

## DOUBLE AMBER FOR ASHINGTON RE-OPENING

Following the visit of Secretary of State Chris Grayling to Northumberland back in February, the County Council has allocated £3.5m to progress the next stage of the re-opening of what they now call "The Northumberland Line". This money covers the GRIP 3 study from Network Rail, development of an application to the Department for Transport's "Transforming Cities" Fund, and various associated ecological studies which are now taking place.

At the end of the GRIP 2 Phase, Network Rail had priced the scheme at £190m; however intensive negotiation and examination of their costs by the



Photo: Dave Shaw

County Council has now reduced this to £130m - a significant saving. This revised price still includes the cost of upgrading the signalling on the line to ERTMS standards which is acknowledged would have to be done anyway even if passenger services are not re-introduced.

To comply with the criteria of the "Transforming Cities" Fund, the Council now intend to split the scheme into 2 phases. Phase 1, costing £90m, would run to Ashington only and omit intermediate stations in Seaton Valley. However, the Council remain committed to then completing a second phase which would add stations such as

Seaton Delaval and consider extensions to Woodhorn and possibly Newbiggin.

The Council are also aware of other future possibilities, particularly the Ashington - Butterwell section. This, and Morpeth - Bedlington link, are already protected in the Council's new Core Strategy. SENRUG have proposed an amendment to give similar protection to the Newsham - Blyth Town Centre corridor.

These other possibilities are one of the reasons why the Council has changed the scheme's name to "The Northumberland Line" as they see it has the potential for significantly more than Ashington and Blyth, though SENRUG, unable to change all its printed publicity, will stick with the name it adopted 14 years ago at the start of its campaign namely "Ashington Blyth & Tyne", and by which it is well known in the media.

The Council expect this scoping work and response to the Transforming Cities application to be completed by December this year, and if all the indicators are positive that is the point at which the final decision to re-open could be announced, with trains running as early as 2022.

Meanwhile, in March 2019, the Institute of Public Policy Research (North) published a report listing the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Re-opening as one of the top 6 "quick wins" for transport priorities across the whole of the North of England.

SENRUG members would have been confused by a Chronicle report in May saying The Secretary of State wishes to hand the tracks over to Nexus for them to re-open the route and is waiting for an application for them. Nexus issued a statement saying they do not see the route as forming part of the Metro network. SENRUG don't mind who...

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# BERWICK FEASIBILITY TO GO AHEAD

SENUG has secured funding for a Feasibility Study to look at the possibility of running a local rail service between Morpeth and Berwick. SENUG's objective is to see the existing Newcastle to Morpeth service extended on to Berwick, with an hourly service each way calling at Pegswood, Widdrington, Acklington, Almouth and Chathill, plus the eventual re-opening of the former stations at Belford and Beal, and possibly elsewhere. The first step is to establish whether there is enough space on the line for local trains to run, and if not, what would need to be done to make the service possible. The Feasibility Study will also include a high-level market appraisal plus outline indicative costs for the proposed new stations.

SYSTRA, an international transport consultancy with over 50 years of experience in the UK, have been selected to manage the study. Project Manager James Jackson said: "We are delighted to have won the contract for this study and look forward to working closely with SENUG and the other stakeholders over the next couple of months. We will bring our significant experience of feasibility studies and new service appraisal to the project and will build on our experience of a similar project looking at local services between Berwick and Edinburgh".

The study is funded jointly by Northern Railway and Northumberland County Council, with a small contribution from SENUG. Northern's award came from their Seed Corn Fund, available for station adopters and community rail partnerships wishing to pursue ideas for improvements in their locality, and followed a strong application from SENUG, which was then matched by the local authority.

Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Cabinet Member for Economy at Northumberland County Council added: "The Council supports the aspiration to see a rail service developed through the north of the county. This has the potential to help revitalise communities and better exploit our tourism and leisure sectors. I know this project is strongly backed by County Councillor colleagues in Berwick, Bamburgh, Alnwick and Warkworth. We are grateful to SENUG for putting the proposal forward and have been happy to contribute

financially to make sure we gather the information needed to identify if this idea can be developed further."

SENUG started its "North of Morpeth" campaign back in 2016. The funding application received letters of support from 10 parish councils or community or station adoption groups along the line as well as from Ann-Marie Trevelyan MP for Berwick. SENUG Chair Dennis Fancett commented "We are most grateful for Ms Trevelyan's support and interest and of course to each person or organisation that took the trouble to write to us. We hope that, by continuing to work together as a community, we can finally reach the position where north Northumberland has a fit for purpose local rail service.



*Could local trains soon be running over Berwick's Royal Borders Bridge?*

*Photo: Clive Nicholson / Steve Miller (adapted)*

Whilst this study is just a first step in what could be a very long road towards a service starting, it allows a better evaluation of the next step, and should feed in to the next franchise renewal."

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## New Timetable

As from this May most Northern Morpeth and Cramlington services now run through to Carlisle, eliminating the 59-minute wait at Newcastle for passengers travelling beyond Hexham. There is also a new weekday CrossCountry service at Morpeth at **18:49** (starts from Penzance at 09:25 and continues to Edinburgh arriving 20:09). This makes 12 northbound long-distance services at Morpeth per weekday. Also please note the Northern printed timetable leaflet is **WRONG**. The 4 TPE services shown starting from 29th July (Column Header note "Y") will **not in fact run** - we have to wait until December these services to start. However, two weekday CrossCountry services that do run are **not shown** in the printed timetable leaflet. These are northbound: 14:49 (from Plymouth to Edinburgh) and southbound: 09:25 (from Dundee to Plymouth).

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## ... and New Trains



Photo: Northern

Northern have kindly sent us some photos of their refurbished class 158 trains, gradually being introduced on the Morpeth line to replace the Pacers.



Photo: Northern

## ... but Penalty Fares

Morpeth, Cramlington and Manors are now part of a Penalty Fare zone. This means passengers **must** buy their tickets before they board the train. To facilitate this, TVMs (Ticket Vending Machines) have been installed at Cramlington and Manors. These machines only take card, but customers who only have cash should still select the ticket they want and obtain a "Promise To Pay" Notice. Passengers boarding a train without a ticket or Promise to Pay Notice will be liable to pay a Penalty Fare. Please allow extra time to get your ticket, noting that there might be a queue at the station as there is only one machine in each location. Note: passengers at Cramlington and Manors are now able to order not just local but also long-distance tickets in advance and collect them from the station machines. SENRUG has pointed out to Northern there is no signage on the machine at Manors and passengers may not realise it is there. We understand that is being fixed.

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## Ashington Re-opening

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... owns the tracks or runs the trains but the key point is the route between Northumberland Park and Central station must, in our opinion, use the direct Network Rail route via Benton Junction, and not the much longer Metro route with its 10 additional stations. Otherwise the train journey time won't beat the bus, and the business case will collapse. Furthermore, the new Metro rolling stock will not have diesel capability and their battery power will not be sufficient to reach Ashington. It is of course possible the role of Nexus might evolve in future to include specification of local services on Network Rail routes within the mayoral region, in a similar way to how the London Overground operates. However, as it stands at present, the new mayoral region is for North of Tyne only and as such, the mayoral responsibilities do not include transport, so that possibility seems a long way off. Meanwhile, we hope this issue doesn't cause yet more delay to our 14-year campaign, just as it finally appears to be coming to fruition.

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# To the Blaydon Races and Beyond

## *Dave Shaw takes the train to Hexham*

There was a time when getting to Hexham or Carlisle by rail from South East Northumberland could be a nightmare. It was a journey of possible missed connections and long waits on station platforms. But the latest Northern timetable gives us a direct hourly service between Morpeth and the Tyne Valley. Hexham is a beautiful town with lots to offer, but the journey is also an experience we shouldn't miss. After diving off the East Coast Main Line we pass through the delights of a green Gateshead. There are allotments and pigeon crees to admire as we race towards the Metro Centre. People get off here to go shopping – maybe they don't know what they are missing further down the line. As we leave Blaydon the road rises away to our left, and our companion for much of the rest of the journey is the River Tyne.

Arriving into Wylam we should consider a break in the journey. It is only a short walk to see the cottage where George Stephenson was born. The path takes you along the Scotswood, Newburn and Wylam line that used to run along the north bank of the Tyne and if you head west along the old line from Wylam you come back to the Tyne Valley line after crossing a miniature version of the famous Tyne Bridge at Hagg Bank. If you've brought a bicycle with you a series of quiet roads and paths will take you to Prudhoe where you can re-join the train. If you are back on the train, then keep an eye out for a small settlement of wooden huts on the other side of the river – known locally as 'the African Village'. From the 1920's onwards these huts have provided access to the countryside for the working classes of industrial Tyneside.

Approaching Prudhoe, from both the cycle way and the train, you will see what looks like a series of spoil heaps to the side of the line. Not just spoil heaps but a nationally important nature reserve. The heaps are the now grassed over waste tips from the old ICI works and their chalky soil, unique to the area, provides perfect conditions for Dingy Skipper Butterflies as well as many other varieties of moth and wild flower. A short walk up the hill would also take you to Prudhoe Castle once owned by the D'Umfravilles, then the Percy Family, and now in the excellent care of English

Heritage. Prudhoe is also the fictional home of Ruth from the Archers, and the real site of the only Ferret rescue service in the North East. Just after leaving Prudhoe my journey is disturbed by a loud bang. A child's balloon has burst, and the bang is followed by tears from an inconsolable owner. Times are tough when you are 4 years old. The line flows west through a tree lined green corridor. Once we break out into open fields the lambs appear, followed by a chorus or two of 'baa baa black sheep' from the now consoled 4 year old. A happy ending. Corbridge passes, the main station building now occupied by an Indian Restaurant whose staff accompany some evening



*Hexham Signal Box*

*Photo: Dave Shaw*

trains and take orders as you travel, and we arrive in Hexham. Walk around the Market Square. Visit the Abbey, the Gaol, and the Sele – a centrally situated park complete with a bandstand. It isn't hard to find refreshment in Hexham. I ate at an establishment off the beaten track. A café run by Adapt – a disability charity. It is in Burn Lane, down by the river and beside Tyne Green Park. The café is disabled friendly and the food is good. Back in the town explore the maze of small streets and, as someone who takes a keen interest in railways, don't forget to admire the signal box to the east of the station- a grade two listed building. If you want see more of the surrounding area think about taking a bus – the AD122, summer only, up to the Roman Wall is a must. It can even take you as far as Haltwhistle and drop you at the station for your return journey.