Written evidence submitted by Campaign to Open Gilsland Station (RUT0183)

Summary

- Rationale for national funding of rural transport networks for tourists
- Need for public transport in rural areas
- Bus – need for early funding to ensure timely planning and advertising
- Rail – need for direct rail access to Hadrian’s Wall funded nationally
- Cycles – need for more off-road sections on national cycle routes
- Cycles – need for improved facilities to transport bicycles on public transport

Introduction

Gilsland is a small village on Hadrian’s Wall. The Campaign to Open Gilsland Station (COGS) represents residents of and visitors to Gilsland who want the reinstatement of the railway station. As chair of the steering committee, I am submitting this evidence to represent the views of the members.

The campaign is supported by Northumberland County Council, Cumbria County Council, Carlisle City Council, Guy Opperman MP for Hexham, Rory Stewart MP for Penrith and the Border, English Heritage, Northumberland National Park, North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, RAF Spadeadam, Thirlwall, Upper Denton and Waterhead Parish Councils, Tyne Valley Community Rail Partnership, Tyne Valley Rail Users Group, Northern (TOC), DNV-GL and other local businesses and accommodation providers and visitors from the rest of the UK and abroad who have pledged support via our website.

1. Rural Transport and Tourism

There needs to be a more national view of rural tourist assets. If the whole nation is to benefit from rural destinations then they should be funded on that basis because the local economy cannot support or develop them without at least pump priming funding from national coffers. This funding needs to be timely, consistent and reliable, guaranteed for a set number of years so that proper forward planning can put in place and visitors and service providers can have confidence in the permanence of the infrastructure it supports. There needs to be a more holistic view of rural areas, their needs and their value to the wider community.

1.a The need for public transport

Rural areas are often characterised by narrow winding roads, narrow or low bridges and level crossings which render them unsuitable for high traffic loads and large tourist coaches. Widening and straightening these roads is seldom an option if the character of the area is to be preserved. This makes reliable, frequent, appropriate public transport a vital part of the tourist offer. If we wish the tourist economy to grow then so must the provision of public
transport. To be effective in supporting the growth of rural tourism, public transport needs to be a well planned, integrated and consistent offer over a period of years so that it can be promoted to tourists as a feature of the area. The current reality is that provision of transport in Northumberland and Cumbria is at an all time low and likely to shrink further without a significant increase in public funding. Local councils are unlikely to be able to provide this in the current economic climate.

2 Buses - Case Study – Heart of Hadrian’s Wall
Visitors to the best-preserved parts of Hadrian’s Wall can access it by car, or on foot in conjunction with the AD122 Hadrian’s Wall Bus, which runs from Hexham to Haltwhistle in Northumberland and onwards to Birdoswald in Cumbria. This service is subsidised by Northumberland County Council. Due to budget cuts Cumbria has withdrawn all subsidy with the result that the western part of the wall is inaccessible by public transport. Northumberland announced the bus would be supported in MARCH of this year. Visitors plan their holidays many months in advance and the majority arrive with a full itinerary planned. Tourists and those who provide services to them need, by the previous September at the latest, to have assurance that this bus will run if it is to have a positive effect on visitor numbers and be fully utilised by them. Funding needs to be in place before this date and, if the visitor numbers are to grow, needs to be promised for a number of years into the future so that the service becomes embedded. This service runs at the height of the season only.

3 Rail - Case Study – Train access to Hadrian’s Wall
Hadrian’s Wall is World Heritage Site and a national treasure. A station at Gilsland on the Newcastle to Carlisle (Tyne Valley) Line would be a national asset which would allow visitors to stand on Hadrian’s Wall around four hours after leaving London (London to Carlisle 3h26m Carlisle to Gilsland estimated as 20 minutes) ( London to Newcastle 2hrs 36m average Newcastle to Gisland estimated as 40 minutes). It would be feasible to market day-return rail tickets to Hadrian’s Wall from London and all points north on both the East and West Coast Lines. The site of Gilsland Station, closed in 1967, is directly on the Hadrian’s Wall National Trail – the footpath crosses the end of the old platform which is 50m from the line of the wall and 200m from Milecastle 48 at the Poltross Burn, one of the best preserved on the Wall. Additionally Hadrian’s Cycleway – route 72 passes less than 100m away and Birdoswald Roman Fort is a 2.4K walk away along one of best preserved sections of the wall. Currently this section of the wall is only accessible by car, walking along the Wall Trail from distant points of access or by the AD122 service detailed above from the east only.

The cost of a station at Gilsland (two 50M platforms, 2 basic shelters, lighting, 2 info boards, disabled access) has been estimated as £28million

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* Network Rail direct on-costs (Design fees, £4,667,600*
This level of expenditure on a LOCAL amenity could never be justified in terms of benefit to the immediate local community. We believe it could be justified if a station giving unparalleled, sustainable access to a World Heritage Site was recognised as a NATIONAL asset and funded accordingly.

4 Bicycles

4a Cycle Trails

Rural roads are now thronging with cyclists. Many of the roads in Northumberland and North Cumbria designated as cycle ways are winding, bounded by high stone walls and populated with visiting cars drivers who have little idea how to drive safely on rural roads. An injection of money into the National Cycle Network could enable some of the most dangerous but well used routes to be re-sited off road. This would encourage more families to use the network. Families tend to cycle shorter distances each day and so are more likely to stay in the area rather than travel through.

4b Getting bicycles into rural areas - Case study – Hadrian’s Cycle Way

The central section of Cycle Route 72 – Hadrian’s Cycle Way – Hexham to Brampton can be accessed via trains along the South Tyne Rail Line run by Northern. However trains running on this line can accommodate a maximum of 6 cycles per train (Pacer trains 2 cycles). Places cannot be booked. Trains are either hourly or two hourly. Buses (such as they are) do not carry bicycles. This makes it extremely difficult for families wishing to cycle in the area to arrive by public transport. If sustainable transport is to be promoted in rural areas, train companies should be obliged to provide carriage for more cycles per train. This should form part of the franchise conditions and should be ambitious in scope as the popularity of cycling continues to grow.

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