

Dave Pearson  
Director, Transport Services  
West Yorkshire Combined Authority  
Wellington House  
40-50 Wellington Street  
Leeds

14 September 2018

Dear Dave

## **Rail North Partnership Joint Review**

Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog representing the interests of Britain's rail passengers, users of motorway and major 'A' roads in England and bus, coach and tram users in England, outside of London. We welcome the opportunity to provide input on behalf of passengers into this review following the May 2018 timetable crisis.

We will focus on the impact on, and communication with, passengers using Northern and TransPennine Express trains, noting other reviews are examining in detail the industry processes and reasons for the disruption passengers experienced.

### **Impact on passengers**

There are three main points to make about the impact on passengers:

- The service was not what passengers had paid for. It was unpredictable; for many passengers it was a lottery with practical and emotional impacts.
- The crisis affected people's work life and home life; for example, being late for work, missing appointments and not getting home before children go to bed.
- The scale of the disruption has led to the understandable decision to defer timetable improvements planned for December 2018. Passengers will wait longer for much-needed improvements they were promised.

Appendix A contains a small selection of the comments Transport Focus received from passengers describing how they were impacted. This comment illustrates a number of the themes:

*I travel on the Bolton to Manchester line and, to be honest, it's hard to know where to start. Since before the introduction of the new timetables, Northern were cancelling or delaying*

*trains during rush hour. Introducing the new timetables has exacerbated the disruption... Travelling to work has become a complete lottery....*

Passengers can generally cope with the odd 'bad day', the difference here was some passengers' journeys were impacted *every day*. It's also important to stress that some passengers in the worst affected areas, for example those travelling in the North West, for example from/to Blackpool, Bolton and the Lake District, endured unacceptable levels of cancellations in the months before May too.

### **Failure to warn passengers in advance**

Northern and TransPennine Express passengers were not given any warning before the unprecedented disruption after the timetable change on 20 May. In contrast, stakeholders were at least notified by Northern on 18 May to "expect some localised service disruption, which could happen at very short-notice while the new timetable beds in". Given Northern were already cancelling services due to problems with driver availability, it is hard to understand how it was thought this problem would not be exacerbated given the planned uplift in services on 20 May. We understand the scale of the impact of the delays to the timetable planning process on staff rostering was not fully understood by Northern until a matter of days before the change. However, the industry missed this opportunity to alert passengers to the risk of disruption and allow some passengers to change their travel plans.

### **Poor information 'on the day'**

For passengers making journeys in the immediate aftermath of the timetable change information about services and cancellations was very poor. Reliable journey planning was often impossible, passengers could leave work thinking a train was running only to reach the station minutes later and find it was cancelled. The high numbers of cancellations led to severe overcrowding and often meant some passengers were unable to board the services that were running.

Many cancellations were attributed to a 'shortage of train drivers', but it wasn't at all clear to passengers what was really going on. It is very hard for passengers to understand why the train companies did not communicate sooner which trains would not run or were at high risk of cancellation. This situation improved following the introduction of Northern's temporary timetable which stabilised the service, but the cumulative impact of the crisis should not be overlooked. On those routes already impacted before 20 May the railway had burned through many passengers' tolerance and goodwill.

### **Lack of open communication**

Having failed to warn passengers before 20 May, or provide reliable information to allow passengers to plan journeys, the industry was slow to acknowledge there was a serious problem, explain why and be open that it could not be fixed quickly. Instead, Northern and TransPennine Express passengers faced a period when they were, in effect, promised a service the industry knew full well it could not deliver. In the immediate aftermath there was a lack of openness and the industry failed to take responsibility in the media, passing up the opportunity to demonstrate accountability and empathy or to communicate the work being done to recover services. This is likely to have damaged trust, not only in Northern and TransPennine Express, but in the railway as a whole.

## **How communication could be improved**

Transport Focus's research *Passengers' relationship with the rail industry*<sup>1</sup> found that to build greater trust with passengers, it is important not only to deliver a punctual and reliable service, but also to build a stronger relationship, based on communicating openly and honestly directly with passengers. This is especially true of passengers who rely heavily on the train, such as commuters, and can be highly engaged with the service and train companies' plans. Northern and TransPennine Express, like most train companies, need to use all communication channels to offer value to passengers and more effectively explain the challenges they face and what they are doing to improve. For example, they should aim to directly and regularly update passengers on their recent performance and development of their timetables from December 2018. Both Northern and TransPennine Express have an opportunity to capitalise on planned improvements, including the introduction of new trains, to build trust. However, to build a relationship with passengers, through 'thick and thin', this requires a genuinely open and frank approach.

## **Compensation**

Compensating affected passengers is an important step in rebuilding passenger trust. Transport Focus has welcomed the compensation for season ticket holders and the anticipated scheme for other regular passengers. We have provided input into the development of the schemes and have checked passengers' awareness and experience of claiming<sup>2</sup>. Compensating passengers is the right thing to do, but the industry has been slow to announce and deliver the compensation which will have hampered its impact.

As early as January Transport Focus wrote to the industry calling for compensation for passengers affected by poor day to day performance and the continuing disruption caused by delayed electrification work between Manchester and Preston<sup>3</sup>. Later, the Blackpool to Preston electrification work was delayed with impacts on driver training, meaning passengers were faced with relying on bus replacement services even longer than the 5 months originally planned. We would encourage the review to consider how it could ensure passengers are compensated more quickly and effectively when they are severely disrupted. This should happen not only when disruption is unprecedented and widespread, as around the timetable change, but also when the intense local impact of welcome improvement work means it is unfair to expect passengers to continue to pay for a train ticket and then travel by bus.

Transport Focus pushed continually for the introduction of Delay Repay 15 as part of the package to rebuild passenger confidence and welcomed the announcement this will be introduced for Northern passengers in December. We look forward to news about Delay Repay 15 for TransPennine Express passengers.

## **Decision making and passengers' interests**

We understand the review will consider how to ensure passengers' interests are at the heart of planning and decision-making. We welcome this, it is often not only unclear to passengers if or how their interests have been considered in decision making, but also often which industry bodies are involved and their roles in decisions affecting them. For example, the decision to remove some services from the timetable on 4 June, including all

---

<sup>1</sup> [Passengers' relationship with the rail industry](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Additional compensation offered to season ticket holders – Transport User Panel survey](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Letter to Mayor of Greater Manchester on compensation for rail passengers](#)

train services on the Lakes Line had a severe impact on some passengers. Transport Focus's experience asking passengers about their experience travelling between Oxenholme and Windermere during this disruption found passengers had very limited understanding of the reasons and trust had been severely damaged<sup>4</sup>.

When difficult decisions are made, if the industry is truly confident it has done the right thing for passengers then it should seek to communicate the reasons more clearly and transparently. Finally, we would encourage the review to consider how the passenger interest could be better represented 'in the room' when decisions are being made. We would be happy to discuss in more detail how we could help. Transport Focus has experience of doing just this, representing passengers' interests at a senior level on forums including City Region Bus Alliances and Network Rail Route Supervisory Boards.

I hope these points are helpful. We would of course be happy to discuss them in more detail.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'David Sidebottom', with a horizontal line underneath.

**David Sidebottom**  
Director

---

<sup>4</sup> [Lakes Line passenger feedback during disruption in June](#)

## Appendix A

*"I now get to work 15mins later than I used to. My trains home (services between 5pm-6pm) have now reduced by 33%, and of those that still run do so from different train stations... in the first working week of the changes, I submitted 5 delay repayment claims, over double the number I submitted in the three years prior to time table changes."*  
(Rainhill to Manchester Victoria)

*"Total disruption to my commute for a week or more... The low point was Thursday with no trains to Urmston at all between 1546 and 1846. Last-minute changes and cancellations, no substitute bus service... Just terrible terrible terrible."*  
(Urmston to Colwyn Bay via Warrington)

*"Again due to the emergency timetable I am getting a train 20 mins earlier, due to change of route the train is full of suitcases and busy... Just weary."*  
(Widnes to Manchester Oxford Road)

*"Before the timetable changes there was a direct train from Stockport to Kirkby... I now have to go Stockport to Salford Crescent then from there to Kirkby. The first day of the new timetable the journey took 4.25 hours due to cancellations. The second day took 3 hours or so. By the third day I gave up and borrowed my son's car which I have done every day since."*  
(Stockport to Kirkby)

*"I had to get a rail replacement bus from Ormskirk to Preston as the service I needed to use is one of several peak hour services swapped for rail replacement bus services in the emergency timetable. Journey takes extra 35 minutes."*  
(Ormskirk to Blackpool North)

*"Train was 29 minutes late and was unable to get on that or the next one. Had to get a bus. I have a yearly season ticket and have paid nearly £40 out on bus journeys since the new timetable due to cancelled, delayed and overcrowded trains. I have paid for a service and am not able to access it! I am unsure as to whether or not it is worth me renewing my season ticket in July."*  
(Swinton to Manchester Victoria)

*"Since the May timetable changes, the delays to most trains I have used have significantly increased - particularly TransPennine Express... As a result on a number of occasions I have missed the last 205 bus... Journeys home have been increasingly difficult and stressful. I have to check the National Rail live departure board for Huddersfield each day to check the cancelled and delayed trains beforehand."*  
(Morley to Huddersfield)

*"Daily stress travelling to work. Never know if the train will be on time and have all its carriages. I have a disability so not being able to find a seat or worrying about packed trains causes me stress. I had to be home at a certain time today and left work early to catch an earlier to ensure I made it."*  
(Chorley to Manchester)