

LETTER TO JEREMY MIDDLETON, POTENTIAL CONSERVATIVE PARTY CANDIDATE FOR POSITION OF NORTH EAST MAYOR, posted on www.jeremy4mayor.com

4th March 2016

Dear Mr Middleton

Re-connecting Ashington to the Passenger Rail Network

I was interested to read in the New Post Leader (3/3/16 page 12) that you intend to stand for office as North East Mayor, and that your campaign manifesto includes extension of the Metro network to Ashington.

As you hopefully know, re-connecting Ashington to the rail network is an objective that SENRUG, the organisation of which I am Chair, has been campaigning for some time. Our campaign has now been fully adopted by Northumberland County Council who are now some way down the road of progressing the scheme, having completed the preliminary work required by the DfT.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that in the light of the work already underway, you suggest a Metro extension rather than the heavy rail scheme which is being progressed at present, without any explanation as to why a change of approach might be preferable.

Ultimately, SENRUG would welcome the rail extension to Ashington however it is achieved. We have not linked our campaign to a particular technology. But we make the following observations on the Metro extension option:

1. A Metro extension is likely to be more expensive as it would require electrification of the line and new Metro rolling stock. Whereas a heavy rail extension could be introduced very quickly without electrification or significant line upgrades.
2. A Metro extension is unlikely to achieve the passenger benefits for Ashington as overall journey times to Newcastle would be too long (due to the 10 Metro stops between Northumberland Park and Central Station). If passenger benefits for Ashington – the largest community that can be served without laying new tracks – can not be delivered, it is likely the business case for the scheme as a whole will flounder. Whereas the heavy rail system can achieve an Ashington to Newcastle journey times in 25 minutes and the current service proposal of 1 train every 30 minutes in morning and evening peaks and one train every hour during the day, evenings and weekends will deliver real regeneration benefits along the transport corridor.
3. Metro service does not offer the same possibilities for through ticketing and integrated timetables to other National Rail destinations that can be reached from Newcastle, making longer journeys eg business connections to London and Birmingham more difficult.

4. But perhaps most importantly, having spent 8 years persuading the County Council to include the scheme in its Local Transport Plan, then commission and review the Demand Assessment and Market Appraisal studies as required by the DfT, and commence negotiations with Network Rail re the GRIP 1-4 studies, we are most concerned that to start again with a different methodology would mean re-doing all this work again and would set us back years. This scheme really does need to be progressed urgently. Thanks to SENRUG lobbying and campaigning, it is a requirement of the new Northern Rail franchise, coming into effect on 1st April this year, that the new operator (Arriva Trains North) must work constructively with Northumberland County Council to progress the re-opening scheme – the only such requirement in the entire Northern Rail franchise. I have personally briefed the Director of Rail North on the scheme and it is very much on the radar of both Rail North and NECA (The North East Combined Authority). All this work would be lost and wasted if there are now calls to pursue a different approach.

Over the last 8 years of our campaign, we have seen local authority responsibilities change, council officers leading on the scheme move on and be replaced, regional development agencies and regional government organisations disbanded and new ones established in their place and of course changes in elected political representatives. It is our belief that SENRUG is the only organisation that has provided any consistency in the development of the plans to get rail services restored to Ashington, though we ourselves have been frustrated at the painstakingly slow progress, now thankfully moving forward at a slightly faster rate.

I hope in the light of these comments you are willing to amend your suggestion to fall in line with the plan already being progressed; namely the heavy rail extension to Ashington;

You can read about our campaign, and what stage the re-opening plan is currently at, on our website at www.senrug.co.uk. See specifically <http://www.senrug.co.uk/Re-open-AshingtonBlythTyneLine.php>

Kindest Regards

Dennis Fancett

Chair, SENRUG: The South East Northumberland Rail User Group

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Re-open the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line: View this short BBC video of our campaign:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/politics_show/regions/north_east_and_cumbria/7444010.stm