

Harborough Rail Users (HRU) response

This document sets out the response of Harborough Rail Users (HRU) to the East Midlands Railway (EMR) December 2020 timetable consultation.

Harborough Rail Users is an independent voluntary group that seeks to represent all users of Market Harborough station, whether regular commuters or occasional travellers. We campaigned successfully to retain the half-hourly train service in the previous East Midlands Trains franchise and we aim to ensure that Market Harborough's rail users continue to be well served.

In making these comments, we note that the much-expanded car park and lengthened platforms at Market Harborough station strengthen its status as effectively a **'parkway' station** for a wide catchment area. Moreover, as well as being a point of origin, **Market Harborough is increasingly a destination** for passengers arriving from elsewhere, for leisure, business travel and regular commuting. This is especially so with the commercial property developments along the Rockingham Road corridor in the town, where the station is located.

- We welcome the placement of Market Harborough in the **Intercity division of EMR** and look forward to the introduction in a few years' time of the new fleet of Hitachi bi-mode trains. We trust that these will offer a true Intercity travel environment at least comparable with the present quality of service, with catering to match. We also trust that the 33 x 5-car units ordered will be sufficient to meet demand as anticipated growth continues. We recognise the advantages in having a standard Intercity fleet, which would allow for short-notice substitutions in the event of service perturbation. We also recognise that platform lengths at St Pancras are limited. All peak workings would need to be double-unit formations, as would many services at weekends.
- In the meantime, we trust that Intercity **catering** provision on the interim fleet will be at least equivalent to that currently on offer, including **accessibility for disabled passengers**. We trust that appropriate services will be timetabled to call at Market Harborough to maintain or increase the current availability of both 'full' and 'light' breakfast services.
- We note that the **service pattern is standardised**, which should help to make it easily understood both by users and staff.
- We welcome the commitment to **two trains per hour in each direction for Market Harborough**, and the intended even spacing of these at 'approximately every 30 minutes throughout the day'.
- The proposed **half-hourly service stopping only at Kettering** is a reasonable compromise between our current hourly mix of fast and stopping trains. It offers reasonable journey times and we would effectively have a half-hourly service to every principal station between St Pancras and Sheffield, with a maximum of one change for any destination. This is welcome. We note also that the half-hourly EMR Electrics service will reduce peak overcrowding on Intercity services.
- However, **we would lose our hourly non-stop service to and from St Pancras**, which is much loved by Market Harborough rail users and promotes revenue and growth for the franchise. We therefore feel that there should be **two non-stop services between Market Harborough and St Pancras in the morning and evening peaks** to secure a service without overcrowding from Kettering; around 07:00 – 07:30 southbound from Market Harborough, with

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corresponding return from St Pancras around 16:30 - 17:00. We suggest that this be achieved by Market Harborough stops on the relevant Sheffield semi-fast services, so as not to remove any Kettering stops.

- We acknowledge, however, the promise of **'peak-time journey improvements of more than 10 minutes'**, which presumably result from the removal of the intermediate calls south of Kettering.
- We also **lose our hourly direct connectivity with all EMR stations south of Kettering**, with passengers having to change there to an Electric service in future. Of particular concern is the loss of a **direct regular service between Market Harborough and Luton Airport Parkway**, which is an important destination for:
 - Commuters who work at or near the airport;
 - Air travellers;
 - Those travelling to intermediate Thameslink stations north of London St Pancras; including regular commuters. For them to have to change trains twice in each direction daily is a significant deterioration in service quality and adds reliability risk.

We therefore ask that consideration be given to **at least one peak Market Harborough service calling at Luton Airport Parkway** in each direction, southbound in the morning, northbound in the evening. We suggest that such Intercity calls at Luton Airport Parkway be set-down only southbound, pick-up only northbound, to deter intermediate use to and from St Pancras.

- We support the suggestion that has been made elsewhere that consideration be given to **'wrong line running' of the Corby Electrics services at Kettering, to give cross-platform interchange** for southbound passengers.
- **We welcome the removal of the Wellingborough – Bedford peak-time bus connection** by means of the reinstatement of trains.
- We are concerned about **connection times at Leicester** for Market Harborough passengers. We note the comment in FAQs about connections being *'on average less than 20 minutes'*. However, on the assumption that departures from St Pancras will be *'flighted'*, with the Sheffield train departing just ahead of the Nottingham train, we fear that Market Harborough passengers changing at Leicester for services towards Derby and beyond may have connection times of up to 25 - 30 minutes. (Longer connection times are acknowledged in FAQs as a possibility in *'isolated'* instances.) As all this is based on an assumption, we look forward to seeing the actual draft timetable.
- It is worth noting that any lengthening of journey times or additional changes of train would have implications for **disabled users**.
- **We welcome earlier arrivals in London**. There is an aspiration for commuters to be able to be in 'the city' by 07:00. (We note that Nottingham is promised an *'earliest service due to arrive over one hour earlier'* than the present 07:36 arrival. (And Beeston *'over two hours earlier'* than the present 08:24 arrival.) Assuming such a service maintains equivalent running times and calls at Market Harborough, this would be a major improvement; arriving at St Pancras around 06:30.)

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- We would wish to see **earlier first morning arrivals in Nottingham, Derby and Sheffield**. (The latter two with or without direct services from Market Harborough; whereas at present the first two northbound departures do take this route.) In short, the timetable needs to allow commuters and others seeking onward connections to be in Leicester by 07:00; Derby and Nottingham by 07:45; and Sheffield by 08:30.
- We welcome the promise of **a later last train to St Pancras**, by 20 minutes. However, this is still too early for an evening out in Leicester or places north thereof. We therefore repeat previous requests for a later last service, both on weekdays and Saturdays:
 - Which need not run through to St Pancras. It could be a service running south from Leicester to Market Harborough and, say Kettering, or perhaps Bedford for onward Thameslink connections;
 - Alternatively, Sheffield is promised '*significantly later departures*' to St Pancras, with '*the final service to depart Sheffield planned to be over one hour later than the current final service*' (which departs Sheffield 20:49). Journey times are less of a priority in the late evening, so we suggest this train call at Market Harborough (and Kettering).
 - There is also a need for a later last train south from Nottingham than the promised '*20 minutes later*' in the consultation. There are various options for this; if the last Sheffield train included a Market Harborough stop, a connecting service via Leicester would suffice. Alternatively, perhaps the last Sheffield train could run via both Derby and Nottingham.
- Sunday timetables are not mentioned. We repeat our previous aspirations for an **earlier northbound first service on Sundays**. A forward extension of the equivalent of the present 10:20 Leicester to York to start from at least Kettering (or Bedford for Thameslink connections?), if not St Pancras, would be a major improvement. Alternatively, a service from stations including Market Harborough to connect into that train at Leicester would suffice.

In making all of these comments, we recognise that EMR is constrained by the franchise contract with the DfT and by the capacity constraints on the Midland Main Line, especially where it is shared with Thameslink. However, we submit our comments in good faith and ask that full consideration be given to them. We therefore look forward to draft timetables showing the actual service proposals.

With thanks for the opportunity to comment.

For further information, please contact Steve Jones, Chair, Harborough Rail Users.

Harborough Rail Users

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