

EAST COAST MAIN LINE 2022 TIMETABLE CONSULTATION

Response to LNER consultation

5 August 2021

1. Introduction.

Our response to this consultation focuses primarily on key Anglo-Scottish services and the local services using the East Coast Main Line (ECML) to Edinburgh. Our comments are framed by the acknowledged need for urgent action to respond to the climate crisis and the public health issues arising from our current transport priorities. These coupled with road traffic congestion show a clear need for a shift to a more sustainable transport system which — to quote the Williams Rail Review — “will ensure rail is the backbone of a cleaner, greener public transport network”.

2. Anglo-Scottish Services.

We welcome the proposed improved journey times from Edinburgh to London; these align with our long-time calls for modal shift from air to rail on this key corridor connecting the two capital cities. In the longer term we would expect further improvements on this route to deliver sub-four hour journey times. These can be delivered by further infrastructure improvements and raising train speeds from 125 to 140mph.

The proposal for two LNER services per hour with one fast and one semi-fast is also welcome. It will be important to deliver rail (and wider public transport) connectivity at key transport interchanges along the route to allow for seamless and timely transfer between services. Newcastle, Darlington, York, Doncaster, Newark Northgate and Peterborough all offer wider connectivity and future service plans should aim to deliver seamless transfer at these stations.

Cross Country Trains also offer key direct rail services to the North, Midlands and South West of England from Scotland. It is important that these services are retained and substantially improved. The current train sets do not have enough capacity and are frequently seriously over-crowded. There is a real opportunity to deliver on significant modal shift on these routes, however a sea-change is required in capacity, service quality and journey times. The decarbonisation agenda dictates that plans should urgently be developed to replace these long-distance diesel-hauled services, initially with high quality bi-mode and ultimately fully electric trains.

3. ECML Services North of Edinburgh.

We note that others have expressed concerns about the slower journey times on ECML trains to/from Aberdeen and Inverness and we share those concerns. We have long campaigned for infrastructure improvements on these routes (see our ‘Inter-City Express’ campaign¹) as journey times within Scotland compare most unfavourably with those south of Edinburgh. This once again serves to highlight the need for the Scottish Government to focus on improving rail journey times between Scotland’s cities as opposed to spending billions on the parallel roads.

¹ See <https://intercityexpress.transform.scot/>

4. Edinburgh Local Services.

Investment in infrastructure at the northern end of the ECML is in stark contrast to that at the southern end. Consequently we currently have insufficient and irregular local services to Dunbar and a largely hourly service to North Berwick. New stations are being developed at Reston and East Linton and the proposals for local services are wholly inadequate. A new hourly local service is required and this should serve East Linton, Dunbar and Reston and be extended to Berwick-upon-Tweed. Additionally, stations such as Musselburgh, Prestonpans and Longniddry could be served to enhance the current North Berwick timetable. However, for North Berwick, the objective should be a half-hourly service as currently exists on Saturdays only. That combined with the hourly service proposed to Berwick-upon-Tweed would allow intermediate stations to be served by a mix of services on the route but giving a new half-hourly frequency.

The other local services on the ECML are the half-hourly Borders Railway trains. Portobello Junction should have been enhanced to double track at the time of introduction of these services but unfortunately that opportunity was missed and conflict between Borders trains and those on the ECML frequently occurs.

Significant infrastructure improvements are urgently required to the eastern approaches to Edinburgh Waverley to allow for a realistic level of local services to be combined with long-distance ones. As a minimum, these should include re-doubling of one or both of the Calton tunnels, re-instatement of the Abbeyhill loop and the Portobello Junction works. Beyond that we are aware of proposals for elements of four tracking through East Lothian to accommodate new HS2 services and generally improve capacity on the route.

5. Freight.

Whilst the focus of this consultation is on passenger services we would wish to highlight the need to ensure adequate freight paths on the ECML. Modal shift of freight from road to rail will be equally important in the years ahead.

6. Strategic Review of Edinburgh-Newcastle Local Passenger Services.

In the light of our comments above we now believe that there is a need for a strategic review of local services on the Edinburgh to Newcastle route. The aim should be to deliver the required level of infrastructure improvements that will ensure that local and long distance services are able to adequately serve the two markets and deliver significant modal shift to rail on the ECML corridor.

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