Delegated Decision Report

26 August 2026

Title:	Northumberland Line Peak Service Strengthening Pilot
Portfolio:	Transport
Responsible Director:	Tobyn Hughes, Director of Transport
Report Author:	Christopher Hawkins, Principal Transport Policy and Strategy Officer (Rail)

Purpose of the report

This report seeks approval for the North East MSA to fund a pilot scheme to increase passenger capacity on the Northumberland Line on one morning and one evening weekday peak service from autumn 2026 to 31 March 2028.

Recommendations

The Chief Executive is recommended to:

1. Approve the use of £927,000 from the Transport and Local Infrastructure pillar of the Integrated Settlement.
2. Agree to enter into a Grant Funding Agreement with DfT Operator Limited to fund additional rolling stock to strengthen peak services on the Northumberland Line.

Executive Summary

Higher than anticipated usage of the Northumberland Line has resulted in crowding pressures during weekday AM and PM peak periods. This report sets out the case for a pilot scheme to increase passenger capacity on specified services from autumn 2026 to the end of March 2028 by introducing additional rolling stock. It is proposed that this is funded by the North East MSA at a cost of £927,000 via a Grant Funding Agreement with DfT Operator Limited (DfT Operator), the UK Government's public sector rail owning group, which owns Northern Trains Limited (commonly known as Northern).

The intervention is to apply from autumn 2026 to the end of the 2027/28 financial year only. This approach provides short-term relief while allowing time for the North East MSA to work with Northern, the Department for Transport (DfT), Rail North Partnership and Northumberland County Council to monitor usage and determine an appropriate long-term solution.

This proposal has endorsement from Technical Officers Group and Cabinet members were informed of ongoing work to provide additional capacity as part of a Local Transport Plan update on 17 March 2026.

A. Context

1. Background

The Northumberland Line opened to passengers in December 2024, providing 35-minute journeys between Ashington and Newcastle at a twice-hourly frequency during Monday-to-Saturday daytimes, with hourly services after 8PM and on Sundays. Services are provided by Northern Trains Limited (commonly known as Northern). It is one of the most significant investments in North East local transport in decades and will help to address long-standing deprivation in parts of South East Northumberland.

Integration of the local public transport network has also improved since the line opened. It is included within the North East's Pop zonal fares system, allowing passengers to use a single pricecapped ticket across the Northumberland Line, Tyne & Wear Metro, and Shields Ferry. Since April 2026, passengers have benefited from the Mayor's Fares initiative which offers reduced daily fare caps for journeys made using Pop PAYG smartcards and caps prices for rail-only tickets on the Northumberland Line.

1.1 Crowding pressures

Over 1.7 million trips have been made on the line as of 11 July 2026. Patronage has increased steadily each month, with Northern reporting an average of approximately 110,000 monthly journeys in the first half of 2026.

However, higher than anticipated usage has also resulted in crowding pressures, primarily during weekday AM and PM peak periods. Northern's monitoring has identified the following services as the worst affected. They operate at the busiest points in the timetable, when commuter demand into and out of Newcastle station is highest:

- 07:37 Ashington to Newcastle.
- 17:25 Newcastle to Ashington.

Monitoring evidence from May to July 2026 shows that total nominal capacity (140 seating and 30 standing) has been exceeded on several weekday peak services. The highest loading (231 passengers) was on the 07:37 Ashington to Newcastle service on 19 May 2026. This is approximately 36% above the existing train's nominal total capacity.

While there is always uncertainty attached to a relatively new transport service, Northern expects further growth in peak demand due to:

- The resumption of most education-related travel from autumn 2026;
- Growing awareness of the Mayor's Fares offer and the availability of cheaper Pop Blue fares for younger passengers;
- General maturation of demand following the opening of the final two stations at Northumberland Park and Bedlington earlier in 2026;
- Relocation of HMRC's Newcastle Regional Centre to Pilgrim's Quarter, close to Manors station and Newcastle Central station, in 2027.

2. Investment proposal

Northern does not have available rolling stock that could be reallocated to the Northumberland Line to address these pressures without reducing services for passengers elsewhere on the local rail network. Diesel Multiple Units (DMUs), the rolling stock used on the Northumberland Line, are also very difficult to source at the present time.

However, Northern has identified an opportunity to lease one additional Class 156 DMU unit in 2026/27 and 2027/28. At specified peak times, this unit could be joined to the rolling stock currently in service on the Northumberland Line, adding a further 140 seats and 30 standing spaces to each service. 340 passengers would then be able to be accommodated on the following weekday services:

- 07:37 Ashington to Newcastle.
- 17:25 Newcastle to Ashington.

As Northern is not funded to finance such an arrangement, the North East MSA would do so through a Grant Funding Agreement with DfT Operator. Northern would then be funded by DfT Operator to lease the additional rolling stock.

A revenue return scheme for the North East MSA to recoup revenue generated that would not have been available were this additional capacity not in place will also be negotiated. This will require both parties to agree a reasonable baseline to distinguish between growth attributable to the additional capacity and that arising from natural demand increases or new station openings. While the revenue from the additional capacity is forecast to be modest, both parties have agreed to develop this mechanism following the signing of the Grant Funding Agreement. Given the need to agree a solution to the anticipated increase in crowding pressures quickly, it is not considered feasible to negotiate this prior to entering into the Grant Funding Agreement. However, initial discussions have taken place and work will commence at pace as soon as the Agreement is in place.

The proposal ensures there is sufficient capacity to strengthen the busiest morning and evening services, allowing them to cope with anticipated additional demand. Addressing crowding pressures at this early stage will help ensure the Northumberland Line continues to deliver the economic and social benefits anticipated in the original business case, and safeguard previous investment by the North East MSA, Northumberland County Council and the UK Government. It will also provide time to work with Northern, Northumberland County Council, the Department for Transport and Rail North Partnership to monitor demand response and develop a longer-term solution.

2.1 Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	26/27	27/28
Deployment of Class 156 Diesel Multiple Unit on the Northumberland Line to support weekday AM and PM peak services.	1	1
Total increase in seating capacity on a weekday	280 (140 per service)	280 (140 per service)
Total increase in passenger capacity on a weekday	340 (170 per service)	340 (170 per service)

Description of Outcomes	Timeframe for achievement	Target
Continued growth in patronage on the Northumberland Line	From autumn 2026 to March 2028	Increase from 2025/26 baseline (to be identified in M&E)
Frequency of peak services exceeding nominal capacity	From autumn 2026 to March 2028	Decrease from 2025/26 baseline (to be identified in M&E)
Improvement in passenger satisfaction on the Northumberland Line at peak times.	From autumn 2026 to March 2028	Increase from 2025/26 baseline (to be identified in M&E)

2.2 Timetable for Implementation

Milestone	Forecast Date
Agreement of Grant Funding Agreement with DfT Operator	September 2026 (estimated)
Deployment of Rolling Stock on Northumberland Line	Autumn 2026 (estimated)
Agreement of Revenue Return Scheme	October 2026 (estimated)

Decision taken on solution for 2028/29 and beyond	June 2027 (estimated)
Completion of intervention	March 2028

2.3 Evaluation

Evaluation will be undertaken by Northern Trains Limited in partnership with Northumberland County Council, Rail North Partnership and the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority. A monitoring and evaluation plan will be produced and embedded into the Grant Funding Agreement.

Evaluation will cover:

- Frequency of peak services (not limited to the two strengthened services) exceeding nominal capacity;
- Passenger satisfaction on the two strengthened services.

2.4 Long-term approach

The proposed intervention is time limited until the end of March 2028. In advance of this, a substantive decision on the long-term provision of capacity on the Northumberland Line will be required.

Likely options include:

- Northern re-deploying rolling-stock currently in use elsewhere on the network;
- Northern taking out a lease for suitable rolling stock and covering the cost themselves;
- Northern entering a new lease, potentially with financial support from the North East MSA;
- A determination that strengthening is no longer justified.

By mid-2027 evidence gathered as part of the evaluation will give the North East MSA and its partners a clearer evidence base for deciding on the most cost-effective and sustainable solution for capacity beyond March 2028.

B. Impact on North East Mayoral Strategic Authority objectives

The Mayor’s Local Transport Plan and associated Delivery Plan are centred on creating a greener, more integrated and more accessible transport network. By increasing capacity on the Northumberland Line, the proposal will improve the attractiveness of public transport and support better access to employment, education and essential services. It therefore contributes to the North East MSA’s corporate objectives of creating a home of real opportunity and a North East we are proud to call home.
The proposal is also consistent with the emerging North East Rail Vision, which identifies adding capacity on the Northumberland Line as an immediate priority and seeks to deliver more reliable, people-focused rail services. The Rail Vision remains subject to formal adoption by the North East MSA Mayor and Cabinet.

C. Key risks

- **Delays to physical relocation of rolling stock -** The MSA has pressed for the unit to be relocated to the North East quickly following finalisation of the Grant Funding Agreement to enable the additional rolling stock to be in place for autumn 2026. If this cannot be achieved, overcrowding will persist for longer and the North East MSA's financial commitment may need to be adjusted to account for the unit being in service for a shorter time period.

- **Failure to agree the revenue-return mechanism** - As noted, the intention to implement a revenue-return mechanism has been agreed in principle and discussions are already underway with Northern's leadership team.

- **Risk of no successor arrangement in place for April 2028** - Robust monitoring and evaluation will be put in place as part of the GFA and a decision will be taken on a long-term solution by mid-2027.

D. Corporate Implications

D1. Financial and other resources implications

The financial profile for the project/programme is included below:

Funding source – Transport and Local Infrastructure pillar of the North East MSA's Integrated Settlement	2026/27	2027/28	Total cost of the pilot
Leasing and operational costs (autumn 2026 - Mar 2028)	£346k	£581k	£927k

The grant recipient is DfT Operator, the UK Government's public sector rail owning group, which owns Northern Trains Limited. Northern is the sole passenger rail service provider on the Northumberland Line.

A revenue return scheme will be negotiated to allow the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority to recoup revenue that would not have been available were this additional capacity not in place. Given the need to agree a solution to crowding pressures quickly, it is not feasible to negotiate this prior to entering into the Grant Funding Agreement. Work on a revenue return agreement will commence as soon as the Grant Funding Agreement is in place. Northern and the North East MSA have agreed to such an arrangement in principle.

Status of match funding:

No match funding is required.

Funding availability:

The proposal is funded through the Transport and Local Infrastructure pillar of the Integrated Settlement.

D2. Legal implications

The comments of the representative of the Monitoring Officer have been included in the report.

D3. Equalities implications

Reduced crowding is likely to have positive impacts for disabled and older passengers, pregnant passengers, and people travelling with children.

D4. Consultation and engagement

The North East MSA Senior Leadership Team and The Technical Officers Group have been consulted on the proposal.

E. Background papers

None

F. Contact officers

Name: Christopher Hawkins

Title: Principal Transport Policy and Strategy Officer (Rail)

Email address: christopher.hawkins@northeast-ca.gov.uk

G. Glossary

Class 156 Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU): A type of diesel passenger train introduced in the late 1980s and widely used on regional rail services across the UK. Each Class 156 trainset consists of two vehicles (carriages) that operate together as a single train unit.

North East MSA: North East Mayoral Strategic Authority

Strengthening (train strengthening): In railway operations, strengthening refers to adding additional vehicles or units to an existing train service to increase passenger capacity without introducing additional timetabled services.

Unit: A self-contained train formation comprising one or more vehicles. A Class 156 unit comprises two vehicles.