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## Ticket Office Closures Scrapped!

### Government Reverses Decision on Ticket Office Closures Following Public Outcry

BY DENNIS FANCETT - SENRUG CHAIR & MARC STEWART

**Unprecedented Public Response Influences Government U-Turn: Over 680,000 responses to the ticket office closure consultations signal strong public opposition, contributing to the government's decision to abandon its plans.**

Over 680,000 responses were received to the consultations on the Ticket Office closures; an amount unlike any before and certainly wasn't without its challenges. Only 3 weeks during the summer holiday were given for feedback initially. This short window might have been acceptable for a single station's closure, but the proposals impacted nearly every station across the country.

In a major policy turnaround however, the government abandoned its contentious plans. The decision was based on the conclusion that the proposals failed to “meet the high threshold of serving passengers.”

**Continued on Page 2**



Morpeth Ticket Office - Sept 2023. Photo credit Marc Stewart



### Continued from cover:

This move follows staunch opposition from watchdogs Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, who objected to every proposed closure, citing significant concerns about passenger accessibility. Additionally, the cross-party Transport Select Committee of MPs criticised the plans as "overly aggressive and lacking transparency", cautioning that they were being implemented 'too far, too fast.'

#### **The consultation itself had flaws.**

Watchdogs successfully campaigned for a consultation extension which, was granted at the last moment. LNER mistakenly published an incorrect email address for enquiries, which was promptly rectified. Northern, on the other hand, did not disclose the percentage of tickets sold at ticket offices versus online by value, citing commercial confidentiality. In a surprising turn, Transport Focus began sending auto-generated emails claiming, "your email has been deleted without being read". This alarming response prompted SENRUG Chair, Dennis Fancett, to seek clarity from Transport Focus Chief Executive Anthony Smith. After discussions, it became clear this was merely an IT glitch.

SENRUG's detailed consultation response is available on their website: <https://bit.ly/3TckkRd>.

#### **SENRUG's View: Advocacy for continued staffing at stations, especially those serving major routes, and questioning the accuracy of consultation data for Morpeth and Alnmouth.**

SENRUG emphasised the importance of adapting to modern times but also advocated against a reduction in station staffing, arguing that major stations like Morpeth and Alnmouth, which offer direct routes to cities like London, Edinburgh and many more, shouldn't be compared to simpler metro systems.

The broad array of tickets, multiple operators, and possible routes available at these stations make reducing staffing an unjustifiable decision.

Furthermore, SENRUG highlighted the importance of having visible staff members at stations, especially for vulnerable and disabled passengers. Even though cash usage is declining, it should still be an accepted form of payment. Not every passenger, especially the elderly or teenagers, have access to card or e-payments despite owning mobile phones.

SENRUG also submitted an additional response challenging the consultation's accuracy for Morpeth and Alnmouth stations. It claims the information provided by Northern concerning the current opening hours of these ticket

offices was significantly misleading, making proposed staffing reductions seem less significant than they were.

This second response can be accessed here: <https://bitly.ws/X6Po>

This development is a significant victory for campaigners and the general public, who have voiced their concerns loudly and clearly, leading to a preservation of ticket office services across the country.



Win an  
Afternoon Tea for 2  
At Green's Morpeth Station.

Scan the QR Code or visit  
<https://bitly.ws/Xb5s> to enter





Photo Credit: David Shaw

## Editorial: Navigating the Railways of Northumberland

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Autumn 2023 edition of the SENRUG Newsletter, my inaugural issue as Editor.

Our region's heartbeat has always echoed the rhythm of the rails. As the birthplace of the Railways, the East Coast Main Line serves as our vital artery. Yet, its tranquillity has recently been pierced by engineering works, disputes, and the wear and tear of time - sentiments I've heard firsthand during my visits to Morpeth.

Remembering our heritage, the Plessey Viaduct - a grade II listed marvel from 1850, crafted by the illustrious Robert Stephenson - stands as a testament to our rich railway legacy. But with recent disruptions due to unexpected damages, it also reminds us of the careful stewardship needed to preserve our ageing infrastructure.

The buzzing debate around ticket office closures brings to the fore our challenge of harmonising modernisation with tradition. The potential implications for disabled passengers and the overall travel experience urge us to deeply consider accessibility and service quality. Yet, in this debate, the community's voice has been powerfully resonant.

Enter SENRUG: their unwavering commitment to confronting these challenges led to the Northumberland Line's approval, a beacon of community-driven progress.

Their efforts underscore the magic of unity and the significance of centring community pulse in decision making.

I'm proud to be a part of SENRUG, a dynamic group that continuously evolves based on feedback from its members and the wider passenger community. While we've achieved notable successes, such as progressing the re-opening of the Ashington Blyth & Tyne (Northumberland) Line and enhancing the frequency of inter-city services at Morpeth Station, we remain driven by our broader vision for South East and East Northumberland.

Remember, railways are more than metal and machinery; they bind our past, present, and future. As we inevitably leave behind challenges like the Plessey Viaduct and ticketing consultations, we surge ahead, filled with optimism, resolve, and a pledge to continually elevate our railway network.

Stay informed, be proactive, and let's champion a vision of a railway system that's efficient and all-encompassing.

Here's to a splendid Christmas and joyous journeys ahead! I hope to meet some of you in person at our next public event.

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### Why not read the Chairman's Blog?

Available on the SENRUG website - <http://bit.ly/46hGvZ0>



### Meet the Editor

*Marc Stewart - Newsletter Editor*

Hello there! I'm Marc Stewart, by day I am CEO of Luggage Point, your go-to for all things airport services and retail. When I'm not at the airport, you might catch me at my other business, Green's Cafe at Morpeth Station, where I love a good chat over a proper coffee.

I'm lucky to call the beautiful South East Northumberland my home, where I share the joys of family life with my lovely wife Erin and our two lively sons, John and James. Beyond the daily grind, I've had the pleasure of coaching local kids' football for about 14 years - time really flies!

And come the weekend? I'm often out playing a spirited game of hockey with my club mates at Morpeth Hockey Club. Just juggling work, a bit of sport, and the fun chaos that comes with family - that's me in a nutshell.



The New Newsham Station Bridges. Photo Credit - Northumberland County Council

## Northumberland Line Construction Progressing Well BY DENNIS FANCETT - SENRUG CHAIR

Construction on the Northumberland Line is making rapid progress.

In Ashington, the siding for the new bay platform has been successfully established. Meanwhile, at Newsham, the expanded double track section built from the south to the north is now clearly visible from the level crossing. Over at Seghill, onlookers from the road crossing can spot the north end of the new loop.

**Most of the trackwork along the route has undergone renewals.**

Most of the trackwork along the route has undergone renewals. Local residents may have noticed some of the night-time construction activities, as well as intermittent level crossing closures.

Although the new platforms are yet to prominently emerge, SENRUG remains optimistic about seeing them in the forthcoming weeks. If you're capturing the progress, feel free to send any images to [chair@senrug.co.uk](mailto:chair@senrug.co.uk) (if you're happy for SENRUG to use them).

Bedlington witnesses the southbound platform's demolition, making way for the new structure. While the northern station building is preserved for non-rail operations, the southern counterpart awaits demolition.

SENRUG had hoped the latter might also have been kept and handed over to SENRUG, but the building is in a poor state of repair and its retention was not supported by Network Rail or any of the statutory authorities.

**Nevertheless, it is pleasing to see construction work underway at last**

The sight of ongoing construction brings a sense of anticipation, however. SENRUG acknowledges the unforeseen challenges faced.

Neil Blagburn, in his enlightening talk during the July SENRUG Public Meeting, highlighted some of these. This led SENRUG to question the efficiency of prior feasibility studies and test drillings, as they seemingly missed identifying these construction challenges.

The costs incurred for these preliminary assessments certainly raise eyebrows. Yet, with these concerns aside, SENRUG eagerly awaits the completion of the line and the inauguration of the train service next summer.

**Move over HS2: The Northumberland Line is on its way!**

The photo above shows the new station footbridge now in position at Newsham. Since the photo was taken, the road bridge to carry the A1061 over the line has also been lifted into place. The current level crossing will be closed.

Northumberland Line Map - Courtesy of Northumberland County Council



**JOIN SENRUG**  
 The more people we speak for, the stronger our voice!  
 Annual membership starts from as little as £2.50  
<https://www.senrug.co.uk/join>



Photo Credit: Geoff Stainthorpe

## Our New Proposal: Blyth Town Centre to Airport Link

**Once** the core Northumberland Line route is up and running, SENRUG proposes it be supplemented with a new Metro style route extending from Airport to Blyth Town Centre. The envisioned route utilises Metro tracks, from the Airport through an upgraded service line and connecting Regent Centre with Longbenton; proceeding on to Northumberland Park. The route would then head northwards to follow the Northumberland Line tracks up to Newsham. Beyond Newsham, the route would continue via new tracks on the old alignment into Blyth Town Centre. The new station would be conveniently sited behind the Community Hospital, near Morrisons, all while occupying a modest footprint compared to its predecessor.

**The new route would also provide a connection from Blyth Town centre to Newcastle City centre via Northumberland Park, changing to the Northumberland Line or the Metro into Newcastle.**

A service frequency of two trains per hour is proposed, operated by Metro style rolling stock using DC overhead and battery power. Existing DC power would be used between the Airport and Northumberland Park, switching to battery power from here to Newsham. It is feasible for the trains to continue using battery power from Newsham to Blyth Town Centre, but this new section of line could also be electrified to Metro DC standards.

The town centre of Blyth, set for regeneration, could significantly benefit from a direct rail link to key regional sites. This initiative stands to particularly advantage Blyth, Northumberland's largest town with 40,000 residents. Currently, the central areas of Blyth are not served by the core Northumberland Line, forcing residents to rely on buses from outlying stations.

**By establishing a direct rail connection, Blyth's accessibility would be greatly enhanced, driving economic growth and opening up job opportunities across Newcastle, nearby business parks at Cobalt and Quorum and the Airport, which employs 3,500 people on-site.**

Additionally, a new Metro route on the northern coastal loop would provide a direct connection to the Airport, bypassing the need for a complex transfer at South Gosforth. A straightforward change at either Northumberland Park or Four Lane Ends would seamlessly link Whitley Bay and coastal areas with the Airport, fostering both business and leisure travel between Gosforth, Newcastle, North Tyneside, and Blyth.

SENRUG's vision extends to introducing two additional stations along this new route. The first at Seghill, reintegrates a location initially bypassed by the current Northumberland Line project, but one that has always been integral to

SENRUG's original campaign. The second, provisionally named Benton East, establishes a vital interchange point where the Metro crosses the East Coast Main Line tracks. While there wouldn't be a physical rail connection proposed, the interchange station facilitates seamless transfers for local and regional rail services connecting the Metro system, the Airport, Cramlington and Morpeth.

Benton East station not only opens doors to faster airport access but also connects north Northumberland, cutting around an hour from the journey via Newcastle, as well as providing a better interchange opportunity from the Tyne Valley. Access to the airport from all these locations opens up the employment market as well as making it easier for business and leisure travellers to reach the airport without taking to the roads. Passenger growth at Newcastle Airport would hugely benefit from a direct rail link, as has been proven elsewhere with Luton, Birmingham, Manchester and Stansted amongst others.

**The new Benton East station would also provide a link from north Northumberland to Northumberland Park creating access to employment hubs.**

SENRUG is creating a detailed leaflet on this proposal, already showcased on our website. If you have a suitable location for displaying this information, please contact [chair@senrug.co.uk](mailto:chair@senrug.co.uk) to assist in spreading the word."

## Plessey Viaduct Emergency Resolved: Network Rail Completes Vital Repairs

Following a sudden structural challenge at the Plessey Viaduct, Network Rail engineers have rapidly completed essential repairs, reinstating full rail services and ensuring passenger safety.

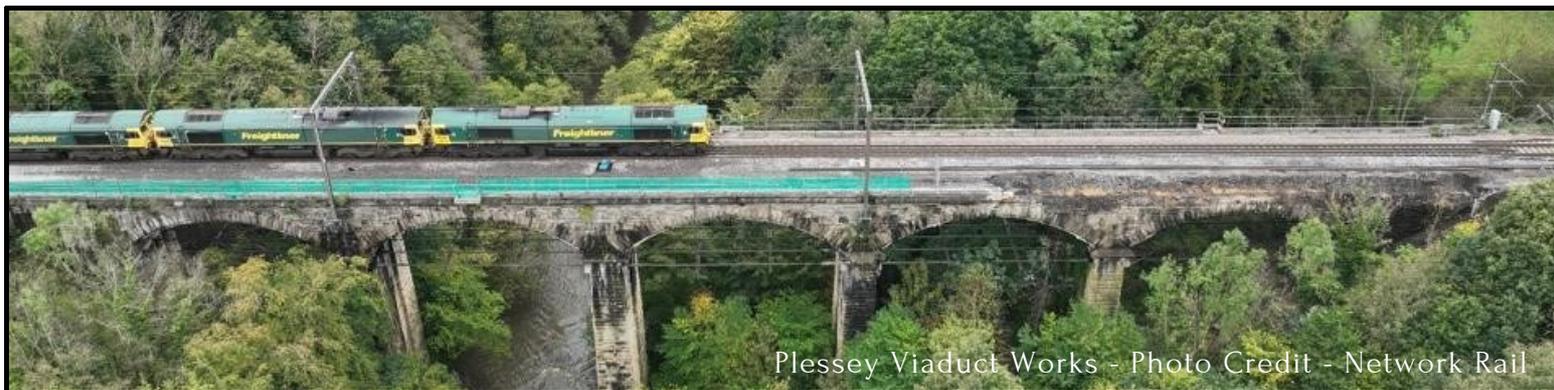
Over the weekend of 7-8th October, a routine inspection during planned engineering works revealed a significant issue at the Plessey viaduct north of Newcastle. A portion of the eastern parapet had collapsed into the River Blyth, posing a risk to the trackbed. Consequently, the southbound line was immediately closed, leading to an emergency single-line operation on the northbound track for East Coast Main Line services between London and Edinburgh.

The emergency engineering works on the Plessey Viaduct have been completed successfully, and the southbound line between Morpeth and Cramlington has reopened. Train services have resumed normal operations at Morpeth, with the exception of unrelated day-to-day cancellations. The replacement bus operation has also concluded. Network Rail engineers deserve commendation for successfully completing repairs, allowing normal train service

For instance, passengers booked on LNER's last service from Morpeth to Leeds faced the risk of being stranded overnight in Newcastle due to misaligned schedules.

Additionally, scheduling inconsistencies, such as replacement buses departing minutes before an available train, added to passenger confusion.

***This was exacerbated by the absence of staff at Morpeth, further advocating the need for staffed stations.***



Plessey Viaduct Works - Photo Credit - Network Rail

### **Emergency Measures Implemented Following Viaduct Damage**

Quick response to the Plessey viaduct damage resulted in an emergency timetable and single line operations, impacting local and national rail services.

This emergency setup necessitated the replacement of almost all Northern and TPE services with buses, leaving Cramlington without a regular train service. Additionally, the crossover at Morpeth station complicated southbound LNER train services, as trains cannot fully fit into the northbound platform. Only shorter Lumo trains and single-unit CrossCountry Voyagers continue to serve Morpeth, leading to a significant reduction in frequency. Network Rail anticipated these arrangements would last until at least 10th November. However, as of Monday 6th November, the situation had markedly improved.

resumption at Morpeth and Cramlington.

Network Rail's swift creation of an emergency timetable averted a potential nightmare and ensured ongoing Scotland services. However, the bus replacements and customer communication have been chaotic. This situation, especially with Morpeth station being intermittently unstaffed, underscores the critical need for adequate station staffing.

### **Challenges in Replacement Bus Services and Station Staffing:**

The logistical issues with bus replacements and the lack of staff at Morpeth station highlighted the importance of maintaining adequate station services. Two weeks into the incident, the details of running trains and buses became more transparent. However, there was a lack of clarity on reciprocal ticket acceptance.

Also at Morpeth, parking issues occurred - the 20-minute short-stay bays obstructed bus manoeuvres. SENRUG has long advocated for relocating these bays to improve accessibility for rail replacement and public buses.

SENRUG evaluated Network Rail's emergency timetable, considering alternatives like selective door opening for LNER trains at Morpeth or redirecting southbound trains to Cramlington. However, these ideas were deemed impractical, potentially disrupting the emergency timetable. SENRUG remains committed to proposing only feasible solutions.

A side effect of the emergency was the cancellation of construction work on the Northumberland Line on 8th October, as engineering trains were rerouted. This incident hasn't directly delayed the Northumberland Line's reopening, although SENRUG has noted subtle shifts in the language regarding its anticipated completion date.

## Parking Charges Introduced at Alnmouth

### SEN RUG Challenges Northern's New Parking Charges at Railway Stations



Northern has announced the introduction of parking charges at Alnmouth Station, and also Wylam Station on the Tyne Valley Line.

As a pro-rail organisation, SEN RUG opposes the new parking charges at Alnmouth Station, arguing they deter train use, especially for short trips like those to Newcastle. The proposed charge of £1.50 represents a 12% increase in the cost of travelling to Newcastle by train, compared to the standard single fare of £12.60.

SEN RUG understands that across its entire network, parking charges contribute less than 1% to Northern's revenue, a figure which diminishes further when enforcement costs are considered. Thus, introducing charges complicates SEN RUG's efforts to promote train travel, offering minimal financial benefit to the rail industry.

**SEN RUG proposes free short-term parking spaces and reciprocal season ticket arrangements to enhance passenger convenience and support local rail travel.**

While SEN RUG acknowledges that management measures may be necessary in consistently full car parks, it strongly refutes the notion that Alnmouth's car park is misused for non-rail purposes due to its considerable distance from the village centre or any other destination.

At Morpeth Station, where parking

charges were swiftly escalated, SEN RUG has suggested to Northern the possibility of free parking for commuters purchasing monthly or longer online season tickets. This approach would maintain free parking for Northern's regular customers, while occasional travellers using other operators for longer journeys would incur charges.

However, SEN RUG concedes that this strategy might not be feasible at Alnmouth, considering its limited Northern service to Newcastle.

Moreover, SEN RUG advocates for approximately six free, 30-minute parking spaces at both Morpeth and Alnmouth stations. These spaces would facilitate short visits for meeting incoming passengers and ticket office transactions. Charging for such brief stops could further reduce ticket office usage, particularly at a time when Northern and other operators have faced significant public opposition to their plans to close ticket offices – plans they have since been compelled to abandon.

At Morpeth, SEN RUG advises relocating short-term parking from the turning circle to the main car park, freeing up the turning circle for public and replacement bus services.

Finally, SEN RUG is calling for reciprocal arrangements between Northern and the County Council's season ticket parking schemes. This would allow passengers who purchase a season ticket from one provider but find no available spaces to use the other provider's car park without incurring additional charges. Without such reciprocity, SEN RUG questions the viability of the season ticket parking products.

For more details, visit SEN RUG's official response at <https://bit.ly/47q1qKz>.

Photos courtesy of Geograph Creative Commons Licence. Station Sign owned by Andy F. CrossCountry Voyager photo owned by JThomas.

*Season's Greetings*

To all our Readers and Members



# HS2's Northern Leg Cancelled: Implications and Reflections

## High Speed to Nowhere - the Price of Procrastination

The government has recently announced a significant scaling back of the High-Speed 2 (HS2) project, with the cancellation of its northern extension from Birmingham to Manchester. This follows the earlier abandonment of the Leeds section, leaving only a relatively short segment reaching Birmingham Curzon Street, distinct from the main New Street station.

**HS2's Reduced Scope:** The government's decision to cancel HS2's northern leg marks a major shift in the project's ambitions, leaving the North with limited high-speed rail connectivity.

*Despite the cancellation of HS2's northern leg, SENRUG remained neutral, recognising the project's minimal direct impact on the region.*

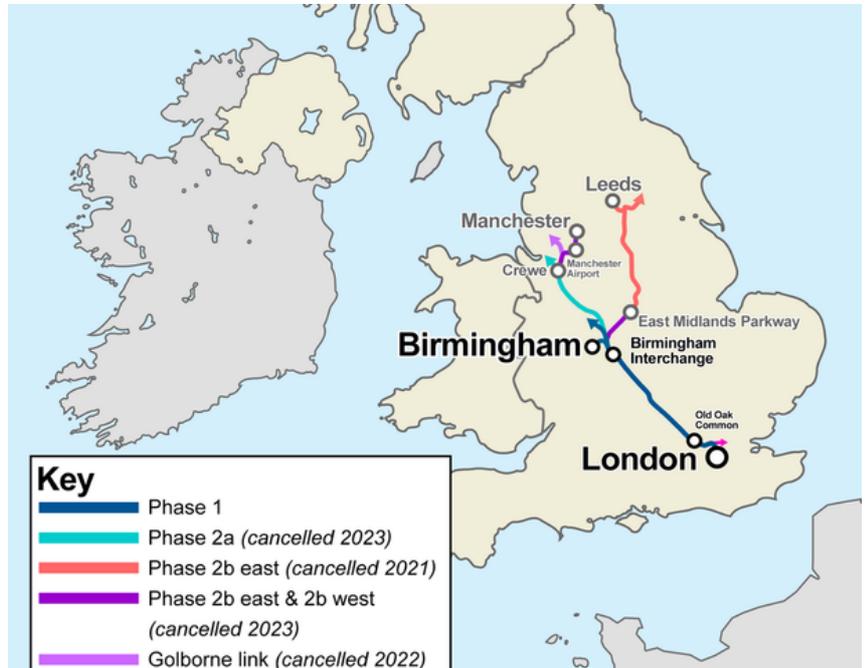
In a somewhat compensatory move, the government reinstated the London approach from Old Oak Common to Euston Cross in the same announcement. Without this, HS2's utility would have been comparable to a short section of disconnected, abruptly ending cycle track, failing to integrate into a broader network. SENRUG refrained from taking a position on HS2, considering the project's limited direct impact on the North East and the divisive nature of the debate.

This development leads to two primary conclusions. Firstly, HS2 has been consistently misrepresented. The project's emphasis should not have been on high speed, as the reduction in travel time from Birmingham to London cannot alone justify the exorbitant costs. Instead, the focus of HS2 should be understood as addressing capacity issues on the existing West Coast line. If a new line is necessary, then building it to support high speeds seems logical.

Secondly, the cost of procrastination is evident. Government projects often see escalating costs due to delays, with the government bearing the risk of rising supplier costs, unlike in most industries. With HS2, each postponement has significantly inflated the project's overall costs.

**The Cost of Delay:** The HS2 experience highlights the financial consequences of government procrastination, with escalating costs due to ongoing delays in decision-making.

The government intends to allocate the funds saved from the cancellation of HS2's northern leg to smaller transport projects in the North. SENRUG hopes this redirection will support its campaigns, such as the Newcastle-Berwick local service with a re-opened Belford Station and the expansion of the Northumberland Line once open. However, there is currently little indication that these projects will benefit from the redirected funds.



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Proposed HS2 platforms in Manchester Piccadilly - Bennetts Associates