

## WCML Diversion Strategy via the S&C

### The Proposal

The WCML will be closed during the Clifton Bridge replacement in the first two weeks of January 2026. The initial proposal is to run a weekday shuttle service of up to 8 Evero bi-mode trains in each direction for in January 2026 via the Clitheroe line and the S&C. The proposal is DfT led and strategy involves buy-in from a number of TOCs (including Northern and TPE) and London-Glasgow passengers will generally be advised to travel via the ECML. The ethos is to keep passengers on trains where possible. Whilst weekend services are not mentioned at this stage it is assumed that a similar pattern will be adopted, at least on Saturdays.

A 10-coach Evero bi-mode test train was successfully run from Preston to Carlisle on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2025 using the Clitheroe branch and the S&C. Journey time was approx. 2 hour 30 minutes as opposed to the normal; 1hour 7 minutes. The train was limited to the prevailing speed restrictions of 45mph Clitheroe branch and 60mph on the S&C.

It is not known as to the extent the existing Northern S&C services will play in that strategy or whether Appleby could be used a staging point for Penrith. However, we are told that Newcastle-Carlisle services will be reinforced.

WCML passengers will change at Preston/Wigan and Carlisle. Allowing for transfer time at Preston and Carlisle Stations of say 10 minutes this might suggest an overall journey time of circa 2 hours 50 minutes.

There will be bus interchange Carlisle-Lockerbie for part of that time as the WCML will be closed at Kingmoor for re-signalling as there is no alternative. That will involve a 7 mile section of single line running to access Platform 1 at Lockerbie for bus transfer.

Current advice is that buses will be provided during the works to reach Lancaster, Oxenholme and Penrith Stations (to be fully ascertained).

As far as we know Trilink is a 10 year programme and the trial in January will inform the strategy for the remainder of the period. The works will involve WCML being truncated for 10% of the time over that period.

We are advised by a former Network Rail manager that *'The last planned diversions were on 28th April 2013 and the last unplanned (emergency) diversions were on 3rd. March 2015 when double Voyagers in each direction were diverted due to a power failure at Scout Green'*.

As far as the S&C is concerned there are positives and negatives from an S&C perspective although heavily nuanced:

#### Positives:

- Safeguards the strategic importance of the S&C as a third route to Scotland – a major plus

- Indicates a way forward for long distance services at some point in the future
- May improve maintenance response times i.e. response teams located on site.
- Raises public awareness of S&C

#### **Negatives:**

- Additional services will not benefit S&C stations
- Potential impact on existing Northern services; potential conflict with YDE if proposed pattern operated on Saturday. Concern, in particular, for the pinch points of Hellifield, Ribbleshead and London Road. Long block sections limit capacity particularly in northbound direction.
- Consequence of infrastructure failure - quite likely given recent track record - and impact on existing services. Even on the day of the test train there was a points failure which led to a near 1.5 hour delay. Winter resilience is poor e.g. frequent axle counter failures.
- Lack of forward planning. No increased resilience or improvements have been carried out which might have had legacy benefit despite strategic advice offered at various intervals by Network Rail. The speed limit could have been increased to 70-75mph but wasn't.
- There will be no opportunity for infrastructure improvements on the S&C over the period of the diversions, such as doubling, loops or signalling – Network Rail are unlikely to risk consequent disruption to services.
- No significant timetable improvements on Northern services for the foreseeable as these will be constrained by Avanti paths.
- Allport aspirations for improvements and longer distance services unlikely in the short term at least. No chance of regular long-distance services or line speed improvements for at least 10 years if diversion strategy carried forward.
- WCML closures are likely for only 10% of the time meaning that any paths created on the S&C will be unused for 90% of the time.
- Possible conflicts with freight movements at Blea Moor albeit these can be short term planned or even suspended. Potential impact on future freight development although we are told that most will ultimately go via the WCML anyway with the exception of line-originated freight, class 6 and Network Rail infrastructure trains.