



HOUSE OF COMMONS

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Dear David

Concerns over LNER's proposed new timetable

Thank you for your time earlier this month and your agreement that LNER would approach this consultation with an open mind. As promised, this is my official response to the consultation to LNER's proposed new timetable for Northumberland.

I am going to focus much of my response on the changes affecting services to and from Berwick, Alnmouth and Morpeth stations - the former two being stations in my constituency and the latter serving a large part of the southern communities in my constituency – however, changes further south have knock on effects on my constituency and many of the arguments I will make below are equally applicable across the north east.

When many think of the north east, and the need to “level up” in our communities, thoughts turn to the cities of Newcastle, Gateshead and Sunderland. However, here in Northumberland we have thriving, growing communities and are attracting families who want to settle in our towns and villages, thanks to the new investment and growing number of businesses setting up and expanding in Northumberland. The recent announcement of the British Volt Gigafactory in Blyth is just one example of the huge investment coming to Northumberland, which will create thousands of new jobs. The renewal of the Berwick-upon-Tweed port infrastructure, new sports centre and hospital are all bringing more working age families to the area.

These new jobs, families and businesses require decent transport infrastructure. For many of the rural communities living across my vast constituency (more than 1,000 square miles) cars are an essential part of life, but rail travel is an integral part of our regional economy.

I have received hundreds of emails and letters in relation to this proposed new timetable, as I suspect LNER has as well, and what struck me was the number of people who have recently chosen to make their home in rural Northumberland, reassured they can continue to commute effectively to Newcastle and Edinburgh from Berwick thanks to the decent rail services presently on offer from LNER.

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Our rural villages and towns need these young people and families to move here and stay here in order to be sustainable. Reducing their infrastructure options instead of improving them is counter-intuitive and contrary to the levelling up agenda. This timetable began its development back in 2016, before our government agenda had truly refocused on a commitment to genuine levelling up of the region and goes counter to that commitment.

Below I have set out my main concerns with the proposed new timetable and some suggestions to improve it.

Access to essential services

Every station on the East Coast Main Line in Northumberland will receive a worse service than the December 2019 timetable. Berwick and Morpeth are particularly affected, with Morpeth losing approximately half of the services it was scheduled to have at December 2019. Alnmouth, Cramlington and Manors all have further minor losses, with Pegswood, Widdrington, Acklington and Chathill receiving an unfavourable timing changes to their single evening northbound service. This will mean some workers simply cannot get home by train.

The cuts to Berwick are particularly concerning given the isolated location and needs of the town and its residents. Berwick is the only town in England that is 60 miles from the nearest A&E. The present regular rail service connects it to the Newcastle Hospitals and Northumberland Specialist Emergency Care Hospital in Cramlington, which is our state of the art emergency facility which serves the whole county, and must be accessible to the whole county, including residents who live in rural north Northumberland. Many constituents contacted me concerned that the reduction in services would affect their ability, not only to commute to work at times which suit them and their employers, but also to attend vital medical appointments.

Journey times

The draft timetable is designed to improve journey times from London to Newcastle by 10 minutes and London to Edinburgh by 15 minutes. I do not believe this should be the driver behind the proposals, which it is overtly stated to be. Trains are about connecting up all parts of the route they travel through, not just end-to-end points of capital cities. Trains are not planes and should have a different set of priorities. Attempting to compete with the Edinburgh to London flights is the wrong basis for timetabling.

As I know from the many hours I spend commuting from Alnmouth to London each month, time spent on board a train is not time lost to business, due to superior on-board wifi, catering and first class services.

However, time caused by changing trains is lost to business. The new timetable removes direct connections for dozens of journeys that can be made today, in particular Morpeth - Alnmouth (off-peak passengers will have to travel to Berwick or Newcastle and double back, but the rail industry does not set a fare for such a journey), Morpeth - Hexham, Morpeth - Peterborough (off peak), Morpeth - Manchester and Newcastle - Manchester Airport.



LNER's consultation refers to "extra seats" being provided but fails to consider the seats being lost on other operators' services that are being cut to make way for faster LNER trains. In summary, the alleged benefit is simply not worth the huge economic cost the north east, and in particular Northumberland, will have to pay.

Access to work and economic drivers

The inter-community access outlined above is not only required for medical treatments and leisure, both of which are of course important, but ability to commute and at times which suit people, was one of the most common reasons cited by constituents as a concern with the proposed new timetable. In some cases, the concern was not with the number of services per day, but the times, in some cases altered to mean people would have to leave home almost an hour earlier to reach their destination in time.

The draft timetable worsens the service for Cramlington commuters by removing a key evening service and failing to add earlier morning services as has been consistently requested.

Anglo-Scottish economic interconnectivity is best served by local and semi-fast trains running across the border through Berwick, connecting smaller communities in north Northumberland and Scottish Borders, rather than faster journeys between London and Edinburgh.

The Union Connectivity Review (UCR) by Sir Peter Hendy, whose preliminary report was published in March 2021, highlighted the huge demand (nearly 10million journeys per year pre-Covid) by rail between England and Scotland.

The review also suggested there is a strong link between transport connectivity and deprivation and suggests that in areas of high deprivation (as we have in some areas of the north east which would be affected by the proposed new timetable), limited connectivity can worsen deprivation by reducing affordable access to employment, education and healthcare. This proposed timetable – created before the UCR was established – goes directly against this.

Those lacking the resources and transport options required for mobility become deprived from interacting with the whole extent of opportunities offered by society. GDP per capita in Northumberland is among the lowest in the UK (ONS, 2018), a fact highlighted again in Sir Peter's preliminary UCR findings. This concerning situation will not be improved by reducing rail connectivity to the county.

LNER services vs open access operators

I am concerned that the proposals suggest that Morpeth no longer requires off-peak LNER services because it will be served by an open access operator. However, since the open access operator would be able to change services or calling patterns at any time without consultation and is not under contract to government, government is under no obligation to step in and rescue services should they fail or be unable to run for any reason. Furthermore, the open access operator will not be offering first class services, will not provide any connectivity between Northumberland stations, or from Morpeth to locations south of York (served by cross-country) such as Peterborough.

The operator will be using shorter 5 car trains; and their business case has demonstrated these are expected to be new passengers won by the rail industry. Congestion could be expected if they now also must take passengers diverted from LNER too.

Summary of changes required

1. TransPennine Express (TPE) services from Liverpool to Newcastle should be re-instated to Edinburgh, hourly in each direction throughout the day, calling at **each of** Morpeth, Alnmouth, Berwick and 1 further station in Sottish Borders (eg Reston or Dunbar).
2. 2 off-peak LNER services should continue to call at Morpeth on Mondays to Saturdays. Suggested services northbound 05:48 London to Aberdeen and 09:03 London to Edinburgh (Morpeth times approx 09:14 and 12:14). Southbound 08:30 Edinburgh to London and 13:30 Edinburgh to London (Morpeth times approx 09:43 and 14:40).
3. On Sundays, there should be 2 further southbound and 1 further northbound LNER service calling at Morpeth, to create travel during the day and an LNER service to London which arrives before midnight. Suggested services northbound 09:03 London to Edinburgh (Morpeth time approx 12:14). Southbound 09:30 Edinburgh to London and 13:30 Edinburgh to London (Morpeth times approx 10:43 and 14:40).
4. Local Northern services should continue to connect through Newcastle, preserving access to jobs from Morpeth and Cramlington to Metro Centre and a direct link between the key Northumberland market towns of Morpeth and Hexham.
5. This draft timetable should take the opportunity to include the paths for the new, hourly each way, electric local service between Newcastle and Berwick, which will serve all local stations, and is the subject of a "Restoring Your railways" application from Northumberland County Council.
6. Stops at Manors and Cramlington must be re-instated on all local services between Newcastle and Morpeth operated by Northern, in particular the Cramlington call on the 17:19 Newcastle to Chathill service.
7. The draft timetable should include at least 2 earlier local morning services from Morpeth and Cramlington to Newcastle, before the current first that departs Morpeth at 07:51, Cramlington at 08:00 and arrives Newcastle at 08:13. This would benefit Cramlington passengers who currently have no ability at all to reach Newcastle before 08:13, and Morpeth passengers whose use of earlier LNER services will be frustrated by LNER's compulsory reservation policy, and the change in time of the 07:12 Morpeth call to 07:34.

I hope the above outlines why I believe the proposals set out by LNER to their timetable in Northumberland, and to Berwick and Morpeth in particular, and I would urge you to rethink the proposals.

Yours sincerely

