

# Rail North Committee Consultation Call Minutes

**30 October 2024  
Microsoft Teams**

**Present:**

<b>Attendee</b>	<b>Local Authority</b>
Mayor Andy Burnham	Greater Manchester Combined Authority;
Cllr Rupert Swarbrick	Lakeland;
Cllr Steve Foulkes	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
Cllr Martin Gannon	North East Combined Authority;
Cllr Mark Ieronimo	North of Humber;
Cllr Paul West	North of Humber;
Cllr Tim Mitchell	South of Humber;
Cllr Philip Jackson	South of Humber;
Mayor Tracy Brabin	West Yorkshire Combined Authority;

**Partners in Attendance:**

Matt Rice	Northern
Tricia Williams	Northern

**Officers in Attendance:**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Job Title</b>
Lord McLoughlin	Chair of Transport for the North Board
Gary Rich	Democratic Services Officer
Katie Day	Deputy Chief Executive
Julie Openshaw	Head of Legal
David Hoggarth	Head of Strategic Rail
Adam Timewell	Head of Programmes Northern
Chris Roberts	Head of Programmes TPE
Charlie French	Investment Planning Manager
Caroline Young	Partnership and Programme Manager
Gary Bogan	Rail North Partnership Director
Joanne Barclay	Senior Solicitor

**Item No: Item**

**1. Welcome and Apologies**

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed Members to the meeting and apologies were received from Mayor Coppard, Cllr Hunt, Cllr Kilbane and Cllr Renwick.

1.2 The Chair informed the Committee that this special meeting had been convened to consider recent performance of Northern. He described the service being provided to residents in the North as not good enough with people's plans ruined or significantly disrupted during half term week, and business damaged by repeat 'do no travel' notices on Sundays. He emphasised the importance of the run up to Christmas and how the constant cancellations and poor performance by Northern can only damage growth in the North of England.

1.3 He recognised that there are certain factors that are beyond Northern's control but there are other things they do have control of and the aim of the meeting is to establish and understand how much of this is out of your control, but how much is and what can be done to put things right.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

## **3. Northern Trains Performance**

3.1 Members received the report from the Partnership and Programme Manager. The Head of Strategic Rail then outlined the key points within the report.

3.2 The Chair then invited Ms Williams and Mr Rice to provide an update to the Committee.

3.3 Ms Tricia Williams acknowledged that services are not where they want them to be and apologised to customers for this. She recognised the impact that cancelled services have on customers day-to-day and weekend activities as well as the important role that Northern play in contributing to the Northern economy.

3.4 She informed the Committee that they understand the root causes of the current problems that they are experiencing as well as highlighting other issues which are historic and complex which need addressing. Issues brought to the Committee's attention included Sunday services and Sunday working arrangements for staff specifically conductors who don't have to work on Sundays in the Northwest, lack of a Rest Day Working agreement in place for drivers which is currently exacerbated by high sickness levels as well as a lack of investment in the business over many years. She stressed that there are no quick fixes to these issues.

3.5 Mr Matt Rice offered his apologies to passengers and colleagues who have been impacted by their poor service delivery. He addressed the issues in relation to Sunday working explaining that within short timeframes they are trying to find volunteers to work on certain routes to try and deliver a timetable. This has worked on some occasions but more often than not it hasn't worked, and this has led to people being left behind. He explained that there is a sharper focus on this now and they are making more direct interventions and working with stakeholders to say whether or not there is going to be a service. Additionally, they are looking to strengthen bus provision and this will particularly be increased in November and December in the run up to Christmas.

- 3.6 He also informed the Committee that they are looking to alter the language they use moving away from the 'do not travel' language to something more meaningful that will focus on the travel opportunities available. Addressing the issue of the Christmas period he explained that they will monitor things throughout November particularly the work that is being done with Central Government and if this doesn't lead to change then they will look to get ahead of local issues ensuring that the big events in December are covered. He stated that they will look to run a more distinct list of services, between core economies and core events and putting a high level of guarantee on these services.
- 3.7 He emphasised that the current situation is not where they want to be, and they want to be running a reliable weekday and weekend service. The breach remedial plan is a longer term view, however Northern's problems have been routed for eight or nine years and need addressing. In the short term, he stated that they are trying to give customers certainty by being clear about what they can and can't do so passengers are able to plan accordingly.
- 3.8 The Chair thanked Ms Williams and Mr Rice for their honest assessment of the situation. The Chair expressed his concern that there isn't an acceptable plan in place and asked that the Committee's views be incorporated into the plan following the meeting in order to bring it up to expectation.
- 3.9 The Chair highlighted the high number of cancellations and the impact that this has on people and their work on a daily basis and expressed concern about the lack of a plan being in place. He also questioned why no agreement is in place with other operators to accept tickets and why no rail replacement services are in place.
- 3.10 Ms Williams stated she is acutely aware of the problems; however, they don't always know where cancellations are going to be making it difficult to deal with rail replacements. She also stated that capacity is limited for rail replacements due to engineering works and the TransPennine Route Upgrade where buses are also needed, as well as working with other operators to see if they will accept Northern tickets. Much of this is being done last minute meaning that some of the mitigated actions that need to be taken aren't. She suggested that they may need to look at earlier cancellations. Ms Williams stated that when they can they have arrangements in place with other operators to accept their tickets.
- 3.11 The Chair then asked Ms Williams why requests made by Greater Manchester on blanket ticket acceptance arrangements and the discretionary use of penalty fares have not been granted.
- 3.12 Ms Williams explained that their position on penalty fares has changed with a number of prosecutions paused where there have been complex ticketing situations on penalty fares.
- 3.13 The Chair then asked about travel from Southport and that passengers are unable to travel via Preston or Liverpool.
- 3.14 Ms Williams stated that if somebody is travelling from Southport into Manchester then they can go via Preston and you can use Northern

Trains to do that, however the issue is that not all operators will accept a Northern ticket as there is not a blanket agreement.

- 3.15 The Chair stressed the importance of having an agreement in place between the operators and stated that this should be in their plan particularly if there are going to be further reductions to the timetable which will impact on local economies over the Christmas period. This agreement will allow people who have tickets to use alternative routes.
- 3.16 The Chair then challenged Ms Williams on sickness and staffing levels.
- 3.17 Ms Williams informed the Committee that compared to other operators their sickness rates are comparative but there is room for improvement and a plan is in place which is reducing absence rates. Additionally, more staff are being recruited in order to cover sickness absence. On the issue of staffing Ms Williams stated that they have enough drivers and conductors with numbers greater than any time in their recent history.
- 3.18 Mayor Brabin expressed her disappointment and frustration at what feels like an emergency timetable at a time when things are heading toward nationalisation yet the operators are unable to set up a system where tickets can be used on any route or provider without passengers incurring additional costs. She also highlighted the number of cancellations on the Calder Valley line and expressed concern about this in the lead up to Christmas and the impact they will have on the Christmas Markets in West Yorkshire.
- 3.19 She then raised questions driver training and why it appears to have stalled and assistance for those with a disability.
- 3.20 With regards to any proposed temporary timetables Mr Rice clarified that no decisions have been made and these won't happen until they have worked with Members and their officers to make the best decision for each local economy.
- 3.21 Ms Williams stated that driver training hasn't stalled however they would like it to go faster. She explained that if there was a rest day working agreement in place then the trade-offs would be easier because currently, they have to cancel trains to protect training.
- 3.22 On the issue of assistance Ms Williams acknowledged that performance is impacting this and if trains are being cancelled then passengers who need assistance are being let down. She informed the Committee that they have been working with the ORR, Transport for the North and the Rail North Partnership on their plan for this and this has meant putting more people at Leeds Station their biggest area for passenger assistance. They are also looking at changing policies, processes and systems to address this matter.
- 3.23 The Chair welcomed Northern's recognition of the need for more local involvement in the running of Northern and believes that this is part of the long term solution where rail is part of an integrated travel system.
- 3.24 Lord McLoughlin questioned why there are issues in getting quicker joint ticketing agreements with TPE and East Coast when they are run by the

- same Operator of Last Resort. He also asked about P-coding and whether they are being ultra cautious and causing unnecessary cancellations.
- 3.25 Ms Willaims stated that ticket acceptance will be included in the plan. On P-coding she informed the Committee that they have not been P-Coding where they have had people available but believes they are actually P-Coding too late believing that people are available, and this is where changes need to be made. Mr Rice then provided an overview of the decision making process and explained that there are areas where improvements can be made including bringing the P-Coding horizon forward. Mr Rice further explained that P-Coding is being used in order to protect certainty for customers and economies. Mr Rice committed to bringing forward decisions around P-coding to earlier in the week going forward.
- 3.26 The Chair raised the issue of technology and asked about the use of fax machines. Mr Rice confirmed that they are still being used.
- 3.27 The Chair challenged as to when they could stop using them as a form of communication. Mr Rice confirmed that it will be done but is not something they plan on doing yet as this is how they communicate with their train crews. Ms Willaims advised that there would also need to be an agreement with the unions on this before they stop using them.
- 3.28 The Chair was critical of Northern's modernisation plan and believes like their training plan it isn't moving fast enough which is leading to constituent Members receiving late notices about cancellations late on a Friday.
- 3.29 Cllr Foulkes highlighted the levels of sickness and stated that officers in the Liverpool City Region have described them as chronic. He asked if it would be worthwhile getting Northern together with the Unions and stakeholders to look at the root cause of the problems. He also asked for an update following their meeting with the Secretary of State.
- 3.30 Ms Willaims informed the Committee that following a recent staff survey engagement has increased. She outlined the issues they have had with industrial relation in recent years, but these have now been resolved and relationships with Trade Unions locally are good. Whilst things have improved the backdrop has not been good for addressing the deep rooted issues on technology, sickness, training and terms and conditions.
- 3.31 Ms Willams informed the Committee that her meeting with the Secretary of State was constructive she asked about performance and Northern shared their plan with her.
- 3.32 Cllr Gannon found it difficult to understand why the introduction of new technology requires Trade Union agreement and believes management need to take responsibility on matters such as this. Additionally, he stated that TfN together with Northern and Members need to work together to rectify these issues permanently and not just put mitigations in place.
- 3.33 The Chair invited Ms Laura Shoaf to address the Committee.

- 3.34 Ms Shoaf stated that the conversations have helped her understand some of the challenges that are being faced in the North and these are not different to some of the issues being faced in other parts of the country. She explained that the Secretary of State has asked her to look at how the passenger is focussed on and what improvements can be made for the travelling public as well as the role of transport infrastructure in supporting economic growth. Additionally, there needs to be a bespoke resilience plan so that the economy isn't impacted on.
- 3.35 She stated that she wants to work with officers from the constituent authority teams and with Northern on addressing the short term problems while putting a longer term solution in place.
- 3.36 The Chair thanked Ms Shoaf, Ms Willaims and Mr Rice for their attendance.
- 3.37 In summing up the Committee's conversation the Chair acknowledged that across some parts of the north, Northern is providing a good service and have many dedicated staff. He continued that whilst accepting that some of the things are beyond their control others aren't. He was critical of their use of technology and stated that the North deserves better than an unreliable fax driven railway in 2024. In order to address the things outside of Northern's control he proposed that following the meeting representations be made to the government and the Treasury; to get a rest day working agreement in place as well as work being done with the Department of Transport and the Treasury to get a plan for Sundays in place. He requested that a letter be sent to the Chancellor outlining the proposal and to get these arrangements in place immediately.
- 3.38 Addressing the plan, he stated that it is currently not good enough and a new one is required that addresses all the points that have been raised by the Committee. He stated that there needs to be improvements in communications and better arrangements for dealing with sickness and training. He asked that the plan be re submitted and that the Committee would discuss at the next Committee meeting on 20 November 2024.
- 3.39 The Deputy Chief Executive stated that Members have been clear about their concern about the current performance and the impact it's having on people and places across the north of England. She supported the recommendation to write to the Treasury.
- 3.40 The Chair asked for the proposed letter to be shared with Members later in that day or the following day.

**Resolved:**

- 1) That the Committee's connection about the impact on passengers and the economy together with comments on the actions required be noted.
- 2) That a letter be sent to the Chancellor and the Department for Transport requesting a mandate for rest day working agreement and more flexible Sunday working
- 3) That Northern develop an improved remedial plan which will be put before the Committee at the November meeting.

**4. Date and time of next meeting**

Wednesday 20 November at 11am