

Meeting: Transport for the North Board

Subject: Rail North Committee Update

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Meeting Date: Wednesday 30 March 2022

1. Purpose of the Report:

- 1.1 To provide the Board with an update on the main issues considered by the Rail North Committee at their meeting on 9 March 2022.

2. Recommendations:

- 2.1 That the Board notes the issues set out in this report.
- 2.2 That the Board endorse the Rail North Committee seeking an urgent discussion with the Rail Minister to address the implications for users and the economy of reduced service levels and increases in travel costs arising from wider economic pressures.

3. Main Issues from Rail North Committee:

- 3.1 Items considered by the Committee covered Rail Reform, the Manchester Rail Blueprint, an Operational Rail Update and an update on train operator business plans.

Rail Reform

- 3.2 The Rail Reform Paper considered by the Committee put forward a strong proposition on Transport for the North's future role in relation to Great British Railways. This is built around five key areas including linking Transport for the North's Strategic Transport Plan with Great British Railways' Whole Industry Strategic Plan, having a prioritised investment pipeline, adopting a principle of 'double devolution', and having a 'profit and loss' account for the North.
- 3.3 The Committee agreed a recommendation to establish a Member Working Group from Rail North Committee members plus LEP members to act as a 'sounding board' on rail reform and help guide the work of a newly established 'Programme Board' involving Transport for the North, Great British Railways, Network Rail and Transport for the North partner officers.

Manchester Rail Blueprint

- 3.4 Rail North Committee Members considered and noted the first full iteration of the Manchester Rail Blueprint. The need for such a document has been championed by Transport for the North. Developed by the Manchester Recovery Task Force, a collaboration between Transport for the North, the Department for Transport (DfT) and the rail sector, it sets out how investment in rail infrastructure and rail service development needs to be taken forward in lockstep around a single plan. The Blueprint is a living document and will enable the partners involved in the Task Force to take forward initiatives that will tackle rail congestion in central Manchester.

- 3.5 Members noted the progress with the Blueprint with some reservations, in particular the lack of clarity for future phases of the work. However, the work to prepare the Blueprint was welcomed as a demonstration of the Task Force partners' continued commitment to work together in addressing the congestion. The Blueprint sets out a roadmap to build back up from the planned December 2022 rail timetable and aims to balance the needs of passengers against the levels of performance and capability of the rail network.
- 3.6 The Committee agreed that the ambition for the railway in the North must be kept alive given the key role it has to play in enabling economic growth and delivering 'levelling up'. In particular the Committee noted that, while an incremental approach to improvements provides some progress, the key focus must be on realising the transformation that enables economic growth and delivers a set of acceptable outputs for passengers. Members asked for the Manchester Rail Blueprint to be made a standing item on the Rail North Committee agenda.

Operational Rail Update

- 3.7 Rail North Committee Members noted an Operational Rail Update from the Rail North Partnership including updates from the Managing Directors of both Northern and TransPennine Express. Both operators expect to have to extend the use of reduced rail service timetables introduced in January to beyond May 2022. This is as a result of significant challenges involving the legacy and current effects of the pandemic on staff availability, industrial relations issues and a continued backlog of staff training. Both operators were keen to stress that their short term measures were necessary to maintain resilient and reliable rail services for passengers
- 3.8 Members expressed concerns over the impact of the short-term measures on passengers post-pandemic. In particular Members expressed their concern that it appeared that the railway was facing managed decline against competing financial pressures nationally. Members heard that the North's bounce-back from the pandemic on rail had been stronger and quicker in the North than elsewhere in the country, driven in no small part by a buoyant leisure market particularly vulnerable to weekend rail disruption.

Train Operator Business Plans

- 3.9 Rail North Committee Members received an update on the ongoing work with the two train operators as they prepare their Business Plans within the financial budget set by last year's Spending Review. Transport for the North's role continues to be one of setting out priorities for the North as part of the Business Planning process. Committee Members emphasised the importance of a strong strategic narrative making a North-specific case in support of a value for money railway that supports the recovery in rail in support of economic growth.
- 3.10 The Committee recognised the need to work with the train operators to review ways of working and realise operational efficiencies whilst protecting passenger outputs and ensuring that passengers continue to have access to staff (both on trains and stations).

4. Board Actions

- 4.1 The Board is asked to note the issues highlighted by the Rail North Committee. In particular, the strength of the recovery in the North alongside the concerns raised about reduced service levels due to continued short term challenges with resources, as well as the impact of the funding envelope set in the Spending Review.

4.2 These concerns should be viewed in the context of a wider cost of living squeeze. Nationally, the Government appears to be considering the need to mitigate the impact of the cost-of-living squeeze on motorists. It is increasingly clear that wider pressures within the economy are likely to have implications for rail users – both directly and indirectly. Given the importance that the availability and reliability of rail services has for many residents across the North there is an urgent need to address the impact on the rail sector of wider economic pressures.

4.3 In the light of the above, the Board is asked to endorse the Committee in seeking an urgent discussion with the Rail Minister to address the implications for users and the economy of reduced service levels and cost increases within the rail sector arising from wider economic pressures.

5. Corporate Considerations

Financial Implications

5.1 There are no direct finance implications as a result of this report.

Resource Implications

5.2 There are no direct resourcing implications as a result of this report.

Legal Implications

5.3 There are no apparent legal implications arising as a result of this report.

Risk Management and Key Issues

5.4 The impact on Transport for the North's objectives in particular risk (TCR09: The long-term effect of Covid-19 on the viability of train services and future investment decisions)

Environmental Implications

5.5 This report does not constitute or influence a plan or programme which sets the framework for future development consents of projects listed in the EIA Directive and therefore does not stimulate the need for SEA or EIA.

5.6 Passenger rail has an essential part to play in achieving our decarbonisation objectives within Transport for the North's Decarbonisation Strategy, particularly around reducing private car vehicle mileage.

Equality and Diversity

5.6 There are no equality or diversity implications

Consultations

5.7 The report is an update, so consultation is not required.

6. Background Papers

6.1 None

Glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used

a) DfT	Department for Transport
b) LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership