

Tuesday 5 November 2024

**Rt Hon Lord Peter Hendy
Minister of State for Rail**

Sent by email:

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**Andy Burnham
Chair, Rail North Committee**

Transport for the North
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Dear Minister

East Coast Main Line Timetable

I am writing to set out Transport for the North's (TfN) views on the East Coast Main Line Task Force's recommendation to introduce a recast timetable in December 2025.

The East Coast Main Line (ECML) is a vital route for the North of England, in accessing London and Scotland, the Midlands and as part of the key east-west trans-pennine axis between Newcastle and Liverpool. The ECML is also a key freight artery for the North. The recently updated Strategic Transport Plan (STP) details the critical importance of Government investing in transforming rail connectivity across the North to realise its economic potential in a way that is sustainable in the long term.

We recognise that considerable investment has been made in both track and trains for the ECML. We also recognise the importance of realising the benefit of that investment at the earliest opportunity.

However, it is a matter of fact that part of the problem we collectively face with the ECML is that the scope of infrastructure investment originally planned was cut back by previous governments. The impact of this has been compounded by decisions taken by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) to allocate additional access rights on the assumption that the infrastructure as originally scoped would be delivered.

We welcome the good work that the ECML Task Force has done since the previous deferral of the timetable. As the statutory advisor on pan-regionally significant investment, TfN has been an active member of the Task Force, bringing the perspective of all our partners across the North into the heart of its work. Given the interdependencies of choices affecting the ECML impacting across the wider North this pan-regional perspective must be central to decision making. We note that many of the previous pathing conflicts and other timetable issues have now been resolved by the Task Force and are re-assured that industry experts believe that the timetable can be delivered. However, we

remain concerned about the nature of some of the compromises, particularly as poor performance is an on-going issue right across the North. Our concerns are amplified by ORR requiring an improvement plan to be produced for the ECML in response to declining performance with the current timetable.

On balance, TfN conditionally supports the Task Force recommendation to implement a new timetable in December 2025.

TfN recognises the benefits of the new timetable, both in terms of addressing capacity issues on long-distance north-south services and facilitating new services between Sheffield and Leeds, and on the Durham Coast all of which are important to the North. We have been assured that the Department will provide the support required to enable these additional services to be run following the timetable change.

That said, there are some significant disbenefits to areas of the North as a consequence of the timetable and a lack of clarity about the timescales for delivery of additional infrastructure improvements to which the Government of the day made commitments to.

Therefore, TfN's support for the timetable change is conditional upon the following:

- The outcome of the performance modelling work, currently scheduled for completion in early 2025, showing no additional deterioration in performance over and above the Task Force assumptions. This is particularly important given the ORR's recent letter to Network Rail on worsening ECML performance under the current timetable. There is need to ensure no further detriment to regional and freight operators as a consequence of prioritising long-distance services.
- The Task Force having a role in robustly monitoring progress across the industry as it prepares for the timetable change, holding operators and Network Rail to account for ensuring that all required activities are completed in accordance with agreed timelines.
- A commitment by the Government that all operators on the ECML will work collaboratively to ensure that the passenger experience is improved. There is deep concern that the reduction in performance on the ECML as a consequence of the timetable change will negatively impact on passengers dependent upon connections between services operated by different companies. TfN is particularly concerned at the heightened risk of passengers missing onward connections due to a decline in performance. There must be a one-railway approach that embraces all operators.
- A commitment from the Government to proactively consider proposals developed through the annual business planning process to improve connectivity to/from those Northeast stations that lose out from the change in future timetables. A consequence of the timetable change will

be to reduce direct connectivity in Northumberland and Durham, an issue that has been raised consistently by TfN over the last 3 years. Whilst the proposed timetable provides a small increase in the TransPennine Express service between Newcastle, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Edinburgh, there needs to be a commitment from the Department to work with Transport for the North and its constituent partners to bring forward specific proposals that will provide a better service for Northumberland.

- Reaffirmation of commitments made by previous Governments to restore the second Transpennine Express service between Manchester and Newcastle as soon as infrastructure upgrades allow.
- Re-commitment to delivering the infrastructure enhancements north of York that support the restoration and enhancements of services in the future (a 7th fast path as a first step). This needs to include confirmation of the date that the deferred works North of York Station will be undertaken, as well as confirmation of the timescale for delivery of the works associated with the Northallerton to Newcastle scheme.
- The Task Force being given a remit to work with TfN and the Department to identify what measures are required, including potential infrastructure investment, to enable the ECML to accommodate further freight growth in line with the targets set by government and TfN. We note the concerns expressed by freight operators about the ability of the proposed timetable change to accommodate further growth in freight traffic.

As the work of the Task Force has served to remind all parties, the rail system serving the North is complex, with a high level of interdependency – changes on the east coast have implications right across to the west and vice-versa. In such circumstances it is essential that investment in infrastructure, rolling stock and timetable changes are considered at a pan-regional level.

The completion of the Trans-Pennine Route Upgrade (TRU) in the early 2030's represents a significant opportunity to transform pan-regional services in support of unlocking the North's economic potential. It is already evident from work on the TRU concept timetable that the ECML north of York will not be able to accommodate the TRU service specification based on currently planned infrastructure. It is therefore essential to acknowledge that to fully realise the potential of the TRU investment the base timetable for the ECML will need to be revisited. Given the timescales associated with such exercises TfN seeks reassurance that the necessary work will be commissioned in time to enable a revised ECML timetable to be introduced upon completion of TRU.

The Task Force has also served to demonstrate the critical importance of having a stronger input from stakeholders into the work of industry programme boards established to oversee such activity. The North, through the Rail North Agreement, already has a high level of devolution on rail, supported by an executive team already based in the North, that enables the North's political



leaders to work with the Department in shaping the development of the rail system. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department in exploring how we might build on this foundation to support the wider ambition of the new Government when it comes to rail reform.

I hope this letter is helpful in setting out our position and we would be happy to discuss further with yourself and officials. We will be updating TfN's Rail North Committee on Thursday 20th November 2024.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Andy Burnham'.

Andy Burnham
Chair, Rail North Committee
Transport for the North