



Northumberland

County Council

Northumberland Line Hospital Level Crossing Q&A

As part of the Northumberland Line project, proposals are being developed to replace Hospital Level Crossing with an underpass. These proposals were presented at a residents' meeting on Thursday 1 July 2021, and this document summarises the answers given to questions raised in that meeting. Introductory sections about the Northumberland Line more generally are included for context.

A planning application for the proposed new underpass has not yet been submitted to the local planning authority, and proposals are still under development. An application for a Transport and Works Act Order (TWAO) has been submitted to the Secretary of State, but this would only authorise the closure of the existing level crossing and the diversion of the existing public right of way through the new underpass. It will not authorise construction of the underpass itself.

Residents will have an opportunity to comment on any future planning application; more information about this is given in the 'Giving feedback and staying involved' section of this document.

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Benefits

1. Why are you re-introducing passenger trains to the Northumberland Line?

The railway between Ashington and Newcastle used to run both passenger and freight services until the Beeching cuts in the 1960s. Since then, freight trains have continued to use the line, primarily serving Lynemouth Power Station.

The reintroduction of passenger services on the line has been an aspiration of Northumberland County Council for many years and the current political, social, economic and rail industry context means that it can now be successfully delivered. As a result of being awarded development funding from the DfT, the council has been working alongside partners since 2018 to develop the scheme.

Improving transport links from towns such as Ashington and Blyth is of key importance to encouraging more sustainable access to the main economic centres across Tyne and Wear. Enhancements to transport links within South East Northumberland will also be instrumental in stimulating economic investment within the region and will help to bring forward much needed housing. The project will address the following issues.

- Car ownership in South East Northumberland is set to increase. This will worsen road congestion, impacting on journey times and the commercial viability of buses across South East Northumberland. A lot of people commute from Northumberland into Tyne and Wear. Road congestion is already an issue and alternative modes of transport need to be provided to ensure people can access employment in a sustainable way.
- Links into Tyne and Wear, particularly Newcastle, are vital for the economic prosperity of Northumberland.
- Current public transport options do not meet the needs of all residents. A lack of available services, long journey times and high public transport costs mean that public transport is not currently a viable option for many people.
- Air quality is a major concern. Collectively, there is a need to reduce harmful vehicle emissions.



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2. What benefits will the scheme deliver?

The Northumberland Line aims to stimulate and support economic growth, regeneration and community development in Northumberland and the surrounding regions by providing new and improved transport links for local people and businesses. By doing so the scheme will:

- improve access from towns such as Ashington and Blyth to employment hubs like Newcastle and open up new opportunities for education, leisure and travel;
- provide a real incentive for potential employers to relocate to and invest in the area;
- provide vital infrastructure to help deliver the region's aspirations for economic growth;
- help to attract visitors and improve local tourism;
- enhance public transport connectivity within and beyond the region;
- help to reduce congestion and improve air quality on key corridors by moving people away from car travel and onto public transport; and
- support the delivery of significant growth in sectors such as renewable energy, offshore oil and gas.

Scheme development and delivery

3. Is the scheme definitely going ahead?

Although the Northumberland Line has been talked about for many years, the current political, social, economic and industry context provides a strong case for re-opening. The scheme has the support of central government as well as key industry stakeholders such as Network Rail, Nexus and Transport for the North. On the strength of wider industry support and the positive business case, this has given us the confidence to proceed with design and planning.

4. When will construction start?

Early enabling works started on site in early 2021. This has mainly been clearance and engineering works with standalone operational benefits, which don't require planning permission. Construction of the stations is anticipated to begin in summer 2022, subject to the necessary approvals being secured.



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5. When will passenger services be operational?

The scheme is subject to several approval processes that may impact the timeline for delivery. The line is currently anticipated to be open to passengers in winter 2023.

6. Who is delivering the scheme?

The scheme is being delivered by Northumberland County Council, supported by a number of key project partners, including North Tyneside Council, Department for Transport, Network Rail, Transport for the North, Nexus and Northern Rail.

7. Who is funding the scheme?

The scheme is funded by the Department of Transport and Northumberland County Council's capital funding programme.

Current use of Hospital Level Crossing

8. How often is the level currently used?

A nine-day level crossing census conducted in 2019 found that 481 pedestrians and 54 cyclists utilised the crossing each day on average. For a crossing which is not connected to a highway, this number of users is considered as very high.

9. Where can the Level Crossing census data be viewed?

Copies of the level crossing census are available on request. If you would like a copy, please contact rail@northumberland.gov.uk.

Option selection

10. Why can't the level crossing be closed and not replaced by an alternative?

When changes are made to the railway (e.g. introducing new services), a risk-based approach is taken to assess whether further changes need to be made elsewhere to accommodate them. When it comes to level crossings, Network Rail's All Level Crossing Risk Model, a model designed to assess the level of risk and safety of a level crossing, is used.



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This assessment has found that once the Northumberland Line service starts operation, the risk over Hospital Level Crossing becomes too great to keep it open. This is due to increased train frequency and speed; the high number of daily users; and the fact trains will be coming from both directions on both tracks. Closure of the level crossing would also not remove the risk of trespassing onto the line.

11. What's wrong with upgrading the current crossing, or diverting people to Green Lane Level Crossing or Ashington Station?

We considered various enhancements to the level crossing, including miniature stop lights, but the risk of each of them was still found to be too high (using Network Rail's Risk Model).

Diverting current users of Hospital Level Crossing to Green Lane Level Crossing would increase the risk at Green Lane Level Crossing. This is compounded by the fact that Green Lane Level Crossing only has a footpath on one side, which would mean all pedestrians would be clustered there at peak times.

In addition, the length of a diversion via Green Lane or Ashington Station would make the route very long for persons of reduced mobility, especially in an urban area, meaning it is unlikely to be acceptable or approved. It also goes against best practice to replace the risk from one level crossing with the risk of another, so level crossings should never be deemed acceptable as an alternative to another level crossing.

12. Have you considered where people using Hospital Level Crossing are coming from and going to? This means that the 'diversion' is actually shorter than it initially seems.

The census undertaken at the level crossing counted numbers of users, with camera information used to categorise type of user (e.g. with cycle, unaccompanied child). As noted in the answer to question 11, the length of the potential diversions is considered too long, in the context of how such diversions are usually calculated, regardless of origin and destination points.

13. Hospital Level Crossing was primarily a means of accessing the old hospital, which has now closed. Does the level crossing really need to remain?

The railway line that Hospital level crossing crosses was authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1857. Whilst, during its existence, the footpath and level crossing provided a convenient



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and direct route for pedestrians visiting the hospital, the level crossing was not created for this sole purpose.

The footpath is now a major part of the local street network and is recorded by Northumberland County Council as a public footpath, which should be protected for the benefit of pedestrians. As a result, strict guidelines and restrictions remain for diversions of these routes and for its removal with no replacement.

14. Why has an underpass been selected instead of a footbridge, especially when the most recent public consultation found a footbridge at the station a more preferable option?

A number of factors were considered when choosing an underpass as our preferred option, including public consultation feedback, journey times, accessibility and inclusion, space requirements, maintenance, engineering, and safety.

During the public consultation, we outlined that we were considering either a footbridge at the new Ashington Station or an underpass close to the current level crossing location. Although we noted a preference for the footbridge option, this was ultimately discounted due to the length of the diversion (including the significant ramps that would be required to provide a structure that meets both accessibility and inclusivity requirements), the increased risk of trespass on the line and impacts on Green Lane Level Crossing.

Relative to a bridge, an underpass also performs better from an engineering perspective as its depth is much more modest than the bridge's height and it requires less maintenance and land take. It also has less impact on neighbouring properties by removing privacy/overlooking concerns.

We have considered the reasons people gave through the public consultation for preferring a footbridge to an underpass, and used this to inform our underpass design. For example, the underpass will be sensitively designed to discourage anti-social behaviour and create an appealing walking route.

15. Why have you chosen this location for the underpass? Does it need to be in a residential area?

The proposed underpass location performs best compared to other locations in terms of accessibility and journey times. Moving the underpass further north would increase the span of the underpass, due to its location under the turnout into Ashington station bay platform, meaning users would have to spend more time under the railway. Moving it further north or south would make it harder to maintain a suitable gradient for users with restricted mobility.



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The underpass also needs to be close to the existing level crossing, to mitigate the risk of trespassing onto the line. As noted above, any increased distance from the current location increases the risk at the existing location and at Green Lane Level Crossing, as potential users may divert there instead.

16. What is proposed for Green Lane Level Crossing?

Green Lane Level Crossing will be upgraded to a full barrier crossing, with full barriers across the road and paths. These barriers will work automatically and will be able to detect anyone trespassing into the crossing area when the barriers are down. New road markings and signs will also be put in place.

Anti-social behaviour and safety

17. What measures would be put in place to ensure people feel safe using the underpass, and to limit anti-social behaviour?

The underpass will be carefully designed to discourage anti-social behaviour and improve safety. This will include:

- good quality lighting;
- designing the structure to be wider and higher than a standard underpass, to create a sense of space;
- installing pedestrian guard rails; and
- limiting the length of the underpass to minimise the amount of time users spend in it.

We are exploring the potential to install CCTV cameras on the underpass.

In addition, visibility will be improved by providing splays at the underpass entrances, which will enable users to see their exit point upon approach and limit blind spots, improving users' personal security. Approaches to the underpass will also be improved, making them more spacious and safer than the approaches to the current level crossing.

Additional safety considerations at detailed design stage will include surfacing and materials, including those that prevent graffiti and vandalism.

As well as the stated design improvements, Northumberland County Council will work closely with and engage the local police, British Transport Police and Fire Service, who will play a role in ensuring that the underpass is a safe space for users.



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18. How have you assessed the risk of an underpass? Do you have any statistics about their safety?

Every underpass has its own unique local context, subject to numerous variables, so it is unreasonable to compare them like for like. Northumberland County Council will nevertheless work closely with and engage the local police, British Transport Police and Fire Service, who will play a role in ensuring that the underpass is a safe space for users.

19. Will you be able to see through from one side of the underpass to the other?

The design of the underpass will ensure that visibility is improved for users. Splays will be provided at the entrances which will limit blind spots and allow the user to view their exit point on approach, providing a sense of personal security.

20. How will motorbikes be stopped from driving through the underpass?

We will address this specifically as part of the detailed design for the underpass. The solution is likely to include traffic bollards at the end of Darnley Road, which will help prevent motorbikes entering the underpass. Trespassing with motorbikes is not unique to this specific underpass location, however Northumberland County Council will work closely with the local police to monitor underpass usage by motorbikes to mitigate antisocial behaviour.

21. If CCTV is installed, who is going to pay for and monitor the cameras? How often will they be monitored? Will it just be after an incident?

During the detailed design stage, we will work closely and engage with the local police to discuss and agree an approach to monitoring and maintenance of CCTV.

22. How regularly will the underpass be checked and cleaned?

The underpass and the footpath through it will be jointly maintained by Network Rail and Northumberland County Council. Details of this will be determined at the detailed design stage.



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Underpass design

23. How tall and how wide will the underpass be?

The distance between the footpath and the 'roof' of the underpass will be approximately 2.6 metres, and there will be approximately half a metre between the 'roof' and the rails. The underpass will be 5 metres wide.

24. Will the underpass be made entirely of concrete?

Much of the underpass structure will be concrete, as this is the best engineering solution. However, the external design is yet to be confirmed and will be developed as part of the detailed design phase.

25. How can you know if an underpass is feasible if ground investigations have yet to be completed?

Ground investigations are due to be completed for the proposed underpass, and will inform its detailed design. It is likely that determination of the planning application will be dependent upon receipt of acceptable ground data.

26. The area is susceptible to flooding. How do you know an underpass won't flood, or make local flooding worse?

The project team have liaised with Northumberland County Council as the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) for the area to develop the proposals for the underpass. As part of the planning application for the underpass, a Flood Risk Assessment has been undertaken. This document will be publicly available and accessible on the council's planning application portal once the application is submitted.

Construction

27. How long will it take to construct, and how much disruption will this cause local residents?

We are currently developing an approach to construction, but anticipate that the underpass would take about five months to build. We are aiming to produce a design that minimises the amount of night working, which may mean construction takes longer overall but which will reduce the impact on residents.



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Nearby residents and businesses will be advised in advance of any construction, both for daytime working and in the event that essential work needs to take place at night.

28. When previous works have been undertaken on site, access to local garages has been blocked. Can you guarantee that this won't happen again?

We apologise for inconvenience caused previously, and do not currently anticipate needing to block access to any garages as part of the construction of the underpass. If a future need to block access is identified, we will engagement garage owners and users to determine the best way forward.

29. If you need to drill into the ground to build the underpass, is there a risk of damage to local homes?

We are used to working adjacent to properties and will ensure that no such damage occurs. We will consider all options for construction through the design phase to cause as little disruption as possible to local residents.

30. Is the circle in the middle of Chillingham crescent, currently used as play space, or green space at Green Lane, going to be used as a construction compound?

We have no current intention to use the Green Lane grass or Chillingham Crescent circle for this project.

31. Are you planning on using the back of Darnley Road for parking?

We have no current intention to use the back of Darnley Road for operational parking or Ashington Station car parking.

Environment

32. How many trees will be felled to make way for Ashington Station car park?

Some existing trees and green space will have to be removed to construct the station and car park. This will be compensated for by new planting provided in alternative locations. Details of the station's impact on local trees is outlined in the Arboricultural Assessment, submitted as part of the planning application for Ashington Station.



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33. What is the project's approach to retaining trees and green space?

It is inevitable that the project will lead to changes in what the area around the railway line and the stations looks like. This will mean some trees and other vegetation will need to be removed along the track and at some worksites. We will approach changes to the local landscape as sensitively as possible and we are developing a landscape strategy to deliver landscape and ecological enhancements as part of the project.

This means that the project will ultimately lead to new and improved habitats for local wildlife. Where trees and habitats are unavoidably lost as a result of the scheme, they will be replaced at other suitable locations locally.

Our landscaping at the station sites will use as many native and local species of plant as possible, aiming to create an attractive environment for people arriving at the stations. Our ecology surveys mean we know the protected species and habitats along the line and our proposals will safeguard these, as well as creating new habitats where possible.

Property devaluation

34. How will the underpass and construction impact the value of houses?

Studies have shown that improvements in local transport infrastructure, new train services and new stations encourage investment in housing, shopping and other services. The impacts on local housing are very difficult to predict and will very much depend upon local conditions and demand.

Whilst we would hope that the Northumberland Line will not cause any reduction in property values, there is an established legal framework which provides for compensation to be paid in such circumstances.

Under Part 1 of the Land Compensation Act 1973, where the value of property is depreciated by certain factors arising from the use of certain 'public works' such as a railway, compensation can be claimed by the relevant owner.

If you think this applies to you, we recommend that you seek specialist advice to help determine your eligibility for such compensation. The following source can help you to identify a suitable specialist: <https://www.ricsfirms.com/>.



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Giving feedback and staying involved

35. Why are you not running a public consultation specifically on plans for the underpass?

We included potential proposals for an underpass to replace Hospital Level Crossing in the public consultation conducted on the Northumberland Line in late 2020. Through this consultation, we collected significant feedback on the proposals for the level crossing, including key considerations relating to its closure and potential replacement with an underpass. We have used this feedback to develop our proposals, alongside ongoing engineering and risk assessments.

36. Why did you not communicate with residents prior to Transport and Works Act Order notifications being put up around the local area?

As noted above, details of the potential for an underpass close to the site of Hospital Level Crossing were identified as part of the public consultation undertaken in late 2020, the publicity for which included a promotional postcard being sent to addresses within 200 metres of the railway line.

We acknowledge that more comprehensive communications could have been undertaken following the closure of the consultation and prior to the submission of the Transport and Works Act Order. We will liaise with the local planning authority and request that those streets within immediate proximity are notified when the planning application for the underpass has been submitted.

37. Will the underpass be the subject of a standalone planning application, meaning residents have an opportunity to raise their concerns directly with the planning authority?

Yes – a new underpass will require a standalone planning application, which would be submitted to Northumberland County Council in its capacity as local planning authority. Any planning application can be commented on by the public and the application will be decided by a planning committee. When an application is heard at a planning committee, the recommendation of the professional officers handling the case is considered by members of the committee. These recommendations are set out within reports that are published on an agenda for each meeting. Members of the committee will read these reports and have access to all the relevant documents and information in the same way that the public have access.



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During the committee, officers present the application. They use visual and verbal descriptions of the proposal, and provide an overview of the key issues.

The public have the opportunity to speak following this presentation. Public speaking is made in accordance with the council's public speaking protocol for planning committees.

After public speaking has finished, members of the committee will direct any questions they may have about the application to the officers of the council. Following this, the committee debates and discusses the merits and issues of each application with the guidance and authority of the Chair of that meeting.

A proposal will be made, which must be seconded by an additional member of the committee. This proposal will usually be to approve or refuse the application in line with or against the recommendation of the planning officers involved. In some cases, members of the committee can propose that a site visit be undertaken so that they can fully consider the application. Members can also seek to alter the recommendation of the officers, which sometimes includes the removal of or insertion of conditions or other requirements. When a proposal has been made, a vote will take place and the outcome of this vote will ultimately determine the decision that the planning committee makes on that application.

More information about the planning application process can be found on [Northumberland County Council's website](#).

38. How will residents know when the planning application has been submitted?

Once a planning application, including one for an underpass, has been submitted, the council will identify those properties which it considers may be affected by the proposal and these properties will receive a letter inviting them to view the application and make comments as part of the planning process. It is at this point that they will be able to raise further concerns, or object to the proposals. Any planning application can be commented on by the public and any public objections can be heard at the planning committee as outlined above.

39. Are there restricted grounds on which residents can object to the proposals once they have been submitted as a formal planning application?

There are no restrictions on who can make comments on a planning application, only that such comments need to be made in writing and before the report for the planning committee is prepared.



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40. How can I keep up to date with news on the project?

You can remain informed about project progress and feedback opportunities via the project webpage: www.northumberland.gov.uk/line.

Other

41. How will the Northumberland Line proposals impact on local traffic and parking?

Each Northumberland Line station planning application includes a Transport Assessment, which considers the development's impact on the local road network and anticipated demand and existing supply of local car parking spaces. This data has been used to determine the proposed car park sizes, and any mitigation needed on the local road network.

In addition, Northumberland County Council is promoting active travel and a modal shift from private cars. This will help encourage those who can to choose to travel to the stations more sustainably.

42. When the line opens, will there be three tracks? Where will additional tracks be accommodated?

The two tracks at Hospital Crossing will remain, but a third platform line is to be created at the station. This will allow passenger trains to use the station without blocking the line for the Lynemouth Power Station train. The new track branches off the existing tracks just north of Ashbourne Crescent.