

Why Harrogate Trains? - Summary

Bid to the Department for Transport
for more frequent direct train services
between Harrogate and London Kings Cross.

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Executive Summary

Harrogate in North Yorkshire is a unique area of high economic growth forming a "golden triangle" with Leeds, Wetherby and York. It is the north-east quadrant of the Leeds City Region, which is the most significant economic driver of the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

Harrogate Town has a population of 72,000, whilst the whole Harrogate District has 158,000, with an older age profile than the Region. It has a predominantly professional demographic profile with higher than average levels of social class, household income, property values and car ownership. Harrogate has been repeatedly quoted as one of the best places to live in the UK. Hence Harrogate attracts upwardly mobile individuals to live in Harrogate and work all over the country - or across the whole world. These factors all indicate a propensity to travel.

Harrogate District is close to the geographical centre of the UK, accessible from north, south, east and west. It attracts large numbers of visitors all the year round, for both business and leisure. The latest estimate of Total Direct Visitor Spend in the District was £331m per year from a total of 6.4 million visitor-days including both business and holiday tourism visitors.

Harrogate has a unique combination of Conference, Exhibition and Event facilities alongside many well established visitor attractions. It is supported by numerous nearby hotels, guest houses and restaurants; a combination not matched anywhere else in the UK. These facilities combined with a relaxing rural environment attract international, national and regional corporate, professional and trade events of all types virtually all the year round. Planning permission has recently been granted for two new hotels, whilst older ones are being updated.

Harrogate International Conference centre is the third largest integrated conference and exhibition venue in the UK after Excel, London and EICC, Edinburgh. Phase 1 of a £45m expansion programme has just commenced which will add two new exhibition and event halls and a new entrance to the venue. These are scheduled to open in Autumn 2011.

Conferences, Exhibitions, Trade Shows and Entertainments at HIC attract well over 200,000 business visitors per annum, with around 40% visiting from London and South East. In a recent event survey, 78% of delegates came from outside Yorkshire, but few travelled by rail. Harrogate's poor rail connectivity has frustrated the attraction of some major new conferences - and risks losing others to better connected venues such as Birmingham and Manchester.

The largest event at the Harrogate Showground is the Great Yorkshire Agricultural Show which takes place in mid-July each year. With the demise of the Royal Show at Stoneleigh, the Great Yorkshire Show is now the largest agricultural show in the UK. Many smaller events of various types are also held on the Showground all the year round, with an average of over 600 events and a total attendance of nearly 440,000 visitors a year. The RHS Garden has over 300,000 pa.

Harrogate has a large number of successful hotels, guest houses and restaurants that cater for both business and leisure visitors. The Tourist Information Centre says that there are 1,472 bedrooms in hotels and 284 in guest houses within Harrogate - making a total of 1,756 rooms with over 2,100 beds - excluding the surrounding District. These figures far outweigh comparable towns that already have direct London rail services.

Before the war, Harrogate enjoyed a frequent London-Harrogate-Edinburgh Pullman Car service with up to 10 trains per day. It was cut back in stages and Harrogate now has just one direct London service, south bound on weekday mornings only, taking almost 3 hours. There are no direct Sunday services despite high demand for travel on this day.

Whilst there are frequent fast services from Kings Cross to Leeds and York, connections to Harrogate are poor quality and often ill-timed. Changing trains is seen as risky, inconvenient, and time consuming - whilst the rolling stock falls significantly below most customer expectations! Nevertheless there are nearly 2 million passenger journeys a year to and from the Harrogate District Stations, confirming the local propensity for rail travel.

Recent developments in Harrogate District that could increase demand for rail travel include loss of the Leeds Bradford to London air service; opening of Harrogate International Business School; adoption of a broad Local Development Framework; new housing and business developments; aspirations for Park & Rail or Parkway Stations; a proposed Transport Interchange; and a planned Harrogate & Dales Convention Bureau.

The need for improvements on the Leeds-Harrogate-York line is recognised and there are plans to upgrade signalling and provide a new turn-back facility at Horsforth, which could also serve

nearby Leeds Bradford Airport using a Rail-Air shuttle bus service.

The Leeds–Harrogate–York line is not electrified, whereas the main lines from York and Leeds to London are electrified. This means that only diesel trains can operate to Harrogate. The York to Knaresborough track has two single line sections, with manual signals, which are a major capacity and operating hours constraint; there are no plans to upgrade this section of the route.

A detailed study of operating constraints shows that Harrogate could most effectively be served as an extension of existing services via Leeds rather than via York. As several daily services are already specifically diagrammed to use diesel high speed train this option would not require any new rolling stock or extra slots on the East Coast Main Line. Platforms 1, 6 & 8 at Leeds currently used for London Trains would enable trains to reverse without conflict with other services. This would be an efficient and cost-effective way to provide services for Harrogate.

This report proposes a series of immediate, short term, medium term and long term actions needed to provide the frequent direct trains to and from London that Harrogate and its many visitors deserve. In summary, these actions and expected outcomes are:

Immediate Actions 2010 = currently 1 direct train per day HGT-KGX southbound

Harrogate Chamber will compile an integrated timetable showing all connections between Harrogate and Kings Cross and intermediate Stations on East Coast mainline.

Northern Rail is asked to change the remaining Class 14X diesel multiple units to Class 15X for all services on the Harrogate Line with 4-car units operating in the peak periods.

Leeds Bradford Airport is asked to implement a Horsforth Rail-Air shuttle mini-bus on a trial basis in view of the likely demise of the Harrogate Airport Bus Service 767.

Short Term Actions 2011 = 2 direct trains per day HGT-KGX every day

The Department for Transport is asked to reinstate the evening return service from Kings Cross to Harrogate on a seven day basis in the EUREKA timetable from May 2011.

Northern Rail is asked to proceed with proposed plans to increase the duration and frequency of services on the Harrogate to York line during the evening and on Sundays.

Medium Term Actions 2012/13 = 4 direct trains per day HGT-KGX

The Department for Transport is asked to put into the new Franchise Specification for the East Coast services one new early morning northbound service from Kings Cross via Leeds to Harrogate and a corresponding evening return from Harrogate to Kings Cross.

North Yorkshire County Council and Harrogate Borough Council are asked to contact the shortlist of bidders for the new franchise so that they all come to Harrogate.

Network Rail is urged to proceed with the proposed Horsforth turn-back and the improved signalling between Leeds and Harrogate.

Northern Rail is urged to procure additional Class 150 series rolling stock needed to serve Horsforth, Harrogate and Knaresborough.

Long Term Actions 2014/16 = 2 hourly service HGT-KGX every day

The Department for Transport is asked to include in the new Franchise Specification for the East Coast mainline services several additional extensions of existing northbound services from Kings Cross via Leeds to Harrogate or alternatively via York to Harrogate.

The Office of Rail Regulation is asked to allocate additional slots on the ECML for open access operators, once planned work by Network Rail to remove bottlenecks is complete.

Northern Rail is asked to include two trains per hour between Harrogate and York as part of the franchise renewal, subject to improved signalling and level crossings.

North Yorkshire County Council & Harrogate Borough Council are asked to approve a Park & Ride or Parkway Station either south of Harrogate or east of Knaresborough.

Network Rail is asked to consider whether the Leeds-Harrogate-York line could be an alternative or diversionary route for ECML diesel services. This might also enable some Trans-Pennine Express and Cross-Country trains to go from Leeds to York via Harrogate.