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18th March 2015

Ms Rachel Gilliland
Head of Commercial & Freight
One Eversholt Street
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Dear Ms Gilliland

First Group Open Access Bid For Rail Services From Edinburgh, Morpeth & Newcastle to London

I am writing to advise you that SENRUG strongly supports the open access bid from First Group to operate 5 trains per day between Edinburgh and London, all of which will stop at Morpeth.

SENRUG is a voluntary pro-rail campaign group and rail user group. We represent the interests of both existing passengers and those that would travel by train if only trains went where they wanted to go, at a convenient time, at a reasonable fare, and in a safe, clean and accessible environment.

SENRUG has long argued that there needs to be a strengthening of intercity passenger rail services at Morpeth, the county town of Northumberland, with a population of 16,000 within the town itself and 170,000 within a 12 mile radius. We believe Morpeth station justifies an inter-city service every 2 hours in each direction, every day of the week. This would assist local businesses in the area, encourage regeneration of South East Northumberland (one of the most depressed areas in the country) by making the area a more attractive proposition for business re-locations, and create opportunities for leisure flows for long distance passengers by providing a reasonable selection of services at competitive fares.

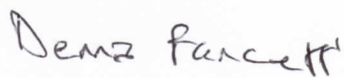
The argument that passengers from South East Northumberland can access inter-city services at Newcastle is particularly disingenuous as it fails to appreciate:

- Driving to Newcastle is not practical as the station car park there is full from 07.30 approx and there is no ability to increase its capacity.
- Taking a connecting train service from / to Morpeth is also impractical because the local service is only every hour. Particularly in the homeward direction, coupled with the need to allow time to change at Newcastle, the last few miles can add over an hour and a quarter to the journey and makes travel by train unattractive
- Taking a bus to / from Newcastle similarly doesn't work because busses from Northumberland don't serve Newcastle station leaving passengers with a half mile walk or a two-stop metro ride to / from Haymarket bus station
- Passengers travelling between Morpeth and Edinburgh do not wish to travel south in order to go north, passing through their starting point on a non-stopping train over an hour after their journey commenced.

These arguments coupled with the population served by Morpeth station make it clear there is a strong case for enhanced inter-city service provision at Morpeth. We are disappointed the DfT did not accept these arguments and mandate a better service as part of the franchise specification for the East Coast Main Line franchise operation. (SENUG's submission to that franchise consultation is available on our website). It is now only reasonable that an Open Access operator be permitted to address this market on a commercial basis.

SENUG has heard news reports of several companies wishing to provide open access and typically non stop services between Edinburgh and London. In general, we have not supported those proposals because they deliver no benefit for Northumberland yet would take up train paths through the county which might be otherwise be used for services providing local benefit. The First Group request however is one we find particularly innovative due to the intention to serve Morpeth; as such we strongly support it and request Network Rail and ORR permit it.

Kindest Regards



Dennis Fancett

Chair, SENUG: The South East Northumberland Rail User Group

Campaigning for better rail services in South East Northumberland
www.senrug.co.uk