

Travelling Back in Time?

A new timetable is being proposed for the East Coast Main Line. The new timetable, if implemented in May 2022, will simply make many of our national, regional, and local journeys much more difficult.

Our local stations will lose some key commuter journeys to both Newcastle and Manors and services will no longer extend beyond Newcastle to MetroCentre and stations in the Tyne Valley. Journeys north from Morpeth will have a new, and less convenient, stopping pattern.



TPE trains may be withdrawn from Morpeth. Photo: Dave Shaw

Inter-city services to all English and Scottish destinations are also greatly diminished with many fewer stops. Morpeth loses all of our TPE services and all the LNER daytime services. In their place will be a limited number of services provided by 'East Coast Trains', the new open access operator. However, their services will use shorter trains with no first class and are expected to be heavily booked. We do get a slightly improved early morning and late evening timetable to London from LNER, but passengers for Manchester Airport will need to change at both Newcastle and York.

Alnmouth and Berwick also lose services. Berwick takes a substantial overall loss of service

despite having a slightly better provision of early morning and late evening LNER services.

Why is all this being proposed? Quite simple: it allows services between London and Edinburgh to be speeded up by 15 minutes. We don't believe that this small time saving will make any difference. Time on board the train is no longer time lost to business and the operators need to think about all the people whose journeys will be longer because of the need to change trains. To provide a service to destinations south of Newcastle LNER propose to run an additional train each hour between London and Newcastle, calling at some of the smaller stations the Edinburgh trains will no longer serve. But this means, because of congested tracks on this part of the line, that one of the current TransPennine services to Newcastle will terminate at York. So more direct trains from Newcastle to London but fewer to Leeds and Manchester – and none at all to Manchester Airport.

We also say that local connections through Newcastle must be retained with Morpeth trains running to and from Hexham, and preferably Carlisle, throughout the day. These through services and connections make all our lives easier as well as opening up many possibilities for 'green' days out. As a very minimum services from Morpeth and Cramlington to MetroCentre must be maintained for the benefit of MetroCentre workers and shoppers, and the importance of Manors needs to be recognised for the many call centre workers in the area and Northumbria University. Also the service from Cramlington need to be improved.

We see little wrong with the current long-distance timetable that a little co-operation between the operators in respect of stopping patterns would not cure. **(contd on next page)**

Finally, these proposals ignore the opportunity to offer a new local electric hourly service between Newcastle and Berwick, calling at **all** stations, with the station at Belford re-opened. This new service could also be extended south from Newcastle to a new station at Team Valley (Low Fell) so creating access to jobs in Team Valley from Northumberland locations. We've already had a study which demonstrated the service would be both commercially and technically viable. Combined with the existing service from Newcastle to Morpeth, which could easily be extended to Bedlington, such a new route could give Northumberland a service

suitable for the next 20 years. Instead, the operators are proposing to take us back 20 years.

The proposals seem to assume that London is the only place we want to visit. The timetable will neither "level up" nor "build back better" and ignores the expressed views of the North. SENRUG will be campaigning to get the proposals withdrawn and then redrawn to meet our needs. Join us and support the campaign to our make voice louder.

Further Details of the timetable and our comments are at <https://tinyurl.com/2hs434rp>.

North from Newcastle – A Local Service

The Systra study, jointly funded by Northern Railway, Northumberland County Council and SENRUG, demonstrated there is capacity for an hourly local rail service between Newcastle and Berwick calling at all stations, and that the service would become commercially viable. It also concluded there was a commercial case for re-opening Belford which is feasible technically.

Following the study, the Council submitted two separate applications to the government's "Restoring Your Railways" fund, one for the service itself and one for Belford. But neither were successful in the first round; the Council has been asked to provide further information and is hoping both schemes will be successful in round 2.

However, "Restoring Your Railways" only provides funding for a study. So SENRUG is not entirely clear why this step was needed, given the study already exists. Surely, all that should be necessary is to simply ask Northern for the cost of providing the service, work out the subsidy needed to cover the capital costs and running costs for the initial build-up years until the route becomes profitable, then ask DfT to fund that.

Of course, the era of franchising is now over following publication of the Williams-Shapps

plan. It's still not fully clear what the process will be for assessing and delivering service enhancements like this. Let's hope it is simple and quick. There is a compelling commercial case for a local rail service to Berwick and surely this should come under the "levelling-up" agenda.

Also significant for North

Northumberland is the recently published National Bus Strategy. This strategy, also known as "Bus Back Better" promotes ideas for several new types of rural and urban bus services to be integrated into a wider network of rail and Metro services. The proposals are exciting and could provide us with a transport revolution. However, the problem may well be persuading the bus operators to both introduce new services that might not be sufficiently profitable, and to divert existing services to provide the rail connections we so desperately need. The whole project will cost money and the present proposed funding, £3 billion in the life of this parliament, has been widely criticised as being both inadequate and not providing the long-term investment that such a system might require.



The single Evening Service arrives at Widdrington. Photo: Dave Shaw

LNER Compulsory Seat Reservations

SENUG has strongly objected to LNER's compulsory seat reservation policy, introduced at the beginning of COVID to enable social distancing, but now being made permanent. We believe that retaining a "turn-up and go" railway is an essential part of rail's overall attractiveness.



An Azuma passing through Morpeth. Photo: Dave Shaw

SENUG doesn't dispute LNER's research showing one in three people are more likely to travel by train if guaranteed a seat. But this was available anyway through the previous free seat reservation scheme. On the other hand, LNER admit 14% of passengers are less likely to travel if reservations are compulsory. There is no need to lose these passengers to rail. Simply continue to offer free seat reservations to those passengers that want one, and a walk-on service for those that don't.

What happens in the event of disruption? For instance, if the local train to Newcastle is late and you miss the LNER connection. LNER say you can simply reserve a seat on the next train, up to 5 minutes before it departs. But for this you need the LNER app. Not everyone has a smartphone and the policy is highly discriminatory against vulnerable people.

Join SENUG and make sure your voice is heard as we work to improve rail services within the area and to destinations beyond. Go to the SENUG website www.senrug.co.uk and click on the 'join' button. It only costs £5 a year and you can pay online by card or print out the form and post it to us with a cheque.

If an entire LNER train is cancelled, there simply won't be enough spare seats on the next train to accommodate everyone. Some passengers are going for job interviews or have tickets for the match or theatre. Travelling another day or several hours later is not an option. Others are on their way home after a trip away and would have nowhere to stay. Time to think again and scrap this ridiculous policy.

The Williams Shapps Plan

The Williams - Shapps Plan published in May 2021 marks the widely predicted end of rail franchising which will now be replaced by a system of service contracts similar to those operated by TfL in London. SENUG Chair Dennis Fancett has written an article on the new arrangements which can be seen at <https://www.senrug.co.uk/More>.

The elimination of the very high cost of bidding for, adjudicating and managing franchise contracts is very much welcomed, but the danger is that with DfT through the new organisation Great British Railways, specifying the service contracts, the rail service will become very London centric with a failure to understand regional requirements. The new proposals for the East Coast Main Line (see pages 1 and 2) might be the first evidence of this. It is therefore crucial that the regional voices of Transport for the North and Transport North East are given sufficient input to the overall strategy and influence over specifying the new service levels, and SENUG will continue to work with these organisations to promote its rail vision for Northumberland.

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Our website is at www.senrug.co.uk and lots more interesting material can be found on our Facebook pages at www.facebook.com/SENUG

AB&T Update

Work on the Ashington Blyth & Tyne re-opening (now called The Northumberland Line) is continuing. In the last few weeks Network Rail



A sign of the times! A temporary road closure at Backworth Crossing to allow for rail revitalisation. Photo: Dave Shaw

have been upgrading the track between Bebside and Holywell and are now starting work on other sites. Planning applications have been submitted for the new stations at Ashington, Bedlington, Bebside, Seaton Delaval and Northumberland Park, and planning consent for the new Chase Meadows footbridge has been granted. Most importantly, the Transport and Works Act Order (TWAO) has been submitted. Once approved, this gives authority for other key issues such as closure of those level crossings being withdrawn, diversions of some footpaths and use of certain areas for temporary construction sites, allowing construction to begin in earnest. We are of course still waiting for the government to approve the balance of the total costs. The last estimate was £166m but only £34m of this has been authorised so far from the Restoring Your Railway Fund. Final approval for the remaining costs is expected this autumn but with the amount of activity already underway, it is difficult to envisage it would not be forthcoming. But it does need to be given on time so as not to delay construction work. The project aims to stimulate and support economic growth, regeneration, and community development in the area and the current schedule is that passenger trains will be running in 2024. Previous advice was that trains would be running by late 2023. So perhaps this is a slight slippage, or maybe test trains and driver training will start from the December 2023

timetable change with passenger services starting in Spring 2024.

Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Northumberland County Council Deputy Leader, said: "It is a great milestone to finally see work to return passenger services physically happening on the line. While there's so much going on behind the scenes, the



New Rails delivered to Backworth and a new work compound. Photo: Dave Shaw

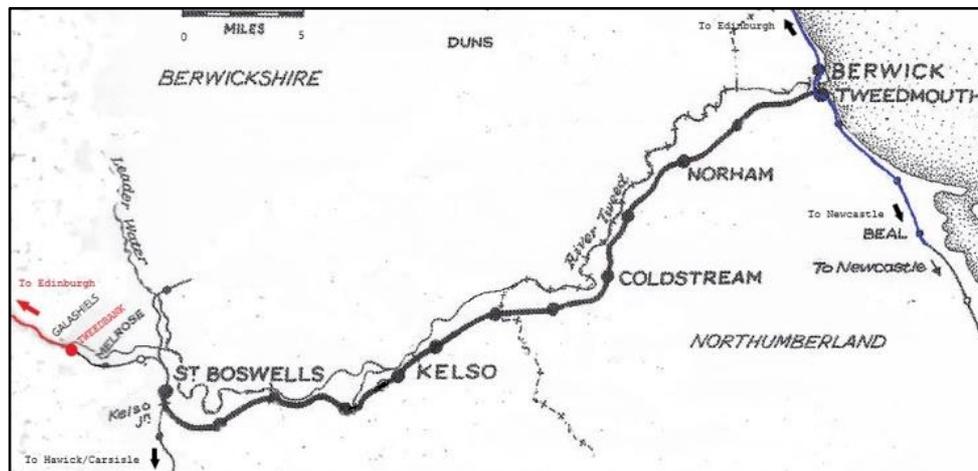
progress feels more tangible when you can actually see it on the ground and this is an exciting time for everyone involved" SENRUG has not got everything its own way, however. We are critical of the designs for Bebside and Seaton Delaval stations where the platforms and station entrances are behind huge car parks, making them an unacceptably long distance from the main road. Whilst this will be fine for those driving to the station, it will make it difficult for pedestrians and bus users, particularly those with mobility difficulties. SENRUG believes bidirectional signalling should be installed in the Bedlington area to both enable a service from Morpeth to be added to the timetable and to make the whole line more resilient [see article by Trevor Watson on next page]. Remonstrations to the Council's consultants on these points have sadly fallen on deaf ears.

Nevertheless, after 15 years of campaigning, SENRUG is delighted to see the project so close to the finishing line. We congratulate the Council on their achievements to date and look forward to being welcomed aboard the first passenger train prior to the 60th anniversary of the line's original closure in 1964.

To Scotland via Melrose?

With Scottish government now looking to extend the Borders Railway from its terminus at Tweedbank, an intriguing possibility of resurrecting the Tweed Valley route from St

passenger flow feeding into the North East & Yorkshire. Just imagine a service from Edinburgh via Galashiels to Newcastle, Leeds or even Kings Cross!



The line would open intriguing development possibilities for Northumberland and the North East. Berwick station would need to be relocated from its present site to south of a new junction at Tweedmouth, creating a new transport hub for the eastern borders, less constrained than the existing facility for parking etc.

Boswells to Tweedmouth on the ECML has become a possibility. This would be in addition to the proposal to take the Borders Railway through Hawick to Carlisle but recent developments at Whitrope tunnel have given a boost to reinstating the route via Kelso to Tweedmouth.

With a substantial part of the historical infrastructure still in place, it could give the central borders access to the ECML for both long distance TOC's and local traffic in advance of the Carlisle option, providing a "new" untapped

"Pie in the Sky"? We said that about Reston & Belford stations being reopened as well as the Ashington line but it now needs the North East to include this as part of its transport infrastructure plan or we may lose this "once in a lifetime" opportunity.

This article was provided to us by David McClymont. It represents his personal views and not necessarily those of SENRUG.

"Bedlington – this train could terminate here."

Trevor Watson writes: The signalling on the Blyth & Tyne system is a mixture of ancient and slightly more modern systems. Trains entering the system from both south and north leave the East Coast Main Line under the control of the Tyneside Signalling Centre via power operated points and colour light signals. At Newsham and Bedlington control passes to local signal boxes operating with more traditional technology.

Network Rail's plan is that all signalling in this area will be controlled from the York Rail Operating Centre. This shift of control will require an update of the old signalling system on the Blyth and Tyne system and it would be

operationally advantageous to install bi-directional signalling to this area as part of the update.

It would enable the present Carlisle to Morpeth Northern service to be extended to Bedlington and run into either platform without blocking or having to shunt over Bedlington South level crossing before returning in the Morpeth direction. In the event of a train failure on the double track it would take some time to rustle up a rescue locomotive and it would be possible to continue to operate a service past the failure.

Bi-directional signalling already exists on the ECML between Birtley Junction 5 miles south of Newcastle and Benton Junction and enables trains to enter the through platforms at Newcastle in both directions.

The Branch Line Society have two excellent reports on signalling in the area on their website. www.branchline.uk/fixture-report.php?id=1383 and www.branchline.uk/fixture-report.php?id=1376

AB&T Next Steps

With the opening of the Northumberland Line core route soon to become reality, it is time to restate SENRUG's objectives for further extensions, and for Council staff and their consultants to be taking these plans into account.

Choppington and Bedlington: The Newcastle to Morpeth service should be extended along the existing track to a re-opened station at Choppington and on to Bedlington, connecting with the core Northumberland Line route. This would provide a 7-minute journey



Class 156 heading for Morpeth.
Photo: Dave Shaw

between Bedlington and Morpeth and help regenerate Choppington and Scotland Gate, which suffer from some of the highest levels of economic deprivation in the entire county of Northumberland.

Woodhorn and Newbiggin: The line should be extended beyond Ashington to Woodhorn, the final section on privately owned track, and then from east of the A189 Spine Road bridge, along re-laid track into Newbiggin. Woodhorn, as well as acting as a park and ride facility for the villages further north, would serve the Museum of Mining and Northumberland Life, creating a "reverse" flow in the opposite direction to commuting. Newbiggin would be greatly enhanced and regenerated by the re-opening of the railway offering fast links to Newcastle and beyond.

Blyth Town Centre: A rail service into Blyth Town Centre can be easily achieved by re-opening the old alignment from Newsham to the former station site between what is now the Community Hospital and Morrisons Car Park. Although the alignment is partially breached at Blyth Sports Centre, there is plenty of space to divert round the building. There would not be capacity on the East Coast Main Line for trains from Blyth to get

to Newcastle Central, so SENRUG believes the service should be diverted onto Metro tracks at Northumberland Park, continuing on a new link between Four Lane Ends and Regents Centre, to Airport, providing access to jobs at the airport plus an important link for businesses and leisure travellers from the Southeast Northumberland corridor.

Seghill: SENRUG has always believed there is a case for a station at Seghill, noting that Seghill residents will need two buses to reach



Seghill Crossing. Photo: Darren Jensen

Seaton Delaval station. SENRUG was disappointed when this station was removed from the re-opening proposals but pragmatically accepted it was best to get the basic core route open first and then re-open Seghill as a later phase.

Butterwell Branch: The privately owned freight branch between Ashington and Widdrington should be upgraded to double track and connected to the main rail network at both ends, with a new north to east junction at Butterwell,



Waiting to join the ECML at Butterwell Junction. Photo: Andrew Carmichael

creating the opportunity for direct passenger services between Ashington and Alnmouth / Berwick and a diversionary route for freight and passenger services on the ECML in the event of disruption on the line.

Community Rail Partnerships – the next step for SENRUG?

Within the detailed descriptions of what the Northumberland Line will deliver there are references to the formation of a Community Rail Partnership. But what is a Community Rail Partnership (CRP) and how does it differ from a Rail User Group (RUG)?

Individual CRPs are charged with engaging with our communities to help us all to get the most from our railways. The partnerships promote social inclusion and sustainable travel as well as working alongside train operators and councils to bring about improvements to services and bring stations back to life. They work with local, regional, and national partners to achieve these aims and are members of the wider network that goes under the name of Community Rail

The Community Rail Network, the umbrella organisation to both CRPs and Station Adoption groups, has in its membership over 70 organisations covering the length and breadth of the UK. The network aims to share good practice and connect community rail partnerships and groups together, while working with government, the rail industry, and the wider voluntary and community sector to champion the idea of community rail and engagement with the wider community. Each individual partnership is now 'accredited' to show that it has the necessary organisational capability. Partnerships are usually designed to represent stations and services operating over a single railway line but there are instances where they cover more than one, usually interlinked, line.

Government supports the idea of Community Rail and all recently awarded franchises have had the requirement to support community rail in their contracts. In this area Northern sees Community Rail Partnerships as partners who work to bring together the railway and the local community. Examples of the work carried out by these partnerships include bringing station buildings back to life, art and education projects and organising special events, such as music trains, which promote the railway and its relevance to the community. Northern supports

21 active community rail partnerships (CRPs) across their network and all of them have, funded by the franchise, a paid officer with all other roles or activities undertaken by volunteers. Because of the need to take on responsibility for employing staff CRPs tend to become "Companies Limited by Guarantee" but some of them get help from Local Authorities in dealing with the additional administration that this involves.

CRPs are seen to have achieved good access to both their sponsoring franchise and other local organisations including local authorities and the British Transport Police – the latter because of a joint interest in minimising both trespassers and those who might want to vandalise the railway. From talking to people in well-established CRPs they are taken seriously by both the railway and local authorities. Having paid staff means that they have more time to develop ideas, and recruit active members, than do most RUGs and having external accreditation gives them further credibility in the eyes of authorities.

Some CRPs have been accused of not wanting to bite the hand that feeds them. However, they all talk about the pride they take in their ability to gather well researched evidence about the need for improvements to services and then argue their case, often forcefully, with operators and/or local authorities.

Having said that they are not quite the same as a Rail User Group although there are several cases where most members of a RUG are also active in their CRP. RUGs, as the name suggests, are mainly interested in representing current users whereas CRPs claim to have a wider focus on development and involving the whole community.

SENRUG has always had a wide focus essentially being much more than a rail user group and more of a pro-rail campaign group. Therein lies a problem, because Community Rail Network's draft terms of reference require CRPs to be "non-campaigning". The logic is that SENRUG would need to remain as a separate organisation in order to continue its campaign activities but would seek to work very closely alongside any CRP as already happens on the Tyne Valley line.

Go West Young Man!

Dave Shaw completes his journey to Carlisle

Our journey today takes us on from Brampton and will finish in Carlisle. But first we take a short break at Wetheral. The station is at the end of the viaduct built in 1834 to carry the railway over the River Eden. The viaduct is a listed building and an important part of our railway



The Viaduct over the Eden. Photo: Dave Shaw

heritage. Running alongside the viaduct is a cast iron footbridge to the neighbouring village of Great Corby. This was added to the viaduct in 1854 because people were using the track bed as a short cut between the two villages. The half-penny toll charged to use the footpath wasn't abolished until 1956. The views from the footbridge into the gorge are spectacular, but only advisable for those with a head for heights.



A bench beside the Eden. Photo: Dave Shaw

To get a more conventional view of viaduct leave the station and head down into the river gorge. As you reach the riverbank look out for a stone bench. This is one of a series of ten contemporary stone sculptures located at intervals along the length of the river Eden between its source above the Mallerstang valley

and the Solway Firth. If you have time take a walk on past the bench along the river path to see, if you are fortunate, otters and osprey as well as and much more of the world of nature.

Onwards to Carlisle and another world. We leave Carlisle Citadel Station and head, on foot, to the Castle, the Cathedral, and the Tullie House Museum. Between them they tell the story of a border fortress that has been fought over ever since the Romans arrived in the 2nd Century.

Carlisle is, these days, usually a peaceful place. But in the 16th century the nearby border was a battleground. Families from both sides set out as 'reivers', to establish their control of the land around the border. They were not averse to stealing cattle and laying waste land owned by the other side, even if their victims might have shared names and a common history. By 1525 the reivers had become such a nuisance that the Archbishop of Glasgow put a curse on all the reivers of the borderlands. It starts:

"I curse their head and all the hairs of their head; I curse their face, their brain (innermost thoughts), their mouth, their nose, their tongue, their teeth, their forehead, their shoulders, their breast, their heart, their stomach, their back, their womb, their arms, their legs, their hands, their feet, and every part of their body, from the top of their head to the soles of their feet, before and behind, within and without."

The Archbishop didn't stop there. The full curse goes on for more than a thousand words – all now carved on a stone situated at the museum. Did the curse work? Well, the reivers stopped their activities long ago but Carlisle residents still blame the curse for disasters that range from disease to the relegation of their soccer team.

Back at the station and a long look at the departure board. We could travel on the famous Settle line or head around the Cumbrian coast to Barrow. We have two routes to Glasgow, and to the South are the delights of Lancashire and the Lake District. We might well be back here soon on another day out, but for today it is back to home to study the timetables and make plans.