



-----NORTH EAST-----

North East Rail and Metro Strategy (NERMS): Comments from Railfuture North East

Introduction

Overall, we welcome the draft of North East Rail and Metro Strategy and feel that could form the basis for a considerably improved Metro/Rail system in the North East. In particular we welcome the recognition that Metro and Rail need to be planned together. We say that the overall strategic aims are right but we have comments on:

1. The way that the strategy has been presented
2. Individual projects
3. Progressing the strategy into the future.

In addition, we think that there are issues that are not covered by the strategy that need to be addressed in any final version.

Presentation of the Strategy

One of our concerns lies with the length and structure of the document. The length of the document means that few people will have read the entire document and the structure seems, to us, to be overly complex and repetitive. Below we set out a possible structure for future editions of the plan. Our proposed structure would not change the overall content but would, we think, make it more accessible and more relevant to the various interests that will want to support the overall strategy.

From the start of the development process we have expressed a preference for a more “rail user” focussed presentation. For example, we said, during the initial stages of development of the document, that it would have been better to present a picture, in the form of a map, of the passenger routes that the strategy aims to deliver – defining a route as the start and finish points that would be shown in a timetable. A route might well cover more than one of the traditional lines that are shown in the strategy. For example: it would be useful for someone who lived in Blaydon, on the Tyne Valley Line, to know that one route (Carlisle to Bedlington) from the station would allow her/him to travel without change to Morpeth because the route would also use parts of the ECML - and that another route (Hexham to Whitby) passing through Blaydon would take her/him to Sunderland and the Durham Coast. It would also be useful in the route description to show the connections that could be made from points on the route – for example emphasising the ease of connection to Metro at Newcastle Central or Heworth to allow for an easy journey to South Shields or Washington. We will shortly be producing a definition of the routes, as opposed to lines, that we think are required for the future and would welcome the opportunity to discuss these with Transport North East. We say that only once an overall route desired route map is agreed can sensible decision be made about the priorities for infrastructure improvement.

If the document is to be seen as a living document that will offer a developing vision about the development of rail services, we think that the structure of future editions needs to be radically altered.

At present it seems to us, for example, that proposals relating to ticketing and information are spread over several different sections in the document. We would suggest that the plans section be restructured under the following headings – each with a heading that would set out the overall strategic aim of the group of associated plans:

1. Route and Connection Plans – allowing the public to see both the direct services and the connectivity that would flow from the completed plan
2. Information and ticketing plans
3. Environmental Plans
4. Freight Plans
5. Passenger Facilities and access plans – to include active travel
6. A community engagement strategy

Individual Projects

One of the difficulties in commenting on the individual projects at this time is, simply, the lack of detail shown in the strategy. This is not an argument for the details to be added to the Strategy Document but more detail needs to be made available about each project. We assume that each project already has some additional detail above and beyond a simple title and that it is important that an extended outline of each project is published and regularly updated. We also think that there is a need to be able to achieve some “quick wins” as a way of demonstrating to the public that there is a real point to the strategy, and that it is not just a paper exercise that will never be achieved. Moving on to our comments on some of the individual projects as outlined in the strategy:

Enhancements to service frequency in Northumberland on ECML

For long distance services we want to see a rational and stable pattern of station stops covering Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick. It is important that people living in Northumberland have direct access to services that extend beyond the region. In addition, we want to see both an hourly ‘semi-fast’ service between Newcastle and Edinburgh that should also extend south from Newcastle and a local ‘stopping at all stations’ service between Newcastle and Berwick. In respect of the local stopping services, we note that the recent Systra Report (part funded by SENRUG and commissioned jointly by Northumberland County and Northern) showed that paths were available on the ECML in Northumberland and that it was likely that the service could run without public subsidy. We say that this should be one of the quick wins that the strategy could deliver – especially because we understand that surplus Electric Multiple Units are available in other parts of the UK and would be suitable for use on the ECML. We note that this is not the only project that relates to improved passenger services on the ECML in Northumberland. We would say that all these projects need to be brought together under one heading – and this is especially important given that Northumberland services are always likely to consist of a mixture of local services, that would be ideally controlled by a NE Rail Concession, and national services that provide for travel both within and beyond the region.

Expanding the number and role of Community Stations – regenerating unused stations at community hubs.

We strongly support the idea of stations as community hubs both on economic grounds and because a well-used station is likely to be seen as a safe station by passengers. We need to know which stations are proposed as community hubs and emphasise the importance of finding tenants who will provide activity on stations over whole working day.

Tyne Valley journey time improvement to reduce the end-to-end journey time to be more competitive with car-based journeys.

Whilst the aim is correct this should not be at expense of station stops – the stopping pattern is equally important. Electrification and track improvements would be the best way to improve journey times.

Local rail Diesel fleet replacement.

Green electricity and hydrogen are going to be important in the future both from a green perspective and as part of a wider industrial strategy for the NE. However, the replacement programme also needs to be linked in to an electrification strategy.

Delivering a North East Rail concession.

The Concession needs to cover whole of NE – North of Tyne Combined Authority, North East Combined Authority, and Tees Valley Mayoral Authority and needs to include an effective public engagement strategy. It also needs a clear arrangement on governance given that such a concession would cover several different local authorities.

Increasing local rail frequency in Durham - Chester le Street hourly service.

This could be achieved as a “quick win” if this was linked to the proposal to use the Stillington Line as part of a fast Tyne Tees Service via the ECML.

Introducing earlier and later local rail services – aim to match working patterns and leisure needs.

Leisure needs work both ways. Earlier and later services are not just for people in areas around stations travelling to urban centres but also people from urban centres travelling in the opposite direction. The visitor economy is important to people in rural areas and there is also a need to link bus services to the rail timetable.

Reopening of Ferryhill Line and Stillington Line to passenger services to Teesside including reopening of Ferryhill Station.

This project could help with one of our “quick wins” if space could be found on the ECML between Newcastle and Ferryhill. There is a need for Newcastle to Middlesbrough service, via the ECML and Stillington, to provide fastest possible connection between Tyne and Tees. It would also allow the ambition, set out in the strategy, to improve local services for both Durham and Chester le Street as well as offering a greater range of destination and connections available from a new Ferryhill Station. Improved services are also required on the Durham Coast Line but there are other ways of achieving this.

Delivery of North East Connect

Our understanding is that North East Connect has, in effect, been abandoned by Northern. We would suggest that it is replaced by the concept of a “North East Overground” that would encompass local stopping services, Metro, and limited stop services.

Freight Gauge Clearance - Work closely with Network Rail and private sector to improve gauge clearance along freight routes.

In addition to Freight Gauge Clearance there is a need for clear freight strategy that includes provision for intermodal site and electrification on ‘last mile’ into docks etc. In this respect we welcome the recent TfN initiatives but say that it is vital that NE does not, as it seems have other TfN initiatives, miss out on improvements in moving freight both within and through the region.

Enhanced service between Berwick and Newcastle.

As we have said above this is a possible “quick win”- especially as this service might not require any extensive infrastructure work. The service would both improve travel to and from work/leisure for many communities within easy reach of the ECML but it would also open up the possibility of visitors travelling to many of the popular areas of the Northumberland Coast by train rather than by car. It will be vital that consideration within this project is given car parking at stations, use of stations as node for active travel, and the need for bus integration.

Thought should be given to creating, in the longer term, new cross Tyne Links to and from Northumberland. Consider extension of stopping service to TVTE (and possibly further south) to open up

new employment opportunities to people living in Northumberland and provided part of the service required by a Park and Ride service at Team Valley.

This project and others lead us to say that there needs to be a clear aspiration about the use of the whole length of the ECML in the area including the need to have paths available for local passenger services as well as for long distance passenger services and freight.

Increased Park and Ride at Public Transport stations and car park maintenance.

In the detailed design we should ensure that park and ride facilities are both of sufficient size and are close to stations, but that the need to achieve this aim should not result in stations being distant from current pedestrian and bus routes

Improved Information facilities at North East stations.

Information is not just a technical issue – stations need to be staffed and it is vital that there is a reliable system that can be accessed by all passengers and potential passengers. Within the document there are six separate proposals relating to information and ticketing that should be rationalised into one strategy with its own implementation plan. The single project should include information provision, timetables, live information, and ticketing.

Cramlington Station Improvements – infrastructure improvements required to facilitate improved frequency of services and better station facilities.

We say that this project is not ambitious enough given the amount of work that would be required to bring the present station up to the standards implied elsewhere in the strategy and the need to make the station more accessible and relevant to the wider area. We ask if the current station is in the right place for the 21st Century, given the changes that have happened in the area since it was built in the 19th century. Space exists to build a new station closer to Manor Walks Shopping Centre that would also allow for much better interchange with local buses and would provide much better access, from both North and South, to both the shopping centres and some of the more recent developments in Cramlington. Coupled with bus integration to provide good connections to the Emergency Hospital, integration that seems to be problematic at the present station, we say that rail could greatly improve access to the largest town in Northumberland and improve the economic prospects of both the town and the people of the area. We also think that it is important to ensure that the timetable for Cramlington includes a sufficient level of both early and late services.

Durham Coast Line – route upgrade and service improvements.

In terms of service improvements, we are looking for a more regular and frequent service with added capacity on each service. We also want to see the development of routes that would allow for passengers to travel to more destinations outside of the area without the need to change.

Public transport connectivity improvements between Consett and Tyneside - Connectivity Improvements along the Derwent Valley Line.

We suggest that there is a need to consider alternative routes including via Ouston Junction from the ECML to provide access to jobs at Team Valley. Depending on the assessment of the possibilities for use of the line by freight services this line might be a candidate for a ‘tram-train’ using both the Ouston and Derwent Valley routes.

Metro and Local Rail Enhancements and Extensions.

The Cobalt Link should not lead to a reduction in services to Coast. It might be better to operate this connection as a shuttle, possibly as a tram service, between Northumberland Park and Percy Main connecting with both the existing Metro and Northumberland Line Services.

The South of Tyne and Wearside Loop would be a welcome addition to Metro but consideration needs to be given to how it fits with heavy rail services on both Durham Coast Line and north end of Leamside.

We don't see an Airport Link as a good use of scarce paths on the ECL given the existing Metro Link to the Airport from Central Station. Given that it is a regional airport it is important that access is made easy from all parts of the region. At present there are good connections via the Metro from areas to the south of the Tyne but access from North Northumberland requires what amounts to "doubling back" via the current Metro service. From SE Northumberland, once the new line is open, passenger would need to change at both Northumberland Park and South Gosforth – with both involving stairs or lifts to allow the move between platforms. RfNE would like to see a study of the possibility for a Benton East Station with platforms on both ECML and Metro connected by stairs and a lift– coupled with Metro Service from Coast/Blyth to the Airport.

High Speed Gateways in the region

This must not be at the expense of existing/planned local and inter-regional services. We say that space must be found on the ECML for both local passenger services and freight with additional high-speed services only being introduced once the infrastructure allows space for all users.

Future extensions for the Northumberland Line - Improving accessibility to South East Northumberland by rail.

We want to see a passenger link between Morpeth and Bedlington, a 'Metro' link to central Blyth via Newsham, an extension from Ashington to Woodhorn using existing track and then to Newbiggin using the former alignment that is still extant, a link from Ashington to the ECML via existing track to provide additional diversionary route and open up the possibility of additional services from North Northumberland, and a passenger service to Cambois from Ashington to serve new industrial developments.

Weardale Railway - A rail service to reconnect isolated communities in Weardale to the Bishop Auckland/ Newton Aycliffe/Darlington corridor.

We say that it is important that through trains operated by Northern and any services operated by the current heritage operator should use the same station at Bishop Auckland and have an integrated ticketing system. We would support through trains from Teesside to Upper Weardale.

Major upgrade to the East Coast Mainline - major upgrade via East Coast Main Line and Leamside reinstatement to include provision for 7/8 trains per hour.

Once again it is important to ensure that there is space for local services as well for inter-regional/national passenger and freight. There is a need to look at the possibility of diverting one Cross Country Service via the Durham Coast to both relieve pressure on the ECML and offer an improved list of destination/connections to passengers from East Durham.

There are already times of the operating day during which the ECML runs 7 or even 8 trains within an hour. This applies to the Newcastle-Northallerton two-track section as well as, for comparison, that between Doncaster and Newark and/or between Newark and Grantham. Looking at the section of line to the south of Doncaster this summer's timetable will include one hour during which 9 trains pass, followed immediately by another hour featuring 7 trains - all along a two-track stretch with few loops. It seems to us that the official statements to the effect that that the ECML is only equipped to take six paths per hour are contradicted by what is actually happening elsewhere on the line without undue fuss or bother.

Progressing the Strategy in to the Future

We say that the key to progressing the strategy and maintaining public support should be a Public Engagement Strategy. This needs to be more than just consulting over proposals (that are often set in concrete at the point when they are made public) but finding ways to involve the public at all stages in the process. Transport North East might consider use of Citizen Panels as well as engagement with interested organisations – including Railfuture.

Proposed additions to the strategy.

1. As we have said earlier in these comments, we would like to see clear proposals to improve access to Airport from North Tyneside, SE Northumberland, and North Northumberland
2. An Electrification strategy
3. A better definition as to what new services will be provided by Metro and what will be traditional heavy rail.
4. Statements about the need for bus integration into the system.
5. Consideration of the possibility of 'light rail' being used in some of the proposed new developments.
6. A clear statement about the need to maintain cross city services and a commitment to using this to drive some of the infrastructure improvements.

A clear strategy for use of the ECML to include space of both long distance and local passenger services as well as freight movements. Our views on this have been recently circulated to MPs and Councillors and a copy is attached to this document.