

Transport User Panel questions for Northern and TransPennine Express

In early November Transport Focus contacted Northern and TransPennine Express (TPE) passengers who have recently engaged with us through our Transport User Panel to highlight our upcoming board meeting in public and to ask for questions they would like us to put to David Brown and Leo Goodwin on their behalf.

We received 123 questions, covering a wide range of local and strategic questions. The questions which were asked at the meeting and a summary of the responses are below.

'What action are the train companies taking to facilitate access to trains and stations for people using mobility scooters (not wheelchairs)? My experience is that (with one honourable exception) every possible objection is raised rather than help offered, and permits are required by each individual company. With an aging population, the use of mobility scooters will increase, and users should be able to use the rail transport network freely?'

Bingley to Leeds passenger

Leo Goodwin said that all TransPennine Express's trains meet accessibility regulations and that its new fleet of trains will have more space for scooters on board. David Brown explained that Northern has a very varied train fleet where some trains are not currently accessible, but that all Northern's trains will be accessible by 2020 when the Pacer trains are retired. However, Brown added that variations in platform heights – and therefore ramp angles – between the train and the platform, along with significant differences in the size of mobility scooters were the reason for its permit system. He said that unfortunately it wasn't possible to have a simple policy across the network without making the policy very restrictive, but Northern is looking to improve and will be revising its policy on mobility scooters next year.

'We hear a lot from the RMT about 'getting rid of Guards'. Why don't we hear any details from Northern about what you are actually planning to do and when services will be required to have a second member of staff, and what their duties are expected to be, so that everyone knows exactly what is happening in this dispute?'

Commuter, Saltaire to Leeds

David Brown said before it can consult externally, Northern needs to consult internally with its staff about any possible changes to their roles, which may be some time away. However, he said Northern will try to communicate more with concerned passengers and do what he called "myth-busting" in future. Earlier in the session, when discussing the strikes, he also said Northern is considering how best it could provide customer service to passengers. He suggested that in metropolitan areas when trains are very busy, and on train staff may struggle to get through the train, it might be more effective to staff stations.

Due to time constraints we were unable to ask all the questions that we received at the meeting on 13 November, but Jeff Halliwell, chair of Transport Focus, suggested we provide the train companies with the opportunity to respond in writing to a selection covering some of the key themes raised.

These are the questions sent to David Brown and Leo Goodwin, requesting concise responses, and the answers we received.

Questions for Northern

'How would passengers be protected on trains without guards? If anti-social behaviour took place how safe would fellow passengers feel?'

Goole to Thorne North passenger

Northern: The Government has committed to retaining a Second Person on Northern services. We are now calling on RMT to suspend their damaging strike

'Who will assist and support disabled passengers if there are no guards on trains?'

Stockport to Greenbank passenger

'When are we going to see an end to the strikes causing misery and disruption to Northern passengers?'

Commuter, Holmes Chapel to Stoke on Trent

Northern: The RMT's dispute has caused untold disruption to our customers. There is no reason for the RMT to continue with its strike now that the Government has committed to retaining a Second Person on Northern services. We are calling on them to suspend their damaging strike.

'For six months Northern has consistently cancelled at short notice Sunday trains, particularly Blackpool to Colne & Blackpool to Carlisle / Hellifield, it claims to have sufficient drivers, when are their drivers going to drive these Sunday trains?'

Burnley to Kirkby Stephen passenger

Northern: We have a number of historic terms and conditions which have remained largely unchanged since the days of British Rail. This is particularly the case for drivers based in Regions West and Central where Sundays fall outside of the working week. This can mean that our driver availability can fluctuate, which on occasion results in some pre-planned cancellations. We do this so that customers can properly plan their journeys in advance with the knowledge of what services will and will not be running. There are a number of short and medium term actions to address our Sunday coverage, and we are in regular dialogue with ASLEF, the drivers union.

'I accept that delays & cancellations will occur... However, what I can't accept is the complete lack of communication that should acknowledge the problem, explain the reason, apologise for the issue & offer reasonable alternatives to the passengers' planned journeys. These are the fundamentals of any service business, and is where

you constantly fail your passengers. What are you planning to do about improving communication?’

Commuter, Sowerby Bridge to Leeds

Northern: We always try and explain the reasons for delays. We will investigate and offer reasonable travel alternatives where possible and available to our customers if they contact the 24-hour customer experience centre. If a customer has booked assistance we will always try to contact them if disruption to their journey is known in advance.

‘What factors determine whether a service consists of two carriages or fewer, and how is Northern working towards consistency and transparency regarding the number of carriages provided? Is there scope to have this information displayed anywhere other than the station, e.g. online? ...significant disruption is caused by overcrowding on these short rush-hour trains: at my local station, Burley Park... Yesterday three services in a row were not boardable.’

Commuter, Burley Park to Leeds

Northern: The train plan has 2 car formation operating on some services over the Harrogate line, the decision to do this sits with Train Planning. Recent delivery has been a challenge due to fleet shortages up to -35 units to deliver the planned capacity and this will no doubt have had an impact on all capacity delivery for all routes.

Questions for TransPennine Express (TPE)

‘Will the December time table changes be used to address some of the issues caused in May which have still not been resolved? I travel daily and if 1 train a week is on time I am lucky. I have now got to the point where anything under 20 minutes late is good!!’

Commuter, Scarborough to York

TPE: We are using the December timetable change to make amendments to the services we know have been impacted the most. The Scarborough to Liverpool services will have significantly more time built into their turnarounds at Scarborough, which will ensure they reach their destination more robustly, reducing cancellations and late running.

‘Before TPE took over the franchise on the Manchester - Huddersfield line, one advantage given was that as they are running both the local and intercity services, if a local stopper service was cancelled, they could use a stop order on an express to ensure people were not left with no service. Why isn't this happening? Many cancellations and no stop orders.’

Commuter, Greenfield to Salford Crescent

TPE: Unfortunately, putting in stop orders on express services is not as simple as it might appear. We have to take into consideration the delay this will put on the service, and very likely the trains that follow it due to how busy the route is. All stop

orders have to be approved by Network Rail, and decisions have to be made that benefit the majority of customers.

'Could you ask TPE if they are considering restoring the once per hour stopping train from Huddersfield to Manchester calling at ALL the stations between Huddersfield and Stalybridge instead of the hated skip/stopping as practiced now, and if not, why not? The December timetable change would be a good time to start.'

Bingley to Manchester passenger

TPE: We are acutely aware of the difficulties our customers using the new stopper services between Leeds and Manchester have been facing, so we are making big changes to this route as from December.

The current service that operates in each direction between Manchester Piccadilly and Leeds, calling at Stalybridge, Greenfield, Marsden, Huddersfield, Deighton, Mirfield, Ravensthorpe, Dewsbury, Batley and Morley will from this date be operated by two separate trains as follows:

- Manchester Piccadilly to Huddersfield, calling at Stalybridge, Greenfield, Marsden and Slaithwaite
- Huddersfield to Leeds calling at Deighton, Mirfield, Ravensthorpe, Dewsbury, Batley, Morley and Cottingley

'Why have the airport trains been re-routed through three Manchester Stations (Victoria, Oxford Rd and Piccadilly)? This always seems to be congested and the trains are always late. I was more than an hour late arriving at the airport 2 weeks ago.'

Skipton to Manchester Airport passenger

TPE: The use of the Ordsall Chord, the track that connects Manchester Victoria to the other Manchester stations, was part of an initiative to improve the connectivity in the city. This was done as part of a wider project alongside Network Rail and our other industry partners.

'Why were significant changes made to the service between Stalybridge and Leeds without any consultation with passengers?'

Commuter, Stalybridge to Leeds passenger

TPE: Consultations took place with local authorities and user groups before the timetable change, and all changes were approved.

'Why are TPE refusing [to] pay delay claims for customers with Metro season tickets even though it says they're entitled to claim on the TPE website?'

Commuter, Huddersfield to Leeds

TPE: We do not currently pay Delay Repay against Metro Season Tickets, however they can be used to claim for Additional Compensation through the May Timetable Compensation scheme.

'I travel several times a week on the Manchester Airport to Cleethorpes service, boarding at either Sheffield or Scunthorpe, I would like to know why the trains are always overcrowded particularly departing from Sheffield to Cleethorpes meaning many times I have to stand, why can't the service have more carriages maybe 4/5 instead of just 3?'

Commuter, Sheffield to Scunthorpe

TPE: We currently use all of our rolling stock across our network, and we do not have any 'spare' carriages. This means if we remove carriages from one area to strengthen a service we are essentially removing that capacity from somewhere else. We are starting to receive our new trains in the Spring of 2019, and once we have all of our new fleets capacity across our network will increase by 80%.