put forward proposals for the re-opening in March 2005. During this time SEN RUG's proposals have won support from Lib-Dem, then Labour and currently a Conservative led administrations at Northumberland County Council. SEN RUG, and most of the independent commentators who have written about the line, believe it should never have taken this long for plans to come to fruition but we are grateful to all those who have supported our plans and worked tirelessly to bring them about over



Map courtesy of Northumberland County Council



Photo: John Brierley

the years, particularly the current team at the County Council.

SEN RUG Chair Dennis Fancett, who attended the event at Newsham, said "this announcement marks a great achievement, and my thanks to all those who have supported our campaign over the years. It shows what persistence and determined campaigning can achieve. We will continue to monitor developments to ensure the re-opening timescale is adhered to, as well as campaigning for further extensions and improvements to the route and other enhancements to rail services in South East and East Northumberland."

Also in this Newsletter: The story of our campaign to re-open the AB&T and details of our campaigns to improve rail services in South-East and East Northumberland.

A Diary of the Campaign



MARCH 2005: SENRUG first puts forward its plans for re-opening the line suggesting, as phase 1, trains could run from Newcastle to Ashington via Morpeth and Bedlington.

JANUARY 2007: The North East Assembly (now defunct) commissions a Feasibility Study into SENRUG's plans. Later the same year Nexus asked the same consultants to investigate the Northumberland Park – Ashington section.

MAY 2007: SENRUG organises an on-line petition to 10 Downing Street. This results in an Adjournment Debate in parliament. Wansbeck MP Denis Murphy then facilitates a meeting between SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett and Rail Minister Tom Harris.

MAY 2008: Northumberland County Council (NCC) commissions a GRIP 4 Study with Network Rail, piggybacking on a study requested by the freight operator, but the freight study is subsequently cancelled meaning the passenger services study is aborted as well.

JUNE 2008: SENRUG organises a Charter Train which makes 3 return trips to Ashington. The first train is reserved exclusively for stakeholders and the press, and is a significant step forward in bringing local decision-makers on-side.

MARCH 2009: Secretary of State Geoff Hoon visits the scheme. SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett presents the scheme to him at Woodhorn. In June, ATOC

(The Association of Train Operating Companies) includes the scheme in its "Connecting Communities" Report, meaning for the first time there is formal support from within the rail industry itself.

MARCH 2010: Prior to the General Election, SENRUG organises a "hustings" meeting with Wansbeck constituency candidates from the 3 main parties, all of whom say they are in favour of the scheme. Later in the year, the new County Council Local Transport Plan lists the scheme as its top public transport priority.

JUNE 2011: NCC commissions Market Appraisal report to meet new DfT (Department for Transport) requirements. Once complete, NCC then asks consultants AECOM to continue with Demand Assessment Report.

AUGUST 2012: NCC, AECOM and SENRUG present the 2 reports to DfT who advise the Council to press on with Network Rail's GRIP 3 Study as soon as possible. But Network Rail says the Council must



start again at GRIP 1 and say the studies cannot be fast-tracked.

APRIL 2014: To mark the 50th anniversary of the Beeching closure, SENRUG organises Schools DVD competition – inviting schools to create a 5-minute DVD to set out the business case for re-opening the line. The competition keeps the scheme in the local press over a period of several months. The winners, from Ashington Hirst Park Middle School, were rewarded with a trip to London to present their work to their local MP, Ian Lavery. They also visited

Northern Rail's Operations Centre at York Station on their return journey.



Photo: Dave Shaw

FEBRUARY 2015: NCC approves budgetary provision for cost of GRIP 2 and 3 studies from Network Rail and other feasibility work to meet DfT funding requirements.

JULY 2016: North East Combined Authority publishes "METROFUTURES – The combined future of Metro and Local Rail in the North East". This document shows the service will be established to Ashington via the existing heavy rail freight route. However, the document is widely mis-reported in both local TV and press as a proposed Metro extension. Meanwhile, the re-opening is specifically mentioned in government statement "A Strategic Vision For Rail".

FEBRUARY 2018: The Chief Economist to the Bank of England, Andy Haldane, visits Ashington and



Photo: Dave Shaw

blogs his hunch that the economic benefits of re-opening the railway would be "whopper".

FEBRUARY 2019: NCC organises a special train round the line with Secretary of State Chris Grayling. SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett is also invited and given opportunity to talk to Mr Grayling about the scheme. Later that month the Council approves £3.5m for the next phase including the "Develop" stage of Network Rail's "Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline" (equivalent to GRIP 3).

March 2019: IPPR North (an influential think tank) lists the scheme as on the 6 top quick wins for the North, whilst 2 months later the Taxpayers Alliance also list it as one of the schemes that could easily be funded if HS2 were cancelled.

February 2020: Following separate visits from Secretary and Under Secretary of State Grant Shapps and Chris Heaton-Harris the previous month, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in his prelude to a statement on HS2 says the "final decision on the Ashington re-opening will be made by the Chancellor in March". But COVID strikes and the March 2020 budget includes no such statement.

May 2020: NCC lets contracts for outline design to SLC and AECOM, and later that year also lets contracts for initial ground vegetation clearance.

JANUARY 2021: DfT announces initial funding of £34m allowing NCC to proceed with land acquisition, preparation of Transport and Works Act Order (TWAO), and planning applications for the new stations.

NOVEMBER 2021: TWAO Enquiry starts. This takes 4 weeks and the Inspector's Report is sent to the Secretary of State for adjudication. Meanwhile, in March 2022, planning consent for the final station is obtained.

June 2022: TWAO approved, giving legal permission for construction to start. Work on the track and some of the stations starts almost immediately.

March 2023: Secretary of State for Transport, Mark Harper, comes to Newsham to formally announce the re-opening and says that trains are expected to be running by Summer 2024. The local press had earlier reported that total cost of the project had risen to £166m, but that the investment is expected to generate benefits to the local economy of up to £470m.

Our work hasn't finished!

SENRUG's campaigning work will continue after the core Northumberland Line route between Newcastle and Ashington opens. We want to see further extensions and enhancements to rail services in the area.

The Northumberland line should be extended to the east from Ashington to terminate at Newbiggin-by-the-Sea. This would use the existing freight line and then new track, on the currently intact former alignment, for the final mile.



A new Metro route from Blyth Town Centre to the Airport should be developed using the former rail alignment between Blyth Town Centre and Newsham, the Northumberland Line to Northumberland Park and then the existing Metro line to the Airport - using the existing line to the north of the depot to avoid having to reverse at South Gosforth. The new Metro cars, with their ability to operate under battery power should remove the costs of electrification between Northumberland Park and Blyth.

A new station at Seghill would provide improved access to the new services to both Newcastle and the Airport.

Track between Northumberland Park and Newsham, and between Benton Junction and Northumberland Park, should be double tracked to improve capacity and remove the risk of delays on services.

The existing route from Ashington to the ECML at Butterwell should be re-opened to improve freight access to the Port of Blyth and allow passenger services between Ashington and the North.

We'll also be working to make sure that the new line has an adequate timetable and that the present Metro Zonal fare system is extended to both Ashington and Morpeth – at least for local trains.

We want to see track improvements at Manors that will allow all Northumberland Line Services to stop at this station.

We will be campaigning to support the recent proposal to extend services on the Northumberland Line to link with a re-opened Leamside Line

In addition to our work on the Northumberland Line we want to see:

The current Carlisle to Morpeth service extended to Bedlington, connecting with the Northumberland Line and with new station at Choppington.

A new, hourly local service between Newcastle and Berwick calling at all stations, with Belford and Beal re-opened. In conjunction with the present Carlisle – Morpeth service this would result in a half hourly service between Morpeth, Cramlington, and Newcastle throughout the day. The new service could also be extended beyond Newcastle to provide a link to stations south of the Tyne without the need to change trains.

Re-instatement of the hourly TransPennine Express service between Edinburgh and Newcastle and re-connecting it to the Newcastle – Liverpool service giving Northumberland stations better connectivity to Leeds and a direct rail service to and from Manchester. This service should also call at Cramlington, giving Cramlington passengers 3 trains per hour.

A new station at Cramlington, replacing the current station, sited where the line passes the shopping centre and allowing much better parking and connections with bus services.

A new station at Benton East with platforms both on the Metro and the East Coast Main Line to allow connections with Metro services to the Airport from Northern and TransPennine Express services, better connecting the Airport to Northumberland and other TPE stations.

The number of long-distance services at Morpeth maintained. SENRUG will continue to fight plans to remove LNER's off-peak services at Morpeth.