

Future Rail provision in North Northumberland

Background

1. Council has previously indicated its support for campaigns being run by Rail Action Group Eastern Scotland (RAGES) and South East Northumberland Rail User Group (SENUG) to deliver additional rail services to Berwick and its hinterland.
2. Whilst it is entirely appropriate for council to indicate its support for such campaigns, council has previously indicated that it wished to consider whether more work should be done on producing proposals that were centred upon the needs of Berwick and its population.
3. The environment within which levels of rail service are determined is complex, and has long lead times. Groups like RAGES and SENUG are often made up of enthusiasts, supported by industry insiders, who have levels of knowledge that an outside organization, such as this Council, cannot access without instructing consultants.
4. The shrinking of network capacity on Britain's railways over the last fifty years has not made it any easier to propose new services. Broadly speaking, the loss of alternative routes and the reduction in the number of sidings or loops sections can mean that there is less capacity on each track. (Broadly speaking, going from one track to two doubles capacity, but going from two to four only increases capacity by 50%). Understanding the ways in which capacity can be calculated is not simple; one article on the topic runs to 75 pages, and that is one of the simpler articles on the topic. *
5. However, broadly speaking, the greater the variation in average / maximum speeds between trains running on the same track, the lower the capacity, all other things being equal. There is considerable variation in journey times over the ECML between Berwick upon Tweed and Newcastle. By way of demonstration, a typical fast service passing Chathill towards Newcastle (1E09) takes 37 minutes, while the local service over the same path (2A01) takes 71 minutes.
6. The need to reduce this variation in average speeds is one potential explanation for the loss of local trains on the East Coast Mainline since electrification, when British Rail prioritized Inter City journey times above all other service objectives. The number of times any given train stops also has a significant impact on average speeds if line capacity is to remain the same. Your officers make these points not to demonstrate what we know, but rather what we do not know, and do not have the requisite capacity to calculate. It is unlikely, in the short term, that your staff could produce accurately timed or realistic proposals regarding individual services.
7. Returning to the point made in para 1 (above) pressure groups based outside the area have made significant suggestions concerning rail services in North Northumberland, such as the proposals from SENUG for additional stations at locations such as Beal to

serve the day trip / tourist market, but there is somewhat less evidence that their demands have been framed with the needs of those who live or work in Berwick in mind. Intuitively, the proposals of RAGES appear to deliver more synergies for residents of Berwick, since they would offer an improved service along the East Coast of Scotland towards, but there is rather less evidence that this is either what residents of Berwick want, or need.

Issues

1. It is best practice for policy formation to be evidence based, but there is insufficient evidence for the council to demonstrate it has either consulted or listened to the 'voice of the customer' on this topic.
2. There are significant issues around the area of demand modelling for new rail services; both the Borders line and the Ebbw Vale - Cardiff line have experienced much greater traffic numbers than anticipated. This may be a result of conservative modelling of passenger number or an overly cautious approach to estimation, or it may be an artefact of entirely predictable customer behaviour. That is to say, customers often understate their propensity to use a new product or service, because they do not have any means by which they can understand its likely benefits; once they see the product or service in use however, they are much more likely to adopt it for themselves. In short, asking potential customers if they might use a specific service may not produce reliable results. However, this should not preclude asking existing potential customers about the barriers to their using rail as an alternative to other modes of transport.
3. It is possible to undertake some analysis of the impact of current services on the likelihood of passengers commuting to and from Berwick by train, and to propose general improvements to timetables.
4. It is significant to note that both SENRUG and RAGES appear to believe they are capable of being the voice of the customer with regard to rail services in North Northumberland. It would be appropriate for the council to check whether this is the view of rail users living in, or working in, its area.

Recommendations

1. Council is invited to recommend that your officers use appropriate survey software to collect evidence as to the current barriers to train usage,
2. Council is invited to recommend that your officers undertake a high level desk based study of existing timetables and service provision to identify whether existing services address Berwick's needs, and
3. Council is invited to recommend that officers seek ways of identifying whether Berwick rail users support or endorse the proposals of SENRUG and RAGES, including a potential public meeting.

* <http://users.dsic.upv.es/~msalido/papers/transport.pdf> An Assessment of Railway Capacity