

Not only does that make for a very unattractive end-to-end journey time, but also a 19-minute wait in the ugly surroundings of New Street will feel extremely tedious and make the journey seem to be even longer than it really is.

That 19-minute layover could be reduced to a perfectly reasonable three minutes by minor re-timings (two minutes or less) of two West Midlands Trains departures. I appreciate that the Avanti services continue beyond Wolverhampton to other destinations, such as Edinburgh and Blackpool, but if it is necessary to lose time for pathing reasons further north there must surely be more appropriate locations to lose it than New Street.

PETER FOOT

Felmersham, Bedford

ECML TIMETABLE DEFERRAL

I was pleased to see the article in *Modern Railways* (p16, September issue) querying the lack of any further public comment on the new East Coast main line timetable. But I felt the article was unbalanced, because it made no reference to the strong opposition to draft one of the timetable from Northern communities and stakeholders. We were being asked to accept a reduction in local and trans-regional services in order to shave a few more minutes off the journey time from London to Edinburgh. A better example of levelling down could surely not be found. The overwhelming response from the north was 'no'.

It is not that we are against faster London to Edinburgh journey times, or even more trains on the route. Stakeholder groups such as mine are pro-rail campaigners. We support developments that will achieve

genuine modal shift from air to rail. But Network Rail must make the infrastructure investment to allow these services to be developed. So far, all the capacity improvement investment – be it an extra platform at King's Cross, a new running line through Peterborough or a dive-under at Werrington – has been in the South. Nothing has been done to address the York – Newcastle pinch-points, or indeed north of Newcastle. One only has to glance further down the page of the same *Modern Railways* issue to find yet more infrastructure improvements are being mooted at Huntingdon, once again in the South.

If there was infrastructure investment in the North, the additional LNER services could run, but the TransPennine Express service between Liverpool and Edinburgh – a franchise commitment for 2019 – could be retained, along with various other local services and connections that were to be withdrawn under the original timetable plans. Until such infrastructure interventions are made to allow us to retain the services we had at December 2019, and to develop additional local services such as Newcastle to Berwick, the faster trains to Edinburgh must wait. Indeed, with vastly improved on-board Wi-Fi, the advantage of those saved minutes becomes less, and certainly does not justify business people travelling between northern cities having to change trains, each change perhaps necessitating at least 20 minutes of time offline.

So here in the North we too are waiting with bated breath for news – not so much because we want the so called uplift (very much a downlift for us) to go ahead, but because we want to know if the strategists at Marsham Street and the planners at York have genuinely listened to

our concerns. The suggestion that May 2023 implementation may not proceed gives us the very faint hope they may indeed have.

DENNIS FANCETT

Chair, The South East Northumberland Rail User Group
Bedlington, Northumberland

ST PANCRAS PLATFORMS

Now that Eurostar has retreated to its core routes (p83, last month), would this be an opportune moment to reallocate St Pancras platforms 5 and 6 to East Midlands Railway? The current four-platform terminus is hopelessly inadequate for the relatively intensive service it now runs, and inbound trains are frequently held outside the station waiting for a platform. Meanwhile, Eurostar operates a maximum of two trains per hour out of six platforms.

NIGEL KAVANAGH BROWN

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BIDEFORD CAMPAIGN PROGRESS

Nine months on from 'Back the Bideford bid' ('Forum', February 2022), the ACE Rail campaign, now under the auspices of the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership's Tarka Rail Association, has matured to the point where sufficient stakeholder and funding support is in place to engage an independent specialist advisor to produce an Initial Business Case – a shadow Department for Transport Restoring your Railway Ideas Fund bid, if you will.

Our firm belief is that, when completed by March next year, it will demonstrate beyond peradventure that the new Atlantic Coast-Exeter Railway – ACE Rail – must deservedly move forward to take its rightful place in 'Devon's

integrated vision' (p72, last month) as a part of Devon Metro.

Formerly the Torridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme, the strategic policy objective is to transform the prosperity and prospects of the community of 30,000-plus people in the Greater Bideford area by reconnecting them via a 21st century rail service with Devon's economic, educational and cultural powerhouse, the county's capital city of Exeter. That being the end, the means will be by upgrading and extending the Tarka line for an additional hourly, limited stop service to bring the Atlantic Coast resort and Exeter within a centre-to-centre 60 minutes of each other. It must be declared unambiguously that the extension will not be achieved by sacrificing the Tarka Trail, the new line running either alongside it (Exmouth's Exe Trail, Okehampton's Granite Way) or inland from it altogether in order to avoid, for example, the tunnel and former level crossing at Instow.

Roundly doubling the catchment population at the end of Great Western Railway's longest branch line is one thing, but unless the journey times are keenly road-competitive then the corridor's travel market, even in the increasingly congested and climate-conscious 2030s and beyond, may still be resistant to making the shift to 'letting the train take the strain'. If better connectivity is to deliver socioeconomic benefits by overcoming the marginalising effects of peripherality, then a higher-achieving railway is pivotal to enabling higher-achieving market towns and coastal communities such as Barnstaple and Bideford.

TIM STEER

ACE Rail lead, Tarka Rail Association

ROGER BLAKE

Infrastructure & Networks
Director, Raifuture



ECML in Northumberland: on 30 August 2022 Lumo's No 803002 forms the 09.11 Edinburgh to King's Cross at Crowden Hill, north of Morpeth. Bill Welsh