



Response to  
**Northumberland County Council**  
**Northumberland Public Transport Strategy 2011-2016 – Consultation Draft**  
(Comments required by 29<sup>th</sup> February 2012)

Comments from SENRUG  
The South East Northumberland Rail User Group  
Issue 2, submitted on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2012  
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**Note:** Page and section numbers highlighted in **blue font** refer to text within the Draft Strategy. Paragraph numbers not highlighted in blue refer to other paragraphs within this response.

**Changes from issue 1 (23<sup>rd</sup> January 2012):**

Section 4.3.1: addition of new bullet re Woodhorn to Newbiggin

Section 7.2: insertion of latest passenger numbers for Morpeth station

**1. Integrated Strategy**

SENRUG welcomes the decision to create a single integrated strategy for bus and rail rather than have separate strategy documents for each mode of transport. But SENRUG believes the Council should go significantly further in integrating its strategies and recommends the following actions:

1.1 **Section 4.2 (page 44)** refers to £1.92m being available for capital projects relating to bus strategy, whereas **Section 7.2 (page 75)** implies none of the Council's own money is available to fund capital projects for rail, even though the **Section 1.4 (page 12)** states the Council does currently provide capital funding for rail projects. This does not evidence genuine integration of strategy. Available Council funding should be capable of being used on for any form of public transport project, based on merit.

1.2 Where the Council subsidises local bus services, the route specification for appropriate services should include minor adjustments to serve nearby rail stations, thus contributing towards Council objectives set out in **Section 3.3 Infrastructure and Schemes / Interchanges and Bus Stations (page 37)**. For Morpeth rail station, the subsidised bus route from Thropton & Rothbury to Morpeth should be extended beyond the bus station (or in the case of through journeys to Newcastle, diverted) to the rail station (that is, bus turning circle in Coopies Lane). For Alnmouth, consideration should be given to extending the subsidised bus services from Wooler to Alnwick to Alnmouth rail station.

1.3 Where the Council subsidises bus routes for school transport, it should consider whether it would be more cost effective to subsidise rail services in some cases (perhaps with shorter, feeder bus

routes to the stations) and thus at the same time achieve some of its rail objectives as stated in [Section 5.3 \(page 48\)](#) and [Section 6.1 \(page 56\)](#). (See also comment on legislative framework at para 7.1).

1.4 The bus route the Council aspires to be introduced from Ashington and Bedlington to Cobalt Business Park ([Section 3.1 / Service Delivery / Future Developments \(page 24\)](#)) should be cross-referenced to the Council's Local Transport Plan objective of re-opening the Ashington Blyth & Tyne railway line ([Section 6.3 Route Upgrades / Future Developments / Ashington Blyth & Tyne \(page 71\)](#)). This line would connect Ashington and Bedlington stations to Northumberland Park which already has an established bus link to the Cobalt Business Park (3 minute journey). The cost of subsidising the bus route should be off-set against the revenue funding required for the railway line re-opening, as the bus route would not be required once trains are running.

1.5 The bus route the Council aspires to be introduced from Ponteland to Morpeth ([Section 3.1 Future Developments / Ponteland \(page 26\)](#)) should call at Morpeth rail station rather than only serve the bus station, to give the villages to the west of Morpeth access to the rail network. At the Ponteland end, the route should be extended to Newcastle Airport; not only would this provide a much needed public transport connection from Northumberland to the airport itself, but the communities served by the route would also gain access to the Metro network through the station at the airport. Extending the route to the airport might make the required subsidy lower due to the extra passenger numbers. SENRUG notes the Hexham to Ponteland subsidised bus route has already recently been diverted to serve the airport as well ([Section 2.1 / Ponteland \(page 18\)](#)).

1.6 For commercially operated bus services, the Council should seek to negotiate with the operator for rail nearby rail stations to be served thus achieving the objectives set out in [Section 3.3 Infrastructure and Schemes / Interchanges and Bus Stations \(page 37\)](#). For Morpeth, the services from (i) Ashington via Stakeford, (ii) Bedlington via Guide Post and (iii) Pegswood to Newcastle and (iv) Lancaster Park to Stobhill local service should be diverted to serve the bus turning circle in Coopies Lane at Morpeth rail station. At Cramlington, the bus service to Nelson Village should additionally serve the rail station. For infrequent services (hourly or less), timetables should be adjusted to make reasonable connections with train times.

1.7 The need for integrated ticketing between bus operators is mentioned in [Section 3.3 Ticketing \(page 32\)](#) though the Council appears to be unaware of the existing Explorer North East ticket that provides this. SENRUG believes the Council should lobby for this ticket to be extended to include local rail services in Northumberland (it already includes Metro and Newcastle to Sunderland rail) and take steps to promote the availability of the ticket. Given the paucity of local rail services in the evenings, an integrated bus / rail ticket would allow passengers to return by bus if a suitable rail service is not available. The facilities of the Explorer North East ticket as well as allowing for simpler return journeys to be made by bus in one direction and rail in the other should be incorporated into the new smart ticketing technology shortly to be introduced.

1.8 In [Section 1.7 \(Aims & Objectives / Aims \(page 14\)\)](#) and again in the concluding paragraph of this section ([page 16](#)), the text refers solely to bus services but should be amended to include all public transport eg rail as well. (SENRUG suspect this is simply a drafting error caused by the merger of formerly two separate documents rather than a deliberate policy to exclude rail).

## **2. Rail: Minimum Train Service Requirements by Station**

2.1 SENRUG welcomes the Council's work to define minimum train service requirements at each Northumberland Rail station, as per the tables set out in [Section 5.3 \(page 48\)](#) and [Section 6.1 \(page 56\)](#). [NB - these appear to be duplicate entries of the same table].

2.2 SENRUG has two concerns as to how the information is presented:

a) The information given on existing service levels, and SENRUG suspects the minimum train service requirement specified, applies to Monday to Saturday daytime service only. Further tables should be provided (or additional columns inserted into the current tables) to provide existing service levels and minimum requirements for (i) evenings and (ii) Sundays. SENRUG is willing to recommend minimum service requirements for evening and Sunday services for stations on the East Coast Main Line (both local and inter-city type services).

b) Data is presented inconsistently, with frequencies such as “hourly” applying to services in each direction whereas frequencies such as “4 trains per day” refers to the totality of trains in both directions, thus appearing to overstate provision when this methodology is used. It also makes it difficult to follow what the Council proposes at stations such as Pegswood and Widdrington where the methodology employed changes from the “Current Service” to “Required Service” column. SENRUG recommends the number of services *in each direction* is used throughout, with an amendment to the column heading to clarify this.

2.3 The table states Morpeth station currently has 6 East Coast trains daily whereas since the May 2011 timetable change it in fact has 8 (9 on Fridays) which as per para 2.2 (b) we recommend is expressed as 4 each way (5 northbound on Fridays). SENRUG is particularly disappointed the Council has **not** noted the full extent of the service improvements introduced by East Coast in May 2011 following intense lobbying by SENRUG and other Northumberland Rail User Groups.

2.4 SENRUG offers the following comments on the Required Service levels for inter-city type services stated:

a) SENRUG warmly supports the Council’s requirement to see Morpeth have a minimum of 8 (4 each way) CrossCountry trains per day.

b) As already mentioned at para 2.3, Morpeth already has 8 East Coast trains per day (4 each way), and SENRUG recommends the required service level be increased to 12 (6 each way), with the additional services being off peak (perhaps one mid-morning and one mid-afternoon in each direction), allowing South East Northumberland residents to benefit from the cheaper advance fares that are only available on off-peak services.

c) A limitation of the Council’s methodology of splitting the required service level by franchise operator is that it is difficult to see the totality of inter-city type services as a whole. SENRUG understands the most popular inter-city type destinations from Morpeth (after London) are York and Edinburgh. These destinations are served by both inter-city type operators (East Coast and CrossCountry). At Morpeth, SENRUG believes the requirement should be for an inter-city type service every 2 hours each way throughout the day. This equates to 10 services each way (allowing for some concentration of services in peak periods). Whilst this could be achieved through 6 East Coast and 4 CrossCountry services as per paras 2.4 (a) and 2.4 (b), it is important to note that some flexibility in the operator would be acceptable.

2.5 SENRUG offers the following comments on the Required Service levels for local services stated:

a) SENRUG warmly supports the Councils requirements to see the Cramlington and Morpeth Northern Rail service doubled from every hour to every 30 minutes throughout the day, and the service to Pegswood and Widdrington increased from 2 trains per day to hourly throughout the day (all service frequencies quoted apply to each direction).

b) SENRUG welcomes the requirement to see 8 trains per day (4 each way) at Chathill and Alnmouth (Northern Rail service) but believe it is pointless to specify a lower service level for Acklington, as this implies some Chathill services would pass through Acklington without stopping.

c) Whilst SENRUG strongly supports the requirement for increased service at Acklington, Alnmouth (Northern Rail service) and Chathill, SENRUG is concerned that a service of less than 1 train every two hours is insufficient to establish a market and achieve genuine modal shift. SENRUG believes therefore the requirement should be increased to **6 trains each way**, allowing an approx every two hour service from 07.00 hours (morning peak) to 17.00 hours (evening peak).

d) There should be a cross reference in this section to the Council's plan to re-open the station at Belford ([Section 6.3 / Infrastructure / Railway Stations / Future Developments \(page 69\)](#)) with the comment that the service level required at Chathill would also apply to Belford.

e) SENRUG additionally recommends extending the local service from Chathill to Berwick, with Beal and Belford stations re-opened (see para 4.1.) If the Council supports this recommendation there should be an additional reference to it in this section. Note this would require further infrastructure work at Belford as the current Council plan ([Section 6.3 / Infrastructure / Railway Stations / Future Developments \(page 69\)](#)) only provides for a platform on the siding and thus could not be used for through trains.

2.6 SENRUG is most concerned that ***no actions are listed to explain how the Council will achieve its strategy*** for minimum service requirements for local services and recommends the following are added to [Section 6.1 Local Rail Services / Key Action Areas \(page 55\)](#):

- Lobby DfT or use its own franchising powers if devolved to achieve the minimum train service frequencies listed for Cramlington and Morpeth (local trains).
- Lobby DfT or use its own franchising powers if devolved to secure an extension of the current Newcastle – Cramlington – Morpeth service to Pegswood and Widdrington (hourly service), Acklington, Alnmouth (local trains) and Chathill (2-hourly service).
- Consider whether the school transport budget, currently used exclusively for bus services, could be more effectively used by procuring local rail services north of Morpeth to form part of the school transport provision.

2.7 SENRUG is most concerned that ***no actions are listed to explain how the Council will achieve its strategy*** for minimum service requirements for inter-city type services and recommends the following is added to [Section 6.1 Long Distance High Speed Services / Key Action Areas \(page 58\)](#):

- Lobby DfT to achieve minimum service frequencies listed for long distance trains (East Coast and CrossCountry) at Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick, particularly during the re-franchise consultations

### 3. Rail: East Coast Main Line – Capacity For Additional Services

The strategy states in several places ([Section 6.1 Service Delivery / Local Rail Services / Future Developments \(page 53\)](#), [Section 6.1 Service Delivery / Long Distance High Speed Services \(page 57\)](#) and [Section 6.3 Infrastructure / Route Upgrades \(page 71\)](#)) that there is limited capacity on the East Coast Main Line for additional services. SENRUG's own understanding of the position from Network Rail is that there are no capacity constraints north of Newcastle (*Ref Network Rail's East Coast Main Line Rail Utilisation Strategy, Feb 2008, para 3.10.7*). However, SENRUG notes that:

- Additional East Coast and CrossCountry services are constrained by the lack of capacity on sections of the route south of Newcastle (for East Coast) and / or lack of rolling stock (both operators).
- Additional stops on existing East Coast and CrossCountry services are constrained by the DfT and operator's objectives to minimise overall journey times between London or Birmingham and Edinburgh for as many trains as possible, plus the need to have trains arriving at Edinburgh evenly spaced to allow for clock-face departures on the return journey.

- Additional local services are constrained by the fact these trains travel at lower speeds and thus need to be overtaken by inter-city type services en route. Thus to accommodate additional local services over long stretches of the route it is likely re-instatement of some passing loops may be needed. See also the SENRUG proposals at para 4.3.1. Alternatively, introduction of electric trains for the local services would allow higher speeds and faster acceleration from stations, meaning the trains would occupy the line for less time. This would additionally offer shorter journey time benefits for customers, and achieve the Council aspiration on improved rolling stock, as set out in [Section 6.3 / Rolling Stock \(page 73\)](#).

#### 4. Rail: Infrastructure Developments

##### 4.1 Local service North of Morpeth.

Although [Section 5.3 \(page 48\)](#) and [Section 6.1 \(page 56\)](#) calls for an improved service throughout the day north of Morpeth, (1 train per hour as far as Widdrington and 2 trains per day (each way) beyond Widdrington to Chathill), SENRUG is disappointed the strategy does not state the need for the local service to be extended beyond Chathill to Berwick, with Belford and Beal stations re-opened. SENRUG recommends that an additional paragraph be added to specify this, and the minimum service requirement be stated as 1 train every 2 hours (each way) on the section between Widdrington and Berwick. This new paragraph should be cross referenced to a separate new paragraph in [Section 6.3 Infrastructure / Route Upgrades / Future Developments](#) which should state the aspiration to see Belford (fully) and Beal stations re-opened.

##### 4.2 Ashington Blyth & Tyne Network

4.2.1 SENRUG recommends the proposed intermediate stations on the route should be listed in [Section 6.3 Route Upgrades / Future Developments / Ashington Blyth & Tyne \(page 71\)](#). These are (from south to north) Northumberland Park (metro interchange), Seghill, Seaton Delaval, Newsham for Blyth, Bebside, Bedlington, Ashington and possibly Woodhorn. It should be clarified the initial proposals will not serve Blyth Town Centre but will have stations on the perimeter of the town at Newsham for Blyth and Bebside.

4.2.2 Although the strategy notes funding is **not** available for the Ashington Blyth & Tyne re-opening at present, an explanation as to why not should be provided, given this is the Council's major Local Transport Plan objective, and [Section 1.4 / Northumberland County Council Rail Powers \(page 12\)](#) of the strategy states the Council provides funding for schemes listed within its LTP.

4.2.3 The strategy should clarify whether funding is available for the Network Rail GRIP study from Network Rail, which appears to be the next step to take the project forward. The strategy should state what level of GRIP study is proposed (eg GRIP 4).

4.2.4 The Key Action Area ([Section 6.3 page 72](#)) should be more strongly worded, eg:

- Proceed to GRIP 4 study for Ashington Blyth & Tyne re-opening and develop the project further should the result of the GRIP 4 study be positive

4.2.5 A further Key Action Area ([Section 6.3 page 72](#)) should be added to identify what sources of external funding might be available (eg European), eg

- Progress identification of likely sources of external funding to support Ashington Blyth & Tyne re-opening.

4.2.6 The strategy does not comment on the immediate risk to this scheme posed by the likely closure of the Alcan works and subsequent cessation of freight traffic on the northern section of the route. The

Council should develop contingency proposals with urgency to safeguard the scheme should this happen, and the proposals should be added as a further Key Action Area ([Section 6.3 page 72](#)), eg

- Identify contingency plan to safeguard route in the event of closure of mothballing of part of all of the line, in the event of cessation of freight traffic following the closure of the Alcan plant. Such contingency plans might include formation of a Development Trust that could acquire ownership of the line and obtain funding to commence running services.

4.2.7 The potential to extend Newcastle – Cramlington – Morpeth trains that are not extended to Pegswood, Widdrington and possibly further, to Choppington and Bedlington to provide (a) a rail service to Choppington and (b) rail connectivity between Bedlington and Morpeth should be noted within this section.

### 4.3 Other Infrastructure To Be Protected

4.3.1 SENRUG is disappointed the strategy does not identify how the current rail infrastructure could be enhanced in the medium to longer term. SENRUG's own work has identified the following former routes or current freight routes could be brought back service at a later date:

- Woodhorn to Newbiggin-by-the-Sea: The former trackbed could be used to extend the Ashington Blyth & Tyne line from Woodhorn to Newbiggin. Track would need to be re-laid from the point east of Woodhorn where the existing freight line turns north towards the Alcan works.
- Newham to Blyth Town trackbed (the former freight route to Blyth Port (not via the former passenger route to Blyth station): possible use to connect the main stem of the Ashington Blyth and Tyne line to Blyth Town Centre.
- Airport to Ponteland trackbed – possible use as a Metro extension to serve Ponteland
- Ashington to Butterwell Junction (on the East Coast Main Line) via Linton. This operational freight route could be used to connect the Ashington, Blyth & Tyne line to Widdrington subject to some upgrading work and the creation of a new northbound junction at Butterwell, and re-connection to the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line at Ashington. This would provide extra capacity for more services from Newcastle to Widdrington avoiding the East Coast Main Line. See also para 3.

4.3.2 SENRUG therefore believes that using the Council's powers to protect these potential routes from development should be part of the strategy and an additional section should be added to [Section 7](#) to recommend this. Whilst SENRUG is aware funding may not be available to develop these proposals at present, the recommendation is simply for the Council to use its powers to safeguard future possibilities.

## 5. Rail: Cross Border Services

SENRUG believes the Transport Scotland's consultants currently investigating the possibility of a new cross-border service from Edinburgh to Newcastle via Berwick ([Section 6.1 Service Delivery / Local Rail Services / Future Developments \(page 53\)](#)) have not fully considered the possibility of an all stations stopping service. Such a service could deliver the aspiration to achieve a service a local service throughout the day between Morpeth and Chathill ([Section 5.3 \(page 48\)](#) and [Section 6.1 \(page 56\)](#)) and eventually to Berwick with Belford and Beal re-opened (para 4.1). It may fit with Transport Scotland's objective to re-open stations such as Reston which has similar characteristics to Beal & Belford. The Council should be urging Transport Scotland to consider this option as well, and the Key Action Areas on [page 55](#) should be amended to reflect this. See also SENRUG's comments at para 2.5 (b), (d) and (e).

## 6. Station Facilities

The matrices in [Section 6.3 / Railway Stations \(pages 67 and 68\)](#) should also consider whether the stations have the following facilities:

- ATM (Bank machine)
- Refreshment facilities (staffed or machine)
- WiFi facilities

SENRUG recommends that all stations with inter-city type train services should have as a minimum an ATM machine and refreshment facilities, in addition to the other facilities stated.

## 7. Other Comments

### 7.1 Legislative Framework & Revenue Funding For Rail

The strategy states ([Section 1.4 / Northumberland County Council Rail Powers \(page 12\)](#)) the Council does not currently have the power to commercially support rail services in the same way that it does for bus services (though the strategy notes the Council might be awarded these powers in future ([Section 5.2 Passenger Rail Franchises / Scotrail \(page 46\)](#))). But SENRUG notes that in recent rail franchise consultations issued by DfT, local authorities have been given the option to specify and fund rail services above the base specification proposed by DfT. SENRUG therefore believes the Council already has such powers. There are 3 implications for this:

- The Council could use such powers to achieve the minimum rail service requirements for stations particularly for local services set out in [Section 5.3 \(page 48\)](#) and [Section 6.1 \(page 56\)](#).
- The Council should set aside revenue funding to achieve this – currently none is set aside ([Section 7.1 page 75](#))
- Where the Council subsidises bus routes for school transport, the strategy should consider whether it would be more cost effective to subsidise rail services in some cases (perhaps with shorter, feeder bus routes to the stations) and thus at the same time achieve some of its rail objectives as stated in above (See also para 1.3)

### 7.2 McNulty Report

The recent McNulty Report recommends complete closure of ticket offices at category “E” rail stations which includes Morpeth and Alnmouth. Although the Council’s opposition to such action is clearly documented in [Section 6.2 User Confidence / Fares & Ticketing \(page 63\)](#), because of the immediate and serious nature of this threat, SENRUG believes it should also be referenced in the section on the McNulty Report in the Executive Summary, at [Section 1.5 \(page 13\)](#). It should also be noted that the passenger numbers for Morpeth station stated in [Section 1.3 page 10](#), have now increased, and for the year to 7<sup>th</sup> January 2012 totalled 264,220 (*source East Coast trains – from Rail Industry “Lennon” system*). This places Morpeth above the 250,000 passengers per year mark and warrant an upgrade of the station to category “D” thus removing it from the scope of this recommendation. A further item should be added to [Section 6.2 User Confidence / Fares & Ticketing / Key Action Areas \(page 63\)](#) as follows:

- Work with DfT to ensure the classification of Morpeth station is upgraded from category “E” to category “D” (thus removing the threat of closure of the ticket office as per the McNulty Report recommendations) in recognition of the significantly higher number of passengers now using the station.

### 7.3 Overall Fare Structure

The affordable fare structure referred to in the [Executive Summary / For Rail \(page 4\)](#) should include the cost of access to the station or of parking at the station. The need to keep local rail journeys cost competitive should be reflected in the Council’s car parking charge strategy in cases where it sets the charge for rail station car parks. SENRUG understands the Council will shortly assume responsibility for the car park at Morpeth station, and believes the current “no charge” policy should continue.

#### **7.4 Partnerships – Rail User Groups**

SENUG is disappointed the role local rail user groups play is not articulated in the table following [Section 5.4 \(page 49\)](#). Whilst the responsibility of such groups is not statutory, SENUG recommends their roles are added to the table with contributions listed as follows:

- Promotion of rail travel
- Immediate feedback on difficulties faced by rail passengers
- Participation in stakeholder contributions and response to consultations with clear, focussed contributions
- Promotion of viable service or overall network improvements

#### **7.5 Partnerships – Community Rail Group**

Although The Strategy notes at [Section 6.1 / Future Developments \(page 54\)](#) Northumberland only has one Community Rail Partnership (Tyne Valley), it should perhaps be highlighted that at present this is the only line suitable for such an arrangement. If the local service on the East Coast Main Line were extended to provide a reasonable daily service north of Morpeth (see paras 4.1 and 5), then SENUG would wish to form a Community Rail Partnership for this line (which it proposes be named “The Northumberland Coast Line”) and looks forward to the same level of support as the Council currently provides to the Tyne Valley Community Rail Partnership.

#### **7.6 Strengths / Weaknesses / Opportunities / Threats (SWOT Analysis)**

SENUG believes the lack of local rail services in the north of the County should be added as a weakness to the analysis given in [Section 5.6 \(page 51\)](#).

#### **7.7 Inter-City Type Rail Services**

The reference to High Speed Rail in [Section 1.7 / Aims / Service Delivery \(page 15\)](#) is misleading as it could be taken to refer to the government’s plans for a new line, normally referred to as “HS2”. In the remainder of the document the Council uses the abbreviation LDHS (Long Distance High Speed). The same phrase should be used here and further explanation given as to the type of services referred to in subsequent uses of the expression. SENUG uses the phrase “inter-city type services” to refer to these services in this response. [The issue of HS2 itself is adequately covered in [Section 6.1 \(page 58\)](#)]

#### **7.8 Northern Rail Route**

The paragraph in [Section 5.2 / Northern Rail \(page 46\)](#) is rather clumsily worded and implies Pegswood, Alnmouth and Chathill stations are between Newcastle and Morpeth. This paragraph should be re-worded.

#### **7.9 Scotrail Services Along Tyne Valley Line**

[Section 5.2 / Scotrail \(page 46\)](#), [Section 5.3 Northumberland’s Desired Level of Rail Service \(table\) \(page 48\)](#), and repeat of the same table in [Section 6.1 \(page 56\)](#), refer to Newcastle – Carlisle – Stranraer services. In fact, these trains now run to Glasgow (and the ferry service from Stranraer has closed). SENUG understands that although these services are operated using Scotrail rolling stock, the section from Carlisle to Newcastle forms part of the Northern Rail franchise, rather than the Scotrail franchise. It is effectively an operating agreement between two companies with adjoining franchise areas. Although SENUG points this out on grounds of accuracy, it makes little material difference to Northumberland’s Public Transport Strategy.

**End**