

Your ref:

Integrated Passenger Transport

Our ref: AE/R28

County Hall, Northallerton
North Yorkshire DL7 8AH

Contact: Andrew Easson

Tel: 01609 535663

Fax: 01609 779722

E-mail: Andrew.easson@northyorks.gov.uk

www.northyorks.gov.uk

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Dear Mr McMahon

CONSULTATION ON THE NETWORK RAIL STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN

This is North Yorkshire County Council's response to your letter dated 1st November 2007.

In general terms, the County Council is pleased with the Strategic Business Plan (SBP), and the four route plans that are relevant to North Yorkshire. I will set out our comments first on the main body document, followed by each of the relevant route plans.

The main document makes reference to growth, and it is pleasing that after many years of decline, the whole rail industry is talking of unprecedented growth. This is where our main interest lies, we need to plan for this growth to be able to assess the effect it will have on North Yorkshire residents and visitors, and transport infrastructure generally in the county. Network Rail considers that the growth estimates contained in the recent White Paper 'Delivering a Sustainable Railway' (HLOS) are not as high as their own. We agree with Network Rail. Our own regular contact with the Train Operators who serve North Yorkshire, and our own observations lead us to believe that growth estimates in HLOS are on the low side, perhaps the DfT need to revise their estimates in the light of the SBP and TOC forecasts.

We are pleased that the DfT has announced that £156m is to be spent on improvements to approximately 150 medium sized stations as part of the National Stations Improvement Programme, and that this is accepted in the SBP. We note that in North Yorkshire, Harrogate, Scarborough and Skipton are listed as 'candidate' stations in appendix 13, but that Selby is not. A considerable amount of improvement is required at Selby, particularly access to platforms 2/3 for both general and disabled access. There is scope for vehicular access to be provided to the platform 2/3 side of the station, and there is opportunity for further much needed car parking.

Route 8, the East Coast Main Line, dissects North Yorkshire, and the two stations in the county are Thirsk and Northallerton. We welcome the proposal to upgrade the 'slow' lines between York and Northallerton, as this should produce speed improvements to TPE services, the main provider of services at Thirsk and Northallerton. We are also very aware of the constraint of only two tracks between Northallerton and Newcastle, and beyond to Edinburgh. We would therefore support any proposal to seek alternative routes (e.g. Durham Coast or Settle – Carlisle) for freight traffic, so as to create more ECML capacity.

During the relevant consultation periods, we did ask the DfT to specify Northallerton stops in some Cross Country trains in the new franchise, but they did not do this. We have made the same comments to Network Rail in their RUS consultation process, but have not yet seen if it is included. We also approached Virgin Trains, when they had the Cross Country franchise, and Arriva, the new franchisee, with the same request but without success. We believe that the reason for reluctance to comply is an operating one; to stop a train at Northallerton would put about 5 minutes into a train's schedule, and thus place a burden on track capacity which we acknowledge is tight. We do not accept that there is no business case, one only has to look at the business generated at Alnmouth since Cross Country stops were inserted there. We would therefore support any initiative to move freight trains away from the ECML north of Northallerton if it would provide capacity for some Cross Country trains to call at Northallerton.

Our interest in **route 9**, North East Routes, lies mainly in the Esk Valley line from Middlesbrough to Whitby. This route is being well maintained by Network Rail, and they are to be applauded with their positive approach to the community rail initiative. However, as the line is relatively low speed, just worked by one diesel unit, and now the North Yorkshire Moors Railway operate between Grosmont and Whitby on several days each year, there is actually not much spare capacity on the line for community rail initiatives to be exploited. This has become more so since the new (9th Dec.) timetable, with the extension of some Newcastle – Middlesbrough services to Nunthorpe. We would like to see Network Rail comment about available Esk Valley capacity in the SBP, and how this could be best exploited.

We are pleased to see that it is proposed to increase capacity on the Durham Coast route and that the Freight RUS recommends that more freight uses this line, as this should create more passenger train capacity on the ECML, which we hope would add strength to our wishes for some Cross Country trains to serve Northallerton, see our comment in our response to route 8.

Route 10, North and West Yorkshire, is where most routes are in the county. Our main concern here is capacity on the Leeds – Harrogate – York line, where Northern Rail is reporting annual growth of up to 10%. Last year the County Council invested £450,000 in extending platforms in North Yorkshire at those stations that were not long enough to accommodate longer trains that were acquired following a complex funding arrangement between Yorkshire Forward, Northern, WYPTE and Angel trains, to lease more trains. We estimate that if present growth continues, further increases in capacity (either strengthening or infrastructure improvements) will be necessary in about three years. We would like to see service frequency increased as recommended in a recent study by consultants, Arup, (jointly funded by West Yorkshire PTE, City of York Council and NYCC), which said that this could be done with minimal infrastructure expenditure. Therefore we would like to see the SBP include mention of options to increase capacity between Harrogate and York, in addition to those between Harrogate and Horsforth.

We are pleased that the extension of platform 3 at Selby is to be undertaken before the end of CP3, and that track modification is to be undertaken at Church Fenton to increase line speeds. The proposed extension to Selby Car Park is to be welcomed, it is much needed, and so is the track upgrade between Selby and Hull. While this upgrade is primarily for freight traffic, we are hopeful that it will lead to improved passenger train reliability, and extended line opening hours facilitating a much requested later evening train from Leeds to Selby and Hull. The SBP does not go into this level of detail.

The County Council is very pleased that the idea of a new park and ride station adjacent to the existing station at Micklegate is still under consideration. Just over two years ago, when GNER were bidding for the East Coast franchise, they told us (in strict confidence at the time) that such a station would put just over 50% of North Yorkshire residents within a 40 minute drive of this station, i.e. the towns of Harrogate, Knaresborough, Ripon, Malton, Selby and Tadcaster all fall within this band. This would have a major effect on traffic flows on the road network, but it is a proposal that we support, and we will co-operate with any further discussion on this proposal.

The final route in which County Council has an interest is **route 23**, North West Rural. The Skipton – Settle – Carlisle and Skipton – Lancaster routes are partly in North Yorkshire. While the current long term engineering work on the Settle – Carlisle is for freight traffic, this should result in improved passenger service reliability, and as the SBP states, an increase in passenger train frequency. One request we have made to Network Rail, and which they accepted, is that while engineering works that take place over several weekends are fine for main line and commuter routes, these two lines are mainly leisure routes and outside the high summer, a major part of the business is carried at weekends.

We would therefore prefer that the engineering work on this type of route is undertaken in one or two major total line closures of, say, a couple of weeks each, as this would be much less damaging to the passenger business. However, we understand that while Network Rail is sympathetic to this view, it is the freight businesses who oppose it. We would like Network Rail to re-assess their policy towards engineering work before they agree possessions in the 'Rules of the Route' with train operators, taking into account the type of passenger traffic carried, and the adverse effect that engineering work can have on the business.

The section of line from Settle Junction to Carnforth is one block section, and a train takes about 40 minutes to traverse this section. It is double track, but the local Community Rail Partnership is pressing train operator Northern to increase service frequency, as there gaps of up to four hours at certain times of the day. Much of the route is jointed track, and therefore possibly in need of renewal, so we would like to see the SBP make some mention of timescales for track improvements on this route.

This concludes our response to the Network Rail SBP, if you have any queries, or if you would like further information on our comments, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Easson
Rail Officer

Paul McMahon
Deputy Director – Competition and Regulatory Economics
Office of Rail Regulation
1 Kemble Street
LONDON
WC2B 4AN