

Mayoral Election Hustings Special

SENUG Leads Public Transport Debate: North East

Mayoral Candidates to Converge at Morpeth Town Hall

The SENUG hustings meeting with the candidates for North East Mayor, held on Thursday 11th April, was a complete success – according to Dennis Fancett, Chair of the voluntary group that campaigns for better rail services in South East and East Northumberland.

Voters packed into Morpeth Town Hall to hear Guy Renner-Thompson (Conservative), Andrew Gray (Green), Jamie Driscoll (the sitting Mayor who is standing as an independent), Thom Campion who spoke on behalf of Aidan King the Liberal-Democrat candidate, and Paul Donaghy (Reform UK) set out their public transport policies and take questions from the audience. Kim McGuinness the Labour Party candidate was also invited but unable to attend and no representative from the Labour party was available to speak on her behalf.

SENUG is a non-politically aligned pro-rail campaign group that works with all parties, whether in government or opposition.

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Photo Credit: Andrew Carmichael

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SENUG Hosts Mayoral Candidates: A Critical Dialogue on the Future of North East Public Transport

In a recent public meeting hosted by SENUG, the focus shifted from its usual rail industry speakers to an event of broader community significance—the upcoming mayoral elections.

Dennis Fancett, chair of SENUG, highlighted the importance of this gathering, noting that the new mayor will wield considerable influence over public transport policies across the North East. "It's crucial that our members and the wider community understand each candidate's vision for transportation and have the opportunity to engage directly with them," said Dennis.

The hustings, keenly attended by locals, addressed several pressing issues. High on the agenda was the widespread concern regarding the proposed service reductions in the train companies' December 2024 timetable.

The integration of bus services with trains also sparked significant discussion, particularly the potential for Morpeth's new bus route 777 to connect directly to Morpeth station, enhancing accessibility to the airport.

Another critical topic was the need for improved local rail services. Participants called for more frequent and reliable connections at smaller stations between Morpeth and Berwick, suggesting that such enhancements could transform local accessibility. The complexity of the current fare system was also debated, with a unanimous call for simplification

to encourage public use and make train travel more user-friendly.

Candidates presented varied perspectives on introducing emission charges for road traffic in Newcastle City Centre—a measure intended to reduce pollution and promote public transport as a cleaner alternative. Their differing views underscored the complexity of balancing economic impacts with environmental benefits.

The meeting also served as a platform to recognise SENUG's longstanding advocacy efforts, particularly its 19-year campaign for the Northumberland Line. There was unanimous support among the candidates for not only the Northumberland Line project, but also for further extensions and the potential reopening of the Leamside Line in County Durham.

With the mayoral elections scheduled for May 2nd, SENUG reaffirms its non-political stance, committed to working constructively with whoever holds office.

SENUG continues to invite community members who are passionate about improving regional transport to join its ranks and strengthen its campaigning efforts. For more information on our campaigns or how to support, visit www.senrug.co.uk. This engagement highlights SENUG's pivotal role in shaping the future of transportation in the North East, ensuring that public transport remains a key issue in the electoral discourse.



SENUG Advocates for Airport Bus Route to Morpeth Station

SENUG is championing enhancements to the new Airport Bus route, which already significantly shortens travel time to the airport from Morpeth compared to routes via Regent Centre.

By directly connecting Morpeth to the airport, this service offers a faster, more direct alternative for travellers.

However, SENUG is actively campaigning for the bus to extend to Morpeth Station's bus turning circle, ensuring seamless travel connections for rail passengers.

This adjustment would greatly improve accessibility and convenience, further integrating bus and rail transport in the region.

Photo Credit: Geoff Stainthorpe



Editor's Opinion: The Fraying Threads of First Class - A Reflection on our Rail Services.

It's a cold day when the promise of 'First Class' service on our railways fails to keep pace with the expectations set by its premium pricing. Recently, a journey from Cramlington to Birmingham served as a stark reminder that the premium paid by passengers doesn't always translate into premium service.

After a disheartening trip where the 09:40 CrossCountry train from Newcastle to Birmingham was bursting at the seams — an experience marked by cramped conditions and unacknowledged reservations — the return journey was equally telling of the gradual erosion in service standards. Opting for a First Class upgrade via SeatFrog for the return leg seemed a prudent choice, not for luxury, but in hopes of a basic level of comfort and service that should accompany the higher price tag. However, the reality was a far cry from the promise.

Settling into the First Class cabin of the 16:03 service back to Newcastle, what was I to expect? A comfy seat, maybe a bit of food, and if the stars aligned, a hot drink. What a fool I was. I sat in first class, which, was just an uncomfortable seat in a different part of the train. Not a snack or hot beverage in sight.

It was like buying a VIP ticket to a festival and finding out the VIP area was just a slightly less muddy patch of ground.

Not once during this journey did a ticket inspector come by to check my upgrade. I tried to summon the trolley service, which I was sure existed—I had, after all, been promised such amenities on the tannoy. When I tweeted my despair, CrossCountry's response was the digital equivalent of a shrug. Apparently, "complimentary" means you can have it if you can find it, and good luck with that.

At one point, a guard clocking off at Leeds, waltzed through with a goody bag of snacks and drinks for himself and worse still, arriving at Durham, whilst the staff were still invisible when it came to servicing First Class passengers, I observed a guard providing a complimentary cup of tea to a guest passenger from the Northern Rail's security staff.

There I was, witnessing the closest thing to a mirage in the arid desert of train hospitality.

This incident was not just about a missed cup of tea or an unchecked ticket; it was symptomatic of a broader decay in service quality, where the basic expectations of paying customers are not met. It is not just the mechanical aspects of rail transport that need regular overhauls and upgrades — customer service too needs a renaissance. Passengers who pay a premium for First Class are not merely buying a seat; they are investing in an

experience. When that experience fails to deliver, it undermines trust in the entire rail system.

The rail companies might argue operational challenges or unforeseen service disruptions, but these should not be excuses for systematic failings in service delivery.

Railways are more than mere modes of transport; they are part of a service industry and must prioritise the needs and expectations of all passengers. It's crucial for railway companies to re-evaluate their commitments and ensure that the difference between classes reflects a tangible improvement in quality and experience, not just cost. For passengers, our concerns extend beyond merely traveling from point A to B; we seek value and quality in the service we pay for. In a time when environmental concerns should be pushing more people towards public transport, it's imperative that railways enhance their offerings. They owe their customers services that justify the costs, meet advertised standards, and respect their patronage. Given that a standard return train ticket from Newcastle to Birmingham can cost over three times as much as putting £50 of petrol in a car, the need for action is clear.

When I disembarked I continued my journey in the pouring rain — metro to bus, each requiring a new ticket. Why make public transport seamless when you can make it a multi-ticket treasure hunt?

Mayoral Election Hustings - Candidate Statements

In the spirit of fostering informed public dialogue on the future of our transport system, SENRUG invited each mayoral candidate to share their vision. On the next few pages, you'll find their concise statements on policies for public transport provision in the North East; in alphabetical order by candidate name.

Aidan King, Liberal Democrats

This mayoral election is an opportunity for transformational change in our region and nowhere is that more obvious than on transport.

Whether it's bringing buses back under public control or investing in new rail lines like the Leamside Line, the Mayor's transport powers are one of the key headlines in this deal and will play a huge part in shaping our region for years to come.

I have three key priorities if elected:

1. Build the Leamside Line
2. Create an integrated transport network
3. Improve walking and cycling routes

The Leamside Line

The Leamside Line is a hugely important part of our transport jigsaw that's sadly been missing for too long. I would use the finance generated from our North East Wind Asset, as well as moneys leveraged through central government, to reopen the Leamside Line as soon as possible. I would also purchase land along this route and re-designate it for housing and industrial sites, creating a new generation of housing and business directly linked to our regions transport system.

Creating an integrated transport network

Multi-modal tickets are meaningless if your bus arrives 5 minutes after your metro leaves or your train arrives after you've just missed your connecting bus. I will work with bus operators, rail companies and the Metro to create a timetable that works for residents, not companies.

Improving walking and cycling routes

If we want to get people out of their cars and using public transport, we need to make sure the first and last mile of the journey is the best it can be. If we're not encouraging people into using active travel with well thought-out and well maintained walking and cycling routes then people will always just choose the car. I'll work with local authorities across the region to sort out our roads and pavements.

We can and should demand better for transport. Only the Liberal Democrats have a plan to improve our transport and pay for it without putting a penny on your tax bill.



Liberal Democrats



COMPETITION WINNER

Last issue, we ran a competition to win an afternoon tea for two in conjunction with Green's Cafe at Morpeth Railway Station.

We're delighted to announce that the winner of the competition were David & Sheila Marlow who answered the question correctly! Congratulations!

The question was: What was the subject of the SENRUG Chairman's blog post on 3rd Sept? The answer was: The Aln Valley Railway!

Mayoral Election Hustings - Candidate Statements

As part of our commitment to enhancing public transport in the North East, SENRUG invited each mayoral candidate to outline their policies and visions, presented to inform and engage our community. Their responses continue with Andrew Grey representing the Green Party.

Andrew Grey, Green Party

Imagine a North East where every town, village and neighbourhood is thriving and resilient.

- Vibrant high streets and town centres, with a good range of shops on your doorstep
- Neighbours staying in their homes, which are warm, secure and affordable
- Local clubs and societies thriving
- Green space within 15 minutes of every home, in which to play, exercise and socialise.

Why start an article about transport policy with policies for housing, planning and the economy? Not just because all these things are worth having in their own right (which they are). Nor because different policies relate to each other and have to work together to be effective (which they do). I start with policies to build resilient neighbourhoods, because the most important (and hardest) part of any sustainable travel policy is reducing the need to travel in the first place. If our region is to thrive sustainably, then a community first approach will be needed to reduce the need for travel.

But to thrive sustainably, communities need good public transport connections with each other (and not just via big city transport hubs). That will mean regulated bus services, with routes, timetables and fares set by the mayor, so that buses run according to need, not just where they can make the biggest profits for the bus companies. It also means rail services operating to support local transport needs, not just the most profitable Edinburgh/London journeys. That requires integrated ticketing and fare caps, station improvements, and coordination of timetables.

And we need more than just good connectivity and integration, because we won't thrive if some people feel unsafe on public transport or at bus stops, or can't afford the fares, or can't access a bus or train due to it not being accessible. So the regulated bus contracts will need to include clauses on real time information, driver training and other safety measures. And we will need to get more people out of cars and onto buses or local trains to keep fares affordable.

Most of the rail improvements needed are not in the gift of the mayor - so SENRUG's campaigning work is far from over! But by adding my voice to Council leaders and local campaigners, we can together build stronger communities, reduce time spent travelling, and create the integrated bus and rail system that our region deserves.



Green Party

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Mayoral Election Hustings - Candidate Statements

Continuing from our previous page, we feature more candidates and their dedicated policies for public transport. Each statement offers insight into the future of travel in our region, as envisioned by those who aim to lead.

Guy Renner-Thompson - Conservatives

In week one of being elected I will launch a region wide review with bus companies, schools, collages, large employers, councils and communities to find and fill the gaps in the bus network. I will work with bus companies and councils to fill those gaps.

I will mandate that live digital timetables are installed at bus stops, linked with GPS trackers on the buses, so travellers know exactly when the bus is coming.

I will lead a railway renaissance in the North East. I've seen firsthand with our team at Northumberland County Council how we can deliver new rail services with the Northumberland Line running from Newcastle to Ashington. I will extend the line with a station at Newbiggin and the potential for a station at Lynemouth to support the development of the former Alcan Aluminium Smelter site.

Re-opening Leamside will enable parts of the region who have no access to rail to be connected with Newcastle, Sunderland and Teesside, as well as with significant employers like Nissan.

The East Coast Main Line runs down the spine of the region, but the priority has been fast trains between London and Edinburgh. I will prioritise a regular stopping service north of Newcastle including a re-opened Belford station. By investing in passing loops we can have a local service without compromising on intercity connectivity.

Our government is currently providing £337 million of funding to bring a new Metro train fleet and maintenance depot, I will continue to invest in the Metro to make it safer, cleaner, and greener.

I will expand the metro with the Washington Metro Loop. The loop would link the existing Metro stations at Pelaw and South Hylton via Washington. I will also seek expansion to Cobalt Business Park and Team Valley, the Metro Centre, and lengthening the line at Newcastle Airport into Ponteland.

78% of all miles travelled are by car, more in our vast rural areas.

I will prioritise key road duelling and junction upgrades and will make the case for the upgrading of A19 junctions North of Newcastle, full A1 duelling and will press for further work to improve the safety, capacity and speed of the A69. I will put £100 million into fixing potholes on our current road network.

All of my transport projects will recognise the importance of car travel and any developments that hinder car access to our cities will be discouraged.



SEN RUG IN THE PRESS

Since our last issue, SEN RUG has been actively engaging with the national media, providing insights on recent developments. Chair Dennis Fancett has been featured in The Guardian and on BBC online, offering comments on the Northumberland Line and the contentious new ECML timetable.

The Guardian - Northumberland Line:
<https://rb.gy/qzszog>

BBC - Northumberland Line:
rb.gy/ljz98y

BBC - ECML TimeTable Changes:
<https://rb.gy/qii4n0>

Mayoral Election Hustings - Candidate Statements

SEN RUG reached out to the mayoral candidates, requesting a brief outline of their visions for the North East's public transport. Here, we continue to present their committed policies, aimed at enhancing connectivity and service quality.

Jamie Driscoll - Independent

During my 2019 North of Tyne Mayor election I visited Ashington Academy. The teacher told me that every September, on her way into work, she drove past the bus stop. She'd see 20 to 30 of her former students waiting for the bus into Newcastle to their college courses. In January she'd pass the same bus stop, she told me, and she'd see 4 or 5 of them. The long bus journey, the walk at the other end, was causing young adults to give up on their vocational training.

In my 2019 manifesto, I said I would unite the region so we could get devolved transport powers and funding. I've kept that promise – and it took a lot of work. Many people in our region didn't want to unite into a Mayoral combined Authority. Central Government didn't want to give us anywhere near the money we now have. It is the best funded devolution deal in the country – £6.1 billion in total.

I'll use it to create a Total Transport Network. Fully accessible publicly controlled buses, extended Metro lines, integrated ticketing, increased active travel, capped fares and free travel for under-18s and students.

I'll get the funding in place to open the Leamside Line, through Gateshead and County Durham. We need further Government investment, and can also lever in private investment from pension funds – I've begun those conversations already. It will take longer than one Mayoral term to complete, though.

I'll extend the Metro out of South Hylton through Washington and into Gateshead, and beyond the Airport to Ponteland. I want to connect Silverlink and Cobalt to Northumberland Park and Percy Main. I'll deliver a mass transit route to the Outer West of Newcastle in the first term – most likely a superbus route. And have on-demand buses connecting rural areas, completing the network.

Already as North of Tyne Mayor, I've created 5,377 permanent, full-time jobs. Increased training courses from 22,000 to 35,000 a year. Built 2,133 new homes on brownfield land. Run a child poverty prevention programme in 100 schools. And all without taking on any debt or charging a single penny in council tax. Competence matters.

In my 2019 manifesto I said I'd back the Northumberland Line. It opens this summer, with £10 million of North of Tyne investment. Future graduates of Ashington Academy will not have their doors to the future closed by poor transport.



JAMIE DRISCOLL
AN INDEPENDENT
NORTH EAST MAYOR

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Mayoral Election Hustings - Candidate Statements

As we continue our exploration of the candidates' views on public transport, SENUG presents the remaining statements. Each candidate was asked to outline their approach to enhancing our region's transport infrastructure for the future.

Kim McGuinness (Labour)

North East Labour Mayoral candidate Kim McGuinness has committed to taking back control of the bus network in order to give passengers a bigger say over fares, routes and timetables.

Kim's promise to take buses under public control has been backed by Shadow Transport Secretary Louise Haigh, who promised that a Labour Government would support Kim to take back control of buses in the North East. Haigh pledged that a Labour Government would break down barriers to public control of buses and would provide the support to shave years off the bus franchising process compared to the uphill struggle faced by Greater Manchester.

Kim's transport manifesto includes pledges to:

- Create a joined-up transport network in which one pass works for bus, rail and Metro.
- More ticket gates and staff at Metro stations.
- Order a review of all rural transport to identify urgent areas of action.
- Introduce free travel for children and subsidised fares for those seeking work.
- Replace all diesel buses with electric buses as part of plans for the UK's greenest transport network.
- Secure funding to expand the Metro, with at least three more stations on the Washington Metro loop.
- Work to ensure the reopening of the Leamside Line railway in Durham.
- Ensure delayed stations on the new Northumberland Line are finally opened.
- Negotiate a new devolution deal to include public control of major train stations.
- Create an extensive network of electric vehicle charging points to improve uptake of EVs regionwide.
- Carry out a regionwide accessibility audit and set clear targets to improve travel for elderly and disabled passengers.

Kim McGuinness said: "The North East needs a publicly-controlled bus network that puts passengers before profit. As mayoral I'll start this process on day one. In my first term we'll see buses rebranded as part of an Angel Network, bringing public control of fares, routes and timetables – and we'll do it faster than anywhere else.

"This is part of a wider plan to have greenest transport network in the country. From Electric vehicle charging infrastructure to climate-friendly buses, we will lead the way in the North East.

"The next step is to get more devolution so the regions have a bigger say over train operators. We need to be able to come together and kick out failed train operators rather than waiting for Government officials in London to step in."



Mayoral Election Hustings - Candidate Statements

Continuing from our previous page, we feature more candidates and their dedicated policies for public transport. Each statement offers insight into the future of travel in our region, as envisioned by those who aim to lead.

Paul Donaghy - Reform UK

Our Transport and Infrastructure has suffered from under investment and lack of joined up thinking. I propose a fully integrated North East public transport network that works for the people, with a single purchase ticket or pass for journeys to cover the region.

A partially Publicly owned transport network that will prioritise affordability and reliability. Fares that are reasonable for passengers with free transport for school age children during term time and continued reduced rate for Students; making public transportation accessible to a wider range of people, including those with lower incomes and encourage those who normally choose to use personal vehicles.

I will ensure that essential services are available to all, especially in less profitable areas. A transport network that will harness the strengths of both sectors: public ownership for essential services and private innovation for efficiency and variety, but enables reinvestment of profits into improving services, instead of shareholders' pockets. These funds will go towards enhancing infrastructure, expanding networks, we will make decisions based on community needs and adopting cleaner technologies, we will not put all of our eggs in one basket with electric buses, however we will utilize this technology on certain routes where financially viable.

I will prioritize connecting smaller villages & towns based on community needs with reliable public owned buses to ensure that services reach underserved areas, connecting people to jobs, education, and healthcare to all

As contracts, partnerships and franchise agreements with private operators come to an end we will ensure any new agreements define minimum service levels, quality standards, and financial arrangements that benefit the region, Failure will not be tolerated or rewarded.

Reopening of the Leamside Line would provide critical connections to both passenger and freight, connecting towns and cities across the North East, helping to drive the economy and growth of the region using existing infrastructure. It's time to stop talking and start delivering, this is one of the most important pieces of infrastructure for the economic future of the North East.

I will scrap the Low emission scheme in Newcastle and Gateshead, this stealth tax punishes businesses, furthermore there will be no low emission schemes anywhere in the North East on my watch, pollution does not stop because you pay a few quid, We do our bit for the environment by ensuring our public transport network is reliable, affordable and fit for purpose, reducing the dependence on motor vehicles.



The SENRUG Vision

You've heard from the Mayoral Candidates - Now it's time for SENRUG's Visionary Leap: Propelling North East's Rail Services into the Future

In a transformative blueprint for the North East, SENRUG lays out a comprehensive strategy to overhaul rail services across South East and East Northumberland. At the heart of this ambitious plan is the enhancement and expansion of the Northumberland Line, poised to serve as a linchpin for regional connectivity and economic revival.

Key Proposals:

Newcastle to Berwick Local Service: Advocated through SENRUG's "North Sea Coast Local Rail Service" leaflet, this hourly service aims to vitalise smaller communities such as Pegswood, Widdrington and Chathill, while proposing new stations at Belford and Beal, enhancing accessibility and promoting local tourism.

Butterwell Branch Upgrade: This proposal seeks to double-track and upgrade the existing freight route, thereby providing a faster and more direct route for both passenger and freight services heading to and from the North.

Advocating for Long-Distance Services:

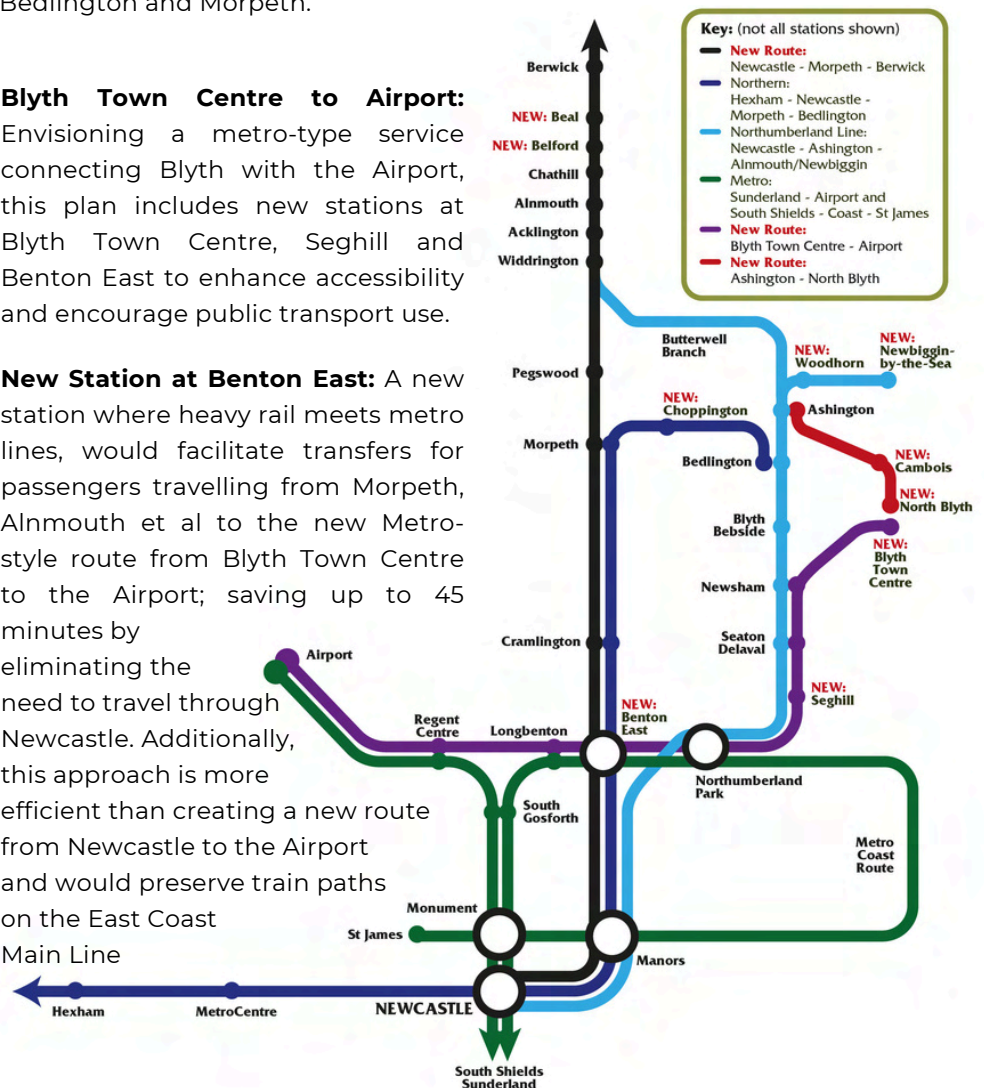
SENRUG stands firmly against reductions in long-distance services and strongly opposes the proposed timetable changes in December. SENRUG advocates for hourly long-distance trains at Alnmouth and Berwick, and bi-hourly at Morpeth. The Transpennine Liverpool-Edinburgh route, promised in 2019 should also stop at Cramlington, Alnmouth and Berwick. Our stance underscores our commitment to maintaining robust connectivity and service levels, opposing any proposals that would diminish access to essential services and destinations.

Bedlington to Morpeth via Choppington: By extending the Carlisle - Morpeth service to Bedlington using existing tracks, SENRUG envisions a swift 7-minute connection, bypassing current lengthy bus routes and fostering economic synergy between East Bedlington and Morpeth.

Blyth Town Centre to Airport: Envisioning a metro-type service connecting Blyth with the Airport, this plan includes new stations at Blyth Town Centre, Seghill and Benton East to enhance accessibility and encourage public transport use.

New Station at Benton East: A new station where heavy rail meets metro lines, would facilitate transfers for passengers travelling from Morpeth, Alnmouth et al to the new Metro-style route from Blyth Town Centre to the Airport; saving up to 45 minutes by eliminating the need to travel through Newcastle. Additionally, this approach is more efficient than creating a new route from Newcastle to the Airport and would preserve train paths on the East Coast Main Line

Ashington to Newbiggin Extension: Proposing an extension to Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, this initiative not only aims to regenerate the seaside village but also to offer a direct route to major attractions like the Woodhorn Museum, drastically reducing travel time to Newcastle.



Do you like what you're reading? Get behind the proposals! The more people we speak for, the stronger our voice! Annual membership starts from as little as £2.50!



The SENUG Vision - A Blueprint for Future-Ready Station Infrastructure and Integrated Transport Services.

In a visionary stride toward revolutionising local transport infrastructure, SENUG has laid out a comprehensive proposal aimed at enhancing the commuter experience across Northumberland's stations and transport services. Central to this vision is a robust plan to standardise and elevate the facilities at all stations, ensuring they cater efficiently to the needs of everyday commuters and occasional travellers alike.

SENUG champions the establishment of consistent amenities at all stations to meet the needs of both regular commuters and occasional travellers effectively.

Elevating Station Infrastructure: SENUG advocates for a uniform set of amenities across all stations. This includes ensuring level access to all platforms to accommodate all users, installing customer information screens for real-time updates, and providing audible announcements to guide passengers effectively. Additionally, printed timetable information and secure bike lockers would support the growing number of cyclists. For larger stations, SENUG proposes more comprehensive services: staffed ticket offices, comfortable waiting rooms, and clean toilets available throughout operating hours. Adding to the convenience are proposed cafés, shops, ATMs, parcel pickup lockers, and accessible taxi ranks, transforming

stations into vibrant community hubs.

Seamless Integration Across Transport Modes: Recognising the need for a cohesive travel network, SENUG is pushing for tighter integration between train, bus, and Metro services. This includes physical infrastructure improvements such as buses serving station turning circles to facilitate easy transitions between modes.

Moreover, SENUG celebrates the inclusion of Northumberland Line stations in the Metro Zone system and is advocating for its extension to include Cramlington and Morpeth, with the goal of encompassing all regional stations.

Timetable synchronisation is also crucial, especially in rural areas, where connections between less frequent services can dramatically affect usability and commuter satisfaction.

Understanding the importance of a unified travel network, SENUG is advocating for improved coordination among train, bus, and Metro services.

Strategic Station Relocations and Upgrades: Two significant projects underscore SENUG's commitment to localised improvement: the proposed relocation of Cramlington Station to a more central location, enhancing accessibility and integration with local bus services, and the redevelopment of Manors Station to increase capacity,

create level access and foster connections with nearby Metro services and community facilities, including potential new leisure spaces like street cafés.

SENUG suggests a significant simplification of the fare system to make rail travel less complicated and more accessible.

To reduce complexity and make rail travel more user-friendly, SENUG proposes a radical simplification of the fare system. Envisioning just three fare categories per journey type, this reform aims to minimise errors and misuse, making fares fairer and more transparent for all users.

Through these initiatives, SENUG is not only enhancing the functionality and appeal of public transport in Northumberland; it is also spearheading efforts to create a more integrated, accessible, and user-friendly system. A system that is designed to encourage wider adoption among residents and contribute to sustainable transport goals - crucial in today's environmentally conscious world. SENUG's approach is set to usher in a new era of mobility, tailored to meet the diverse needs of our communities and perfectly aligned with contemporary transport standards.

Our detailed leaflet on these proposals is on our website. If you have a suitable location for displaying this information, please contact chair@senrug.co.uk and help spread the word.

Reviving Connections: A Journey Along the Reopened Bicol Railway

Our intrepid explorer Ronald Hunt rediscovers the rails with a scenic early morning journey aboard the newly restored Naga to Legazpi route, with the majestic Mayon Volcano watching over the path of the Philippine National Railways

The Revival of Philippine Railways

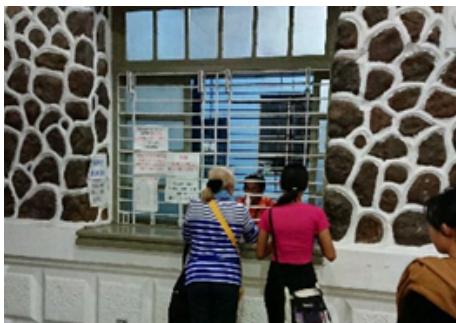
(Some text provided by PNR, images courtesy of Ronald Hunt)

The Philippine National Railways (PNR) is a state-owned railway company which operates one commuter rail service between Metro Manila and Laguna, and local services between Naga and Legazpi in the Bicol Region (Pacific coast).

PNR Railways began operations in November 1892, Manila-Dagupan, during the Spanish colonial period, and later becoming the Manila Railroad Company (MRR) during the American colonial period. It became the Philippine National Railways in June 1964.

PNR used to operate over 1,100 km (684 mi) of route from La Union to the Bicol Region. PNR trains served various parts of Luzon with its 138 (once) active stations.

PNR's service has been reduced in recent years due to problems with informal settlers in the 1990's as well as natural disasters. The government is currently in the process of reinvesting in the railway through numerous projects set to revive defunct lines and create new ones. There are now several metro lines operating around Manila.



A PNR Ticket Office



Inside the Indonesian built train



Map of Luzon region Philippines showing rail routes: Black = historic. Orange = newly re-opened.

In 2011, PNR resumed daily long-distance passenger trains between Manila and Naga City (Manila to Bicol is approx 450km) after they'd been discontinued some years previously due to typhoon damage. PNR say that the Bicol Express train was a comfortable and safe way to travel between Manila and Naga, overnight with air-conditioned sleepers bought second-hand from Japanese Railways. However, in late 2012 all trains were suspended once again after hurricane damage and they have not run since.



Mayon Volcano & rail lines near Legazpi

The route from Manila to Clark City in North Luzon is currently being brought back in operation with the construction of an elevated electrified line which has been seen in March 2024 to be at an advanced stage of construction and is due to open in 2025. The Naga City to Legazpi section (101 km) was reopened in December 2023.

This is a short account of a journey in Philippines made in March 2024. The writer – a SENRUG member - was visiting Legazpi City and took the opportunity to take a trip on the newly re-opened line.

The story of this trip started in Legazpi City at 4am that morning getting up first to take a motor tricycle ride to the Legazpi station for the 5.30am train heading north to Naga City. Legazpi is the end of the line. The major tourist sight in the Legazpi region is the Mayon Volcano which is a perfect cone and dominates the skyline. The journey started in darkness and it was 50km to Polangui, an intermediate station on the line. The train (newly built by Inka Indonesia – see Footnote) comprised a PNR 9000 Class diesel locomotive with four air conditioned carriages. Throughout the journey the carriage was very cold. This train had quite a number of passengers and several staff members on board. Announcements were made in each coach by hand held loudspeaker. We also had the company of a cockerel in a cage bought on board by one of the passengers.

There were eight stations stopped at before arriving at the destination and passengers were joining and leaving at each station. Since travelling all the way to Naga city would have been three hours and then a return journey would have resulted in a really a long day the decision was made to get off at the midway point and return by long distance bus service. The PNR staff were friendly, very courteous and helpful throughout even giving assistance after leaving the train.

Footnote - About the locomotive - The INKA CC300, also known as the PNR 9000 Class in the Philippines, is a multipurpose diesel-hydraulic locomotive. Owned by the Directorate General of Railways and built by PT INKA, an Indonesian state-owned manufacturer, it was launched in 2013. This model marks Indonesia's first domestically produced mainline locomotive and its first export, with the first units arriving in the Philippines in December 2020. It features a 2500hp Caterpillar C15 engine.