



Response to
Transport for the North
on the
Strategic Transport Plan
Draft for consultation May 2023

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1. Introduction

- a) This is SENUG's response to Transport for the North's Strategic Transport Plan, draft for Consultation May 2023. Responses to the consultation are required by 17 August 2023 and can be submitted via email to stp@transportforthenorth.com
- b) SENUG is The South East Northumberland Rail User Group, an unincorporated voluntary 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. SENUG has 188 members and 15 corporate members that include both local businesses and 4 Town or Parish Councils (as at 21st May 2023).

2. Overall View of Strategic Plan.

- a) The Strategic Transport Plan says very little about the North East, and appears to focus on the Manchester – Leeds corridor.
- b) The Strategic Plan does not address the current conflict between the desire to run more services with fewer stops between London and Edinburgh and the need to provide more (or re-instate

previous) regional semi-fast and local services connecting northern cities and communities. This conflict emerged with the publication of the draft East Coast Main Line timetable for May 2022 which clearly prioritised more services to and from London over connection between Northern communities, with several direct journey opportunities within the north being lost. The proposals were deferred following strong objections from Northern stakeholders but are likely to re-surface soon. We expect Transport for the North to take a strong lead in championing the need for connectivity between Northern communities thus regenerating the north, which must not be compromised in favour of more London – Edinburgh services. Whilst SENRUG is not against more London – Edinburgh services and recognizes such services have a key role in achieving modal shift from air and achieving decarbonisation targets, SENRUG’s view is that additional infrastructure must be provided to support such services, rather than simply reducing existing or curtailing the expansion of regional and local services.

c) However the proposal to re-open the Leamside Line (page 74) to create a secondary route from Darlington to Newcastle is welcome. The ability to run regional services between Newcastle and Edinburgh has been hampered by the alleged lack of capacity between York and Newcastle meaning not all the services required can actually reach Newcastle. This is again evidenced by the draft East Coast Main Line timetable for May 2022 and post Covid recovery timetables, which has resulted in one of the two TPE services to Newcastle be curtailed at York, in order to run a third LNER service from London. This in turn has meant the extension of the TPE service from Newcastle to Edinburgh as originally a franchise commitment as from December 2019, has been lost.

d) The Strategic Plan refers to capacity upgrades on the East Coast Main Line between York and Alnmouth currently being implemented (page 77), which would be welcome, though no details are provided as to what these might be, and the text implies that actually there is nothing specific between Newcastle and Alnmouth, which is disappointing.

e) There is no reference to the need to increase power capacity at Marshall Meadows (near Berwick) which has prevented some electric trains from running under electric power and presumably limits introduction of further electric services.

f) The Strategic Plan does not consider whether there is sufficient capacity through Newcastle station to permit the number of long distance services from London in addition to the regional and local services that are required.

3. General Measures for the North East

3.1 Retention of Through Running of Local Services Through Newcastle station

The Strategic Plan should stress that local services into Newcastle should continue to run through the station, connecting together various local routes such as Morpeth to Newcastle and Newcastle to Carlisle, rather than all services terminating at Newcastle for operational convenience, making

journeys more complex, adding to journey times and risking failed connections for through passengers.

3.2. Long distance Services at Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick.

Existing Level of Long Distance Services at Morpeth, Alnmouth & Berwick must be retained, if not increased. Alnmouth and Berwick should have 1 train per hour in each direction, alternating between East Coast Main Line and CrossCountry services, and Morpeth should have a long distance service every 2 hours in each direction, with a good mix between East Coast Main Line and CrossCountry, and excluding the services provide by the open access operator at commercial risk.

3.3 Minimum Station Specifications by Class of Station.

SENUG believes Transport for the North or another appropriate body should set a minimum standard for station facilities (heavy rail and Metro) as follows:

3.3.1 All Stations

- Step free access to all platforms
- Signage showing which platforms are for which destinations
- Customer Information Screens
- Tannoy Announcements
- Visual display of timetables and routes (ie Timetable posters or for Metro service frequency posters)
- Help Point, with time to answer targets.
- Waiting shelters on all platforms (unless underground)
- Seating on all platforms

3.3.2 Interchange & Town Centre Stations:

(Eg Ashington, Northumberland Park, Cramlington, Manors)

All of the above, and

- Ticket purchasing facilities
- National Rail stations should also have a pre-paid ticket collection facility
- ATM
- Kiosk or coffee cart

3.3.3 Stations Also Serving Long Distance Trains:

(Eg Berwick, Alnmouth, Morpeth)

All of the above, and

- Ticket Office staffed 07:00 to 18:00 daily as a minimum
- Toilet and babychange facility open to passengers 07:00 to 18:00 daily as a minimum
- Internal Waiting Room available to passengers 07:00 to 18:00 daily as a minimum

- Disabled assistance to board / alight trains 07:00 to 18:00 daily as a minimum
- Buffet or café facility
- Timetable leaflets for passengers to take away.

In particular, it should not be necessary to require a passenger to use his or her mobile phone to obtain train running information, at any station.

4 Specific New Services for the North East

There are a number of new rail service requirements that SENRUG and other stakeholders wish to see established, and the introduction of these should be part of the Strategic Plan:

4.1 Newcastle – Berwick Local Service

a) This proposal is for a new local service, minimum hourly in each direction, between Newcastle and Berwick, calling at all existing stations, and with potential to add new stations once proven justified through robust business case development. Potential new stations include Belford, Beal and a new Metro Interchange facility at Benton East.

b) Northumberland County Council. Northern Rail and SENRUG have already jointly commissioned a Feasibility study from Systra which concluded the service would be commercially viable and technically achievable, provided electric trains are used capable of 100 mph maximum speed.

c) This service would:

- Transform neglected Northumberland communities of Pegswood, Widdrington, Acklington & Chathill which currently have just one service in each direction per day.
- Offer connectivity from these station northwards (to Berwick) as well as southward to Newcastle
- Double service frequency at Cramlington to 2 trains each way per hour, by adding a 2nd hourly service to the current hourly Carlisle – Morpeth service

d) The service could:

- Be joined to a similar local service provided by Scotrail between Berwick and Edinburgh to create through connection possibilities across the border (eg Belford to Reston), permit rail commuting from North Northumberland to Edinburgh and from Scottish Borders to Newcastle, and avoid the need for trains from both directions to terminate at Berwick, where capacity for trains waiting before starting their return journey may be limited.
- Easily be extended south from Newcastle to a new station at Team Valley, providing a rail connection between this high growth area to Newcastle and allowing access to jobs located here from south and east Northumberland.

4.2 Re-instatement of Liverpool - Newcastle – Edinburgh Service

a) This service was introduced in December 2019, fulfilling a franchise commitment, by extending

the hourly Liverpool – Newcastle north to Edinburgh with an intermediate station at Morpeth. However, the service was never re-instated after Covid.

b) SENRUG calls for the service to be re-instated but with a more intelligent stopping pattern between Newcastle and Edinburgh, with all trains stopping at Morpeth, Alnmouth & Berwick plus a maximum of one further intermediate stop in the Scottish Borders.

c) This service would:

- Provide connectivity on faster, limited stop services between Northumberland’s key market towns of Morpeth, Alnmouth for Alnwick and Berwick
- Provide direct connectivity between these towns and Manchester, and
- Increase service frequency to Leeds and Edinburgh

4.3 Extension of Carlisle – Morpeth service to Bedlington

a) SENRUG believes the existing Carlisle – Morpeth service should be extended along the existing, fully maintained freight line, to Bedlington, connecting there with Northumberland Line Services. A new intermediate station at Choppington could be added once proven justified through robust business case development. The service would operate at virtually nil marginal cost, utilising the time the train and crew currently wait at Morpeth before starting their return journey. Within this time, the train could run on to Bedlington and back.

b) This service would:

- Reduce public transport connection time between Morpeth and Bedlington station from 24 minutes (by bus) to just 8 (by train).
- Provide a much needed public transport connectivity between Bedlington Station and Cramlington, for access to employment, leisure and medical services.
- Offer an alternative route from Bedlington to Newcastle and
- The station at Choppington would serve an area of high economic deprivation.

4.4 New Metro Route to Airport from Blyth Town Centre and Northumberland Park

a) This proposal is for a new Metro service running on the former alignment between Blyth Town Centre and Newsham, then on Northumberland Line tracks from Newsham to Northumberland Park, here switching to the existing Metro tracks and using the service line through the Metro depot between Longbenton and Regent Centre, and then then on to the Airport. Metro trains would run under battery power between Newsham and Northumberland Park avoiding the need to put dc wires above the Northumberland Line. The short section between Newsham and Blyth Town Centre could either be electrified or an extension of battery running.

b) A new Metro / Network Rail interchange station where the tracks cross at Benton East (without physical connection between the 2 systems) would give better and faster access to the airport from Cramlington, Morpeth, North Northumberland, the Tyne Valley Line, and stations served by the re-instated Transpennine route (see 4.2) eg Northallerton and Durham.

c) An additional new Metro station could be built at Seghill on the Northumberland Line section.

d) This service would:

- Radically assist in the economic regeneration of Blyth by providing a direct rail link (Metro) right into the Town Centre (as opposed to needing a bus connection from Newsham).
- Provide a direct rail link to Newcastle Airport from Blyth, Newsham, Seaton Delaval and Northumberland Park.
- Provide a one-change only rail connection to the Airport from Ashington, Cramlington, Morpeth, local stations between Morpeth and Berwick, Metro stations such as Whitley Bay and North Shields, Tyne Valley stations and stations on the Transpennine route between Liverpool and Edinburgh,
- Provide access to jobs at the airport from some of the most economically deprived areas of Northumberland.
- Be significantly cheaper to construct and provide easy access to the Airport from a far greater range of places than a new heavy rail link from Newcastle Central station, which would still require passengers to travel into Newcastle Central.

4.5 Extension of Northumberland Line from Ashington to Woodhorn & Newbiggin

a) The Northumberland Line should be extended along the existing double-tracked freight line to a new station at Woodhorn, and then along the former alignment to Newbiggin by the Sea.

b) This service would:

- Significantly assist in the economic regeneration of Newbiggin by providing a direct rail link into the town centre.
- Help promote Woodhorn as a premier North East Tourist attraction by creating easy access to the facility by rail.
- Serve the villages further north on the A189 through a Park and Ride facility at Woodhorn, making this a dual purpose station for both commuters and those visiting the Woodhorn Museum.

5. General Capacity Improvements and Freight

5.1 Utilisation of Butterwell line

a) Significant extra capacity for freight and diversionary train movements could be created by utilizing the Ashington – Butterwell line, currently in private ownership, but SENRUG understands no longer required by the private owner following the end of mining operations in the area. To fully utilize the potential of this line as a freight and diversionary route, it needs to be absorbed into the national rail network in conjunction with the following initiatives:

- Creation of a new grade separate north to east facing junction at Butterwell
- Double tracking the mineral line between Butterwell and Ashington

- Double tracking all remaining single track sections of the Northumberland Line between Newsham and Northumberland Park
- Increasing the number of running tracks on the East Coast Main Line between Benton Junction and Newcastle

b) Passenger services could also be introduced on the route, connecting Ashington with Alnmouth and Berwick, and possibly justifying construction of an intermediate station at Linton.

5.2 Newcastle Station Capacity

The next revamp of Newcastle Station should include consideration of joining platforms 1 to platform 9, to create an additional line for through trains, in addition to creating a new station pedestrian entrance on the south side to serve the Stephenson Quarter.

5.3 Manors Station

a) Manors station has the potential to serve as a heavy rail – Metro interchange, avoiding the need for metro passengers to change at Monument for heavy rail trains from Newcastle Station. It also has potential to be seamlessly linked to the adjacent Manors multi-storey car park and the high level footbridge from the car park to the city centre. Manors station also needs to be upgraded to provide level access to the platform.

b) Manors station now serves a major university campus (Northumberland) and associated Halls of residence, and better serves the Quayside, Millennium Bridge and Artists Quarter than does the city centre station, yet its potential is constrained by paucity of services serving the station, which cannot at present easily be increased due to the operating bottleneck through the station.

c) The following improvements for Manors station and its environs are therefore proposed:

- Increase from 3 to 4 running lines from Newcastle through Manors station (as part of the wider project mentioned at 5.1 (a) bullet point 4.)
- Install a 2nd island platform at Manors (may need to be offset from the existing one) so that all 4 running lines are served by platforms, and all Northumberland Line trains and other local trains can call here.
- Provide level access from the footbridge to the platform levels, and extend the footbridge to connect with the car park level 4, which already has lift access to street level.
- Provide level access at the city end of the high level walkways from the car park.
- Improve and better signpost the walking route between the Network Rail and Metro station entrances to properly connect both stations together.

End