

East Coast Main Line (ECML) – May 2022 Timetable Consultation

Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent watchdog for transport users. This paper sets out our response to the consultation(s) proposals of LNER, Cross Country and TPE for May 2022 timetable.

General comments

Timetable proposals from open access operators (OAO) and other operators who provide services on the ECML are not yet fully known for May 2022. Therefore, it is impossible to obtain a full picture from the consultation process and respond fully as the inter-relation and connectivity between the various consultations and how it affects passengers is only partial.

Consideration should be given in future major timetable rewrites for a single and comprehensive consultation process that provides a full picture of the overall proposal on offer.

We note that due to previous decisions regarding investment, infrastructure and access rights that the structure of the timetable is largely fixed. We trust that where particular issues of consumer detriment are identified that adjustments can be made, with any wider comments about the balance of services considered for future timetable iterations.

Attracting infrequent and non-users

The core proposal to deliver the benefits of the £1.2 billion East Coast Upgrade investment programme is to increase the attractiveness of LNER services between London, Newcastle and Edinburgh by reducing journey times and providing more seats.

The aim being to attract a proportion of the estimated three million Edinburgh-London and Newcastle-London journeys per year that are not currently taken by rail.

Many of the proposed timetable changes flow from this core proposal.

We support the broad thrust that the investment programme provides but it is worth noting that not all passengers want to travel to/from London and the attractiveness of rail must cater for all journeys on the ECML, meeting passenger expectations.

However, reducing journey times and providing more seats that the investment programme provides has to be delivered within a range of measures to make rail travel more attractive and reduce barriers to travel for infrequent and non-users.

The common overriding theme throughout our insight¹ on making rail more attractive is that the main barriers to travel surround cost and convenience. Similarly, the main things that could overcome these barriers are to do with the price of the ticket and the quality and level of service provided (frequency, reliability, comfort).

It is equally clear, however, that it is not just the actual cost or convenience that can act as a barrier – perceptions also matter. Negative perceptions create their own barrier to rail travel.

There is a relationship between the things that existing users want to see improved and the barriers identified by non-users. Transport Focus's insight² sets out the top five priorities for improvement identified by passengers:

1. better value for money
2. being able to get a seat on the train
3. more trains arriving on time
4. less-frequent unplanned disruptions
5. fewer trains cancelled.

Department for Transport (DfT) 2018 research also looked at what improvements would encourage infrequent users of long-distance services to use rail more.

1. cheaper fares (66 per cent)
2. more frequent trains (18 per cent)
3. more routes (17 per cent)
4. less crowded trains (15 per cent)
5. faster journey times (14 per cent)

What this suggests is that train companies can broaden the appeal for those currently not using their services by continuing to focus on the improvements identified by their current passengers.

This requires continued investment to improve capacity and frequency, a focus on driving up levels of punctuality and much more attention on how disruption is managed.

Making fares simpler and easier understood³ also offers considerable opportunities. Single journey-based pricing will simplify and make the system easier to explain, a

best fare guarantee will improve confidence and trust, and new fares that match the way that people want to travel today will make rail more attractive. All of these should also appeal to non-users.

¹ Barriers to travel: How to make rail more attractive to infrequent and non-users – April 2019

² Rail passengers' priorities for improvement – July 2020

³ Tomorrow's passengers: understanding how to make rail travel more attractive to infrequent and non-users – April 2018

However, it will be critical to communicate any improvements clearly, as without the benefit of experiencing any changes, non-users are unlikely to know any concerns have been addressed.

Reliable timetable

A key pillar of any timetable rewrite must include the delivery of a reliable timetable day in and day out. We note that Network Rail is leading a wide-ranging programme to better understand performance as part of the May 2022 timetable. The programme once complete must ensure the delivery of a punctual and reliable railway.

Passengers⁴ want a reliable railway that delivers on the promise of the timetable day in and day out. Improving value for money is a close second and while passengers may not realistically expect prices to drop, they do expect the basic promises of the industry to be met in return for their fares.

The third highest priority is getting a seat on the train. In recent years the railway has succeeded in attracting passengers but has increasingly struggled to provide the extra capacity to meet this demand. More and more services have run on increasingly congested infrastructure, often with a knock-on hit to reliability and punctuality.

These basics – being reliably on time and getting a seat – also contribute to passengers' perceptions of value for money. These are the three key priorities to focus on to improve passengers' journeys.

Since the research was undertaken the railway has, like the rest of our lives, been dramatically changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. A busy and crowded network too often vulnerable to disruption and delays has been transformed into a much quieter, lower frequency, more punctual railway.

In the short-term Covid-19 is bound to have an impact on passengers' priorities – not least when it comes to personal safety, space on the train and cleanliness – but the baseline results will still be relevant. Punctuality, capacity and value for money will still be important in a post-lockdown world. In the long term the looming challenge of climate change means demand for rail travel will return and grow again.

Capacity

The consultation notes that to realise the benefits of making rail more attractive between London-Newcastle and Edinburgh, changes to local and regional services are required.

⁴ Rail passengers' priorities for improvement – July 2020

We have previously⁵ highlighted the need for necessary capacity for long-distance high-speed trains to link the key cities on the ECM L with London, and to Cross Country and TransPennine destinations at the frequency and with the capacity required to develop and sustain the markets. This has to be delivered together with the necessary capacity to meet current demand and accommodate growth on other, mainly local and regional services that run over the ECML itself or connect into it.

We welcome the investment in the ECML that allows key cities to be linked. However, wider aspirations we identified have yet to be fully delivered and future investment decisions must take cognisance of increasing regional capacity and connectivity.

Specific comment on timetable proposals

Comparing and contrasting the three consultation proposals, and aligning it with other operators' as yet unconfirmed timetable proposals, has been a difficult task. However, with all timetable recasts there are both benefits and disbenefits. We provide a summary of both with the expectation that disbenefits identified will be taken into account with a view to making improvements beyond current timetable plans.

Summary – benefits

Edinburgh – faster journey times providing an hourly two-stop service to London; the fewer stops will create more space for passengers making longer-distance journeys, a clear requirement from the charts provided by LNER at its regional presentations.

Dunbar - one more train to King's Cross, a later last train to Newcastle.

Berwick-upon-Tweed - calls by the Inverness and Stirling trains, three new through trains to/from Penzance, nine Plymouth trains each way, five more southbound, seven more northbound, 12 instead of seven trains from Birmingham, 13 to Birmingham rather than seven, four more trains to Leeds and seven trains each way for Glasgow Central, an increase from two.

Alnmouth - three more trains to King's Cross, one more train from King's Cross, calls by the Stirling train and six trains each way for Plymouth, an increase from four.

Morpeth - East Coast Trains has not yet provided any timetable for its proposed service, but it has rights to operate five a day each way. This would provide Morpeth with a London service of eight trains from, and nine to, King's Cross, up from four each way at present. Four trains, instead of one, each way for Plymouth, with two through trains to Penzance.

Newcastle - hourly one-stop service to and from London, three trains an hour throughout the day.

⁵ Response to Network Rail's ECML Route Utilisation Strategy draft for consultation – September 2007

Durham - three trains every two hours, rather than one an hour.

Middlesbrough - a new service of one through train each way each day for London: from Middlesbrough at 7.35 (9.36 on Sundays), from King's Cross at 18.45.

Northallerton - four more trains to Edinburgh (13), five more to Glasgow Central (six), new through trains to Dundee (two) and Aberdeen (one). More trains from Manchester Airport and Manchester Piccadilly, and from Leeds. New through trains to Birmingham New Street, Plymouth and Penance.

York - an hourly additional train for London King's Cross.

Retford - four more trains to King's Cross, better spacing from 15.00 to the end of the day gives a net gain of one train; two more between 6.00 and 7.00, one more 8.00 to 9.00. Three more trains from King's Cross, at 7.45, 19.03 and 23.08, but the 18.33 doesn't call, so a net gain of two.

Peterborough - through trains to/from Inverness and Aberdeen; currently only one train from Aberdeen calls.

Summary – disbenefits

Many of the disbenefits stem from two features of the proposed timetables.

Despite the DfT request to Network Rail to start with a 'blank sheet', many trains are in paths very similar to today's, which makes the May 2022 timetable not the place to start from when building a strategy for the future, making connections at main interchanges poor, or even very poor.

The withdrawal of TPE's Manchester Airport to Newcastle trains and the removal of stops from the two-hourly trains between York and King's Cross will significantly worsen the connectivity between stations on that section of the ECML.

For example:

- reduction from two trains per hour to one train per hour operated by TPE between Newcastle, Durham and Darlington to York, Leeds, Huddersfield and Manchester
- a number of southbound calls in the current Redcar Central – Manchester Airport service at Northallerton have been withdrawn.
- connectivity to Manchester Airport from York, Leeds and Huddersfield is reduced from two trains per hour to one train per hour.

Dunbar - reductions in its services. One morning southbound Cross Country train, one late afternoon Cross Country train, the morning train from Leeds, the late train to Leeds, all but one northbound Cross Country train, and no improvement to the irregular service pattern for journeys to/from Edinburgh.

Reston - a lack of clarity over what services will call, as details are still incomplete. We understand that TPE, Cross Country and ScotRail are in dialogue with the aim to provide a satisfactory timetable. This must be resolved for the implementation of the May 2022 timetable.

Berwick-upon-Tweed - four fewer middle of the day trains to and from King's Cross, four instead of five trains from Aberdeen, imbalance between southbound (11 to King's Cross, 27 total) and northbound (8 from King's Cross, 23 total).

Alnmouth - loses a mid-afternoon train to King's Cross, one train to Edinburgh/Aberdeen, an early afternoon arrival from King's Cross, and one from Liverpool Lime Street. Imbalance between southbound (11 to King's Cross, 21 total) and northbound (eight from King's Cross, 19 total).

Morpeth - reduced service from Leeds, only one train, not two, and only one train to Aberdeen, not two.

Newcastle, Darlington, Durham - the loss of through trains to Manchester Airport.

Northallerton - uneven pattern of up/southbound calls, with both TPE and Cross Country calling every two hours for much of the middle of the day. Six more northbound than southbound trains. As far as TPE services are concerned, that creates an imbalance between northbound and southbound services – 16 from Manchester Airport (four more than now), but only 12 to the airport. Apart from two trains from Liverpool in the evening, no Liverpool service.

Darlington - three trains every two hours, rather than 2 trains per /hour. Patronage at Darlington is noticeably less than might be expected. However, we note plans for the redevelopment of the station and the establishment of an economic campus creating a number of jobs.

York - connections between London trains and Scarborough trains are generally poor: from London the wait is 21 minutes and from Scarborough the wait is 25 minutes.

Retford - a two-hour gap in down trains between 16.03 and 18.03 and two closely-spaced pairs of down trains: 15.47, 16.03 and 18.45, 19.03. The last up train is 22.00 instead of 23.05.

Peterborough - limited number of through journey opportunities to some stations on the ECML north of Doncaster. For example, only two-hourly to Darlington, and no regular link with Durham. LNER services in the up direction are irregular and bunched together (in even hours there are three trains within 15 minutes and then nothing for 45 minutes). Fast journeys to London will be less attractive.

There is no up train leaving Peterborough between 07:33 and 08:14. Connections with EMR's Norwich service are poor: to Norwich, the arrival at Peterborough of trains from Edinburgh are at 10 minutes past the hour, departures for Norwich are at 41 minutes past the hour. From Norwich arrive in Peterborough at 11 minutes past, depart to Edinburgh at 51 minutes past the hour.

First and last Trains

This table compares the proposed first and last LNER trains with those in the first week of August 2021.

Station	direction	Mon. – Fri.		Sat.		Sun.	
Edinburgh	up	5.40 5.40	20.20 19.36	5.40 5.48	18.00 17.30	9.00 9.00	19.25 19.00
	down	5.48 6.15	20.03 19.30	5.48 6.15	18.30 18.00	8.30 8.48	19.30 19.00
Newcastle	up	4.35 4.45	21.58 21.15	4.35 4.45	19.27 19.02	7.55 7.54	20.58 20.33
	down	5.48 6.15	22.03 22.00	5.48 6.15	20.03 21.00	8.30 8.48	22.03 21.00
York	up	4.42 4.40	22.58 22.25	4.42 4.40	20.31 20.01	8.02 8.00	22.02 21.35
	down	5.48 6.15	23.08 23.00	5.48 6.15	21.03 21.00	8.30 8.48	22.03 22.05
Leeds	up	5.00 5.05	21.10 20.45	5.00 5.05	20.10 20.15	8.10 8.05	21.10 20.45
	down	5.40 5.55	23.40 23.33	5.40 5.55	21.40 22.00	8.40 9.03	22.40 22.35

up is towards King's Cross

down is from King's Cross

Morpeth						<i>journeys</i> <i>pop. 2019</i> ¹ <i>2019/20</i> ² % <i>change</i> <i>journeys per person</i> 15,130 506,574 6.6 33.48						
Southbound services						Northbound services						
to	cumulative total	change from today	from	cumulative total	change from today	to	cumulative total	change from today	from	cumulative total	change from today	
BHM	1	(7)	175%	ABD	1	ABD	1	50%	BHM	1	(5)	167%
BRI	1	(5)	125%	BWK	1	EDB	9 ¹	(11)	90%	BRI	(4)	133%
DON	1			EDB	5	GLC	1	new	DON	1		
KGX	4 ¹		225%	GLC	5				KGX	3		75%
NCL	1	(13)	118%	STG	1	new			LIV			
PLY	2	(4)	400%						LDS	1		33%
PNZ	2		new						NCL	1		
RDG	1		new						PLY	4		400%
YRK												
Total	13¹	108%				Total	11¹	92%				
<i>note 1 plus 5 ECTL, so total = 18, 150%</i>						<i>note 1 plus 5 ECTL, so total = 16, 133%</i>						

Northallerton						<i>journeys</i> <i>pop. 2019</i> ¹ <i>2019/20</i> ² % <i>change</i> <i>journeys per person</i> 17,030 712,450 0.7 41.83									
Southbound services						Northbound services									
to	cumulative total	change from today	from	cumulative total	change from today	to	cumulative total	change from today	from	cumulative total	change from today				
BHM	1	(11)	new	ABD	2	200%	ABD	1	new	BHM	2	(12)	new		
BRI	2		new	EDB	3	(12)	150%	DEE	1	new	BTH	1	new		
KGX	19 ¹		136%	GLC	7	new	EDB	5	(13)	144%	KGX	18 ¹	113%		
LDS	1	(23)	85%	MBR	1	(12)	75%	GLC	6	600%	LDS	1	(33)	127%	
MAN	1	(12)	92%	NCL	15	(27)	108%	MBR	1	(18)	120%	LIV	2	14%	
MCV		(12)	44%	RCC	11	(11)	69%	NCL	14	(27)	96%	MAN	1	(17)	142%
MIA	11		85%	SLB	11	new	RCC		(17)	113%	MCV	1	(19)	67%	
PLY	6	(8)	new	SUN	6 ¹	150%	SLB	17	new	MIA	16		133%		
PNZ	2		new				SUN	6 ¹	150%	PLY	6	(9)	new		
YRK	2	(45)	n/c							PNZ	3		new		
Total	45¹	n/c					Total	51	109%						
<i>note 1: GC have said they intend to run 6/day</i>															

Retford						<i>journeys</i> <i>pop. 2019</i> ¹ <i>2019/20</i> ² % <i>change</i> <i>journeys per person</i> 23,348 541,674 4.2 23.20					
Southbound services						Northbound services					
to	change from today		from	change from today		from	change from today		from	change from today	
NNG	5	63%				NNG	2	25%			
GRA	12	75%				GRA	11	65%			
PBO	10	111%				PBO	10	111%			
SVG	5	63%				SVG	2	20%			
KGX	21	124%				KGX	19	112%			
Total	21					Total	19				
<i>totals include Hull Trains, 7/day</i>											