



**Response to**  
Northumberland County Council  
on

**Consultation on Car Parking Charges at Selected Coastal and Railway Car Parks**  
**Status: Final Issue**

Submitted by email to [budget@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:budget@northumberland.gov.uk) on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2018

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**1. Introduction**

1.1 This is SENUG's response to the above Consultation that was issued by Northumberland County Council to SENUG on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2018. Response is required by 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019. SENUG's response is only concerned with proposals for the Morpeth Railway Station car park.

1.2 SENUG is a voluntary pro-rail group which represent the interests of both existing and potential rail passengers in South East Northumberland. By potential SENUG means people who would travel by train if only trains went where they want to go, at convenient times, at affordable, easy to understand fares, and in a safe, clean, secure and accessible environment. "Accessible" means ability to get to and from the station, and as such includes issues like station car parking, as well as the ability to get on and off the train.

1.3 As of end of October 2018, SENUG has 172 individual members and 12 corporate members. SENUG is highly regarded locally and has been successful in securing a number of rail improvements in the region.

1.4 SENUG believes the issue of car parking charges cannot be separated from car parking capacity, and therefore wishes to make a number of prior comments (Sections 2 - 10), before turning specifically to the issue of parking charges in Sections 11 and 12.

**2. Parking Capacity at Morpeth Station is Insufficient for Current Level of Train Services**

2.1 The increase in train services at Morpeth over recent years in response to SENUG campaigning, coupled with the recent permanent loss of 6 spaces and taxi parking to the

derelict station buildings redevelopment project, means the two car parks (Northern and County Council) at Morpeth station are now completely full by 08:00 hours each morning.

2.2 There is no alternative parking available. Coopies Lane has been yellow-lined, and some of the neighbouring residential streets have “residents only” restrictions. SENRUG understands the Council intends to introduce Residents Parking Permit zones into the remaining residential streets (Low Stobhill).

2.3 Town Centre car parks are unsuitable due to the steep uphill climb from the town centre to the station. The Council proposal to build a multi-storey car park on the former site of Goose Hill school in Morpeth Town Centre (not a specific commitment in this consultation), whilst welcome for the Town Centre, will not assist with parking problems at the railway station due to a) the aforementioned steep climb from town centre to station, and b) morning peak hour traffic congestion on A192 Shields Road / Castle Bank into the Town Centre. A passenger who drives to the station needing to park but finds there are no spaces available would need to allow a further 10 minutes to exit Coopies Lane and get to the Goose Hill car park then a further 10 minutes to climb back up the hill. Few people arrive at the station 20 minutes before their train arrives, and expecting passengers to complete this manoeuvre after finding the station car parks are full, will cause them to miss their trains, and take business away from Morpeth station.

2.4 There is no evidence to suggest that people are parking at the station for town centre purposes because station parking is free, since a) town centre parking is also free - including the long stay car park for shop workers, b) the station car park is full by 08:00 and c) the steep hill climb back to the station from the town centre is impractical for people with shopping.

2.5 There are insufficient bus services to the station; the stops in Shields Road do not adequately serve the station, and there are no direct buses from outlying villages such as Guide Post, Stakeford, or Bedlington into the station turning circle, or from housing areas such as Kirkhill and Lancaster Park and outlying villages such as Pegswood or Longhorsley into the station area at all.

### **3. Train Services at Morpeth Will Double In The Next 3 Years**

3.1 Train services at Morpeth will virtually double in 12 months’ time when the TPE hourly service to Edinburgh (northbound) and Newcastle, York, Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool commences in December 2019. There will be a further significant enhancement in 2021 when the First open access service will deliver an additional 5 trains non-stop to Edinburgh and 5 trains to London non-stop from Newcastle per day.

### **4. Existing and Additional Train Services Might Be Lost If Parking Capacity Not Increased.**

4.1 If rail passengers find they cannot park at Morpeth station, given there is currently no viable alternative means of getting to the station, passengers will be obliged to a) drive to another station or b) possibly drive all the way to destinations such as Durham, York or Edinburgh. This will result in a gradual loss of passenger numbers at Morpeth Station.

4.2 Both LNER and CrossCountry are now providing services at Morpeth in excess of their legal franchise obligation and these additional services can be withdrawn by the operator at any

time. The new London / Edinburgh service from 2021 will be “open access” meaning it could be stopped without notice (or the Morpeth call withdrawn) should it not meet the operator’s commercial expectation. There has already been a sad example of an open access failure with the former London - Wrexham service run by a different company.

4.3 With services that form part of a franchise commitment, there is the risk that DfT could reduce or remove the franchise commitment when the franchise is next renewed, if they believe passenger numbers no longer justify it, or no longer represent as great a priority as issues needing to be resolved elsewhere in the country within finite rail capacity resources. DfT has already proposed elimination of CrossCountry services at “smaller stations”, which SENRUG took to include Morpeth, at the next CrossCountry franchise renewal. If this happened it would undo SENRUG’s hard work over the last 10 years. SENRUG’s robust response to that consultation is on our website at <http://www.senrug.co.uk/widescope/resources/18-08-17-dft-xc-re-franchise-consultation-response-1.pdf>

4.4 An early argument that SENRUG made in successfully campaigning for more intercity services at Morpeth was that car parking capacity at Newcastle is completely full and cannot be extended. Thus, SENRUG argued that to increase the rail market, train operators must look to alternative catchment points such as Morpeth where car parking was available and can easily be extended. Having done its bit in securing the extra train services, SENRUG now expects the County Council to increase the parking infrastructure to support both the existing level of services and the growth secured over the next 3 years. If no action is taken, SENRUG’s argument for establishing these extra services is weakened and it’s possible they could be lost.

## 5. The Local Economy Will Suffer If Rail Services Are Reduced

5.1 The Council has rightly acknowledged that town centre parking should remain free in order to support the town’s commercial viability and its local retail businesses. However, the Council should not overlook the impact a good train service with easy links to other commercial centres such as London, Edinburgh Leeds and Manchester has on the wider business community (eg commercial and manufacturing), not just for Morpeth but throughout the South East Northumberland catchment area served by Morpeth station. The Council should ensure it is supporting the wider business community by not taking steps that could have the unintended consequence of reducing train services in South East Northumberland.

5.2 Furthermore, good rail services improve employment opportunities and in particular the new hourly service to Edinburgh will make it significantly easier to commute to Edinburgh and open up a new range of employment opportunities, assisting the regeneration of South East Northumberland. (The extent of Morpeth - Edinburgh commuting became apparent a few years back when Virgin unwittingly removed the 18:30 Edinburgh - Morpeth return home service which was hastily re-instated at the next timetable change following protests from SENRUG and Northumberland commuters.) If passengers are driven away from Morpeth due to insufficient parking infrastructure, and the number of trains serving the station starts to decline as a result, then the economic prosperity not just of Morpeth but of South East Northumberland will suffer.

## 6. Part of the Council’s Strategy Objective is Unacceptable

6.1 SENRUG is concerned that one objective of the Council’s proposed policy is to “*assist in*

**helping to manage demand**” (para 3 of the Consultation Letter). This presumably means the intended outcome is that less people will be parking at the station. Which in turn presumably means less people will be using trains. SENRUG is concerned that if this happens, it could ultimately result in the loss of some of the additional services SENRUG has secured.

## **7. Council’s Current Plan To Increase Parking Capacity Is Not Enough**

7.1 SENRUG therefore welcomes the informal statement from the Council that it intends to turn the grass area on the other side of Coopies Lane, opposite the station buildings, into approximately 30 more spaces, though notes with concern this specific plan is not mentioned in the Consultation and is not therefore a firm commitment from the Council at this stage.

7.2 Welcome though this plan is, it is not nearly ambitious enough. SENRUG believes the Council should be looking to provide an extra 150 spaces approximately. SENRUG has twice submitted proposals as to how can be achieved (each proposal listing different ways). These proposals are on SENRUG’s website as follows:

**January 2018** Response to the Council’s Alnwick, Hexham & Morpeth Town Centre Parking Study:  
<http://www.senrug.co.uk/widescope/resources/ncc-car-parking-study-response.pdf>

**February 2015** SENRUG proposals:

<http://www.senrug.co.uk/widescope/resources/15-02-23-morpeth-station-car-parking-proposals.pdf>

(It is solution “E” of these proposals that we understand the Council now intends to implement, but SENRUG draws the County Council’s attention to the possibilities offered by proposals A, B, C and D, within this document)

7.3 SENRUG is not suggesting that the Council should necessarily fund the capital cost of the significant car parking enhancements it proposes; but does ask that the Council show leadership in bringing the different railway companies together, and agreeing a joint funding package. SENRUG cannot stress enough the **URGENCY** required for this activity since the December 2019 major boost to train services is now only 12 months away.

## **8. Historic Opposition to Northern’s Introduction of Parking Charges**

8.1 When the previous Northern operator first introduced charges for their section of the car park, SENRUG opposed it on the following grounds:

8.1.1 For commuters, it represented an approximate 30% increase in the cost of getting to work (£2 charge added to £6 return rail ticket - Morpeth to Newcastle Anytime Day Return is now £6.90).

8.1.2 SENRUG felt it was unjustified discrimination against Northumberland residents that charges were only introduced at shire county stations and not at stations in Passenger Transport Executive (PTE) areas. A senior manager at Northern told us they knew the PTE authorities would “never let them get away with it”. Thus, it seemed a blatant case of introducing charges where the opposition was weakest. SENRUG aspires to work constructively with the County Council to combat this kind of discriminatory policy against Northumberland residents and businesses and to enable the Council to make robust counter-arguments to such policies. PTEs

would oppose charges because they want free parking at outlying commuter stations to help manage traffic congestion in their city centres. South East Northumberland suffers from being under a different local authority than the city to which many of our resident's commute (Newcastle / Gateshead), though SENRUG is hopeful of more co-ordinated thinking now the new North of Tyne Authority Mayoral has been established.

8.1.3 SENRUG did not accept the argument that the proposed car parking charges had been bench-marked against charges at other nearby car parks, since at the time County Council town centre car parks were free, and even non-County Council car parks such as Manor Walks at Cramlington were also free. Northern (the previous franchise holder) were not able to articulate exactly what other car parks they had bench-marked against, although SENRUG repeatedly pressed them on this.

8.2 Most importantly, SENRUG is aware that Northern's car parking charges are not part of their regulated business and thus not subject to any cap, political direction or consultation requirement to prevent further increases. Neither is Northern subject to any kind of democratic scrutiny in the same way as the County Council is. SENRUG is therefore concerned that once the precedent for charges was established, both SENRUG and the County Council would be powerless to stop further and unjustified increases in Northern's section of the car park. SENRUG notes with concern the original charge of £2 per day has already quietly been increased to £3 – a 50% increase (compared to the RPI-linked cap on rail fare increases of 3.6% for 2018), and now a 50% addition to the £6 per day charge for getting to work.

## **9. Link Between Council's Strategy and Northern's Strategy**

9.1 At a recent SENRUG public meeting at Morpeth Town Hall, Northern told the audience the amount of money it makes from parking charges is negligible. This then begged the question as to why they have them, given the amount of ill-will their policy caused, and SENRUG asked Northern to review the policy. However, SENRUG recognises that once the County Council introduces charges, any possibility of Northern then removing theirs is gone. And in any case the advantage would be lost if by the time Northern removed charges, County Council are charging for their section of the car park.

## **10. Acceptance That A Degree of Charging at Morpeth May Now Be Appropriate**

10.1 Notwithstanding the arguments SENRUG has set out in paragraphs 2 - 9, SENRUG now recognises its opposition to parking charges has become a victim of its own success in attracting a significantly number of additional train services and associated passengers to Morpeth. As Morpeth emerges from the sleepy backwater station with a poor train service that it was in 2004 when SENRUG was first formed, to the thriving intercity station it should be by December 2019, it is perhaps appropriate that a small parking charge is now justified. SENRUG is not averse to passengers travelling to London or on other longer journeys paying a small charge, but is still concerned about the impact on daily local commuters some of whom may be on minimum wage jobs. SENRUG notes that the cost of getting to work is never factored in to government welfare policy decisions, and the cost of getting to work is much higher in the North East than in London.

## **11. Activities Required Before Parking Charges Are Introduced**

11.1 Whilst SENRUG is willing to accept modest parking charges at the station, it asks the County Council to undertake the following steps **BEFORE** the charges are introduced:

11.1.1 Complete the creation of the additional 30 (or so) spaces planned for the grass area the other side of Coopies Lane opposite the station buildings. This would also help the Council “sell” its policy as rail users would realise they are getting something in return.

11.1.2 Make a formal commitment to constructing the additional 150 or so spaces as per the SENRUG proposals set out in Section 7.2, most likely possibility being to make use of the Network Rail waste land to the north of the platforms (access could either be from Bankside / Station Cottages or, if the Council wishes to avoid access through the residential streets, it could be from the north side of the level crossing to the east of the station (easier access from existing station car parks). Note, SENRUG is not requesting this more complex scheme be completed before charges are introduced, merely that a firm decision to proceed with timescales for completion is announced, prior to the introduction of parking charges.

11.1.3 Negotiate reciprocity between the Council and Northern’s period parking tickets, so that a passenger who has bought the Council’s Annual Pay & Display Parking Permit may use the Northern section of the car park, and a passenger who has bought a Northern parking season ticket may use the Council’s car park (at Morpeth Station only) without further charge. It is unreasonable to expect passengers to pay for both systems and without such reciprocity it would be difficult for passengers to know which of the two systems to join.

## **12. Review of Proposed Charging Level**

12.1 SENRUG also asks the Council to:

12.1.1 Reconsider the pricing level of the Council’s Annual Pay & Display Parking Permit. Most calculations work on the basis of 200 travel-to-work days per year (allowing for statutory and private holidays, sick leave and out of office days). If the charge could be pegged at say £195 pa it would allow the Council to argue the daily charge equates to less than £1 per day, which would make the proposed policy more compelling.

12.1.2 Review the justification for evening charges and consider whether there is a case for free parking after 17:00 or 18:00 hours (until say 06:00 next morning).

12.1.3 It is not clear to SENRUG why Alnmouth passengers with a better intercity train service should enjoy a lower charge of £1.50 per day whereas the charge at Morpeth is proposed at £3.00. This may result in diverting some passengers (eg people living in Widdrington or Longhorsley) to Alnmouth. SENRUG asks for the level of charges at Morpeth to be reviewed and possibly dropped to the level set for Alnmouth.

## **13. Other Parking Provision Modifications**

13.1 Once the further 150 or so parking spaces come on stream (see 11.1.2), SENRUG suggests that 6 or so of the available spaces in the current grass area opposite the station

buildings (see 11.1.1) be designated short stay only, say a maximum of 30 minutes. Such spaces would assist people who wish to visit the ticket office to buy advance tickets for complex journeys. SENRUG are separately negotiating with Northern to extend the ticket office opening hours at Morpeth which would be partly commercially justified from Northern's commission income on ticket sales. If the parking charge strategy makes it difficult for people to visit the station to buy tickets, it could jeopardise the case for extending the ticket office opening hours, and thus general staffing hours. However, SENRUG recognises it won't be possible to take any spaces out of all day use until the significant enhancement to the number of available spaces is on stream.

13.2 SENRUG also recommends the County Council negotiates a straight swap with Northern for its 2 disabled parking spaces, so that the County Council's spaces become general spaces and 2 of Northern's spaces, closest to the ticket office, become designated "disabled". Currently, disabled rail travellers have a long walk from their parking spaces to the platform. SENRUG is not requesting any change to the overall level of disabled parking spaces, noting the pressure on standard spaces.

## **14 Station Turning Circle Bus Services**

14.1 SENRUG recognises that increasing car parking provision at the station will never fully answer the problem and the solution must be complimented by non-drive alternatives such as better bus provision. SENRUG is saddened to report that the bus side of Arriva has been completely unresponsive to SENRUG's proposals for better bus services to the station turning circle and we would welcome senior level support from the Council in further negotiations with Arriva.

14.2 With regard to the Council subsidised services provided by a different operator, (Routes S1, S2 and T1C), SENRUG is frustrated these are still not correctly displayed / promoted at the bus stop at Morpeth Station Turning Circle and have offered its assistance in both displaying the correct services and times at the bus stop, and potentially doing an audit to confirm the buses are actually serving the stop as scheduled (see email to Neil Easton 18<sup>th</sup> August 2018).

## **15 Cramlington**

15.1 Finally, whilst parking charges at Cramlington station are set by Northern and are outside of the County Council's control, and not therefore part of this current consultation, given that SENRUG now acknowledges that a small parking charge at Morpeth might be required, it wishes to stress it remains opposed to charges at Cramlington station, since Cramlington still has an unacceptably poor level of train service. SENRUG believes the answer to non-rail passenger use of the station car park is enforcement action rather than penalising rail commuters. SENRUG also wants proper bus services to Cramlington station bus turning circle, particularly to / from the new emergency hospital, and regrets that a commitment SENRUG received from the NHS to provide such a service has been abandoned.

**End**