

SENRUG Press Release: 22nd April 2014

ALARM AS NEW EAST COAST FRANCHISE FAILS TO PROTECT VITAL MORPETH SERVICES

SENRUG, the group that campaigns for better rail services in South East Northumberland, is expressing its concern that the specification for the new East Coast Main Line rail service, recently published by the Department for Transport, does not protect vital services at Morpeth.

The franchise sets out the minimum service levels the new operator, who will take over running the line from March 2015, will need to provide. Three companies are currently bidding for the contract. Whilst whoever wins can provide additional services over and above the franchise specification if they wish, they can withdraw any service that is not “franchise protected”.

SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett said the franchise specification, now available on the government website, is a long and complex document. “But as far as we can see, the all important early morning Monday to Friday southbound connection from Morpeth to the Flying Scotsman service with current arrival in London by 09:40 is no longer a specified requirement. The earliest requirement for arrival in London from Morpeth reverts to 10:05, making that 10:00 business meeting impossible once again. Although the operator is required to retain the two direct services from Morpeth to London, it is not stipulated that one of them must offer a connection at Newcastle to the Flying Scotsman. And the

Flying Scotsman itself will only be required to arrive by 09:50 (current arrival time 09:40)".

Additionally, the later northbound Friday only service from London at 19:30 is not a specified requirement. The new operator will only be required to offer services up to 18:30, the same as the Monday to Thursday requirement. And from May 2020, the new operator will not be required to offer an evening departure from London to Morpeth on Mondays to Fridays at all!

On Saturdays, the new operator will only be required to offer 1 direct service from London to Morpeth; currently 2 are provided (departing London 16:30 and 18:00).

On Sundays, the new operator will only be required to offer 1 southbound service at Morpeth, and that will not need to be a direct train to London. Currently, there are 2 services, one of which is a London train. They will also only need to provide 4 northbound services at Morpeth; currently there are 5. As Morpeth has no local services on Sundays, the number of inter-city services calling at Morpeth is crucially important.

And the franchise specification does not include any improvements for service at Morpeth, either immediately or from the introduction of new rolling stock in 2020

"What is most frustrating is that some of the current services such as the ability to arrive in London in time for a 10 o'clock meeting, and the choice of two evening trains back, were only introduced in

2011 following an intense campaign from SENRUG and other groups. It was accepted at the time the needs of Northumberland had been overlooked and improvements were made, but now we seem to be in the same position all over again” said Dennis.

“When it comes to the new High Speed Line, the DfT is very quick to point out that better, faster rail connections with London will boost economic growth in an area” said Dennis. “Yet for South East Northumberland, more in need of an economic stimulus than possibly any other region in England, and certainly not yet seeing any signs of the recovery that may be evident elsewhere, either the DfT does not accept the link between improved rail connections and regional growth, or it is content to let this region flounder by permitting the new operator to cut vital connections to and from London much needed by our business community” he added.

SENRUG has written to the DfT asking for confirmation their analysis of the franchise specification is correct, and if so, requesting an amendment be issued to protect the current level of service at Morpeth. They have yet to receive a reply.

End (650 words)

Notes for Editors

SENRUG is The South East Northumberland Rail User Group, a voluntary pro-rail campaign group that campaigns for better rail services for existing and potential passengers in South East Northumberland.

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The franchise specification for the new East Coast operator is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intercity-east-coast-franchise-invitation-to-tender>

Minimum service patterns at individual stations are listed in a series of separate tables as follows:

For services up to May 2020 (TSR1) at:

[**Train service requirement 1 \(TSR1\): tables 1A to 1F**](#)

For services after May 2020 – following introduction of new rolling stock - (TSR2) at:

[**Train service requirement 2 \(TSR2\): tables 2A to 2F**](#)

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