

Email to Ian Levy MP for Blyth Valley dated 26th March 2023
Copied to Nick Donovan, MD of Northern Trains
Re Cancellation of ALL trains to Cramlington on afternoon / evening of 19th February 2023

Dear Ian

I would like to bring to your attention that on the afternoon / evening of Sunday **19th February 2023**, which was **not** a strike day, Northern cancelled **every single** train to and from Cramlington.

It's seems the primary reason for this is that Northern were 1 conductor short, and they decided to use the conductors they did have to provide a full service between Newcastle and Middlesbrough, which has a greater revenue impact for them if cancelled.

I don't quibble with that logic for a single train cancellation, though sadly it affirms my believe that the Newcastle – Cramlington – Morpeth line is Northern's Cinderella line, resources will always be taken from it if there is a problem elsewhere. But I simply cannot accept this logic if it results in the entire service on a given line being withdrawn. Neither does it take into account many Cramlington passengers, such as the person who first brought this issue to my attention, would be connecting at Newcastle to / from long-distance services, and with a 2 hour plus delay or journey abandonment they would then be entitled to the twice the cost of their entire ticket for the long distance journey to be refunded. Middlesbrough passengers would not be connecting at Newcastle for long distance trains. So Northern's actions may well not in the wider commercial interests of the rail industry, or indeed their parent company DfT OLR Holdings which also includes LNER.

Northern have said travel was available via other operators, but that only applies to Morpeth, not Cramlington. They have also said Cramlington passengers could take a bus, but have declined to confirm whether they arranged ticket acceptance with Metro (to Haymarket) and Arriva busses, or indeed rail replacement busses, so I think we can safely assume they did not.

To the travelling public, it makes strike days completely indistinguishable from non-strike days. There may or may not be a service running. Don't rely on the train if you are meeting someone, attending a job interview, wedding or funeral or anything like that. Indeed, if the minimum service legislation currently going through parliament is adopted as law, Cramlington passengers will be left hoping the RMT call more strikes – then at least we will be guaranteed some kind of minimum service, whereas left to Northern's commercial competence alone it seems we are not.

At a Stakeholder Meeting on 1st November 2022, Northern's MD Nick Donovan stated the company is not short of drivers, and cancellations announced as being due to driver shortage should be robustly challenged with his operational management teams. Whilst I recognise that comment was about drivers, whereas this incident was caused by a conductor shortage, I'd like to think the same sentiment applies.

So I have indeed been trying to challenge what happened, and have deliberately delayed bringing this matter to your attention whilst I've tried to chase down with Northern the logic behind their decision making, and to allow them to give me an assurance that management flags

are now in place to stop this happening again. Despite a month now elapsing, and repeated chasing, they have not so far provided further comment on the incident after the initial response.

In my view, cancellation of two sequential services on a route where the overall level of service is hourly or less should trigger a management escalation. Cancellation of three sequential services should be classed as a crisis. But Northern seem to have no internal escalation process whatsoever, and no appetite for reviewing decisions afterwards in the interest of learning and continuous improvement.

As you know, SENRUG is primarily a pro-rail campaign group, calling for a bigger and better railway. I much prefer to be writing to you about our viable plans to extend and improve rail services in your constituency, such as the station at Seghill or our proposed Blyth Town Centre to Airport Metro link that we've discussed in the past. We do not like to be critical about the industry or talk it down, and prefer to work constructively with rail companies to help promote the network, get more people travelling by train, and to increase revenue. For these reasons, I did not raise the issue with you when we met on 6th March with the Secretary of State, as clearly that was a "good news" day for the industry and we wanted to keep it as such. But given Northern have been either unable or unwilling to provide more explanation, or any kind of assurance to me that this won't happen again, and given Northern is directly owned by the DfT, I thought you might wish to raise this with the Secretary of State in the hope that Northern can be compelled to provide a more robust explanation to him as to their operational decision-making.

It's also time to improve service at Cramlington by getting more services stopping there. There's absolutely no reason why the 5 TransPennine Express services each way per day on the Newcastle – Edinburgh route can't stop at Cramlington (currently 2 southbound services do, thanks to SENRUG lobbying, but no northbound services). We completely reject Network Rail's assertion there is not enough capacity in the timetable for these trains to call at Cramlington. We frequently observe these trains arriving at Morpeth 5 minutes early, and being held there until it is time to proceed, so Network Rail's claim seems to be more about back-pocketing some capacity for more LNER services rather than provide a decent level of service in Northumberland. Perhaps Network Rail could be requested to be a little more realistic on the point, and allow these services to be introduced at Cramlington from the December 2023 timetable.

My thanks for your time in considering this email.

Kindest regards

Dennis Fancett

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Campaigning for The Northumberland Line (previously known as Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line) since March 2005

See our campaign chronology [here](#)

Note

Ian Levy's office has responded stating they are taking the issue up with the Department for Transport.

Since writing to Ian Levy MP, Northern Trains have now finally responded (on 31st March 2023) explaining the mistakes that were made on 19th February and advising that measures have now been put in place to avoid this kind of incident happening again.