

Rail North Committee Minutes

Meeting Date

Tuesday 14 November 2023

Meeting Location

Microsoft Teams

Present:

Attendee	Local Authority
Mayor Andy Burnham (Chair)	Greater Manchester Combined Authority;
Cllr Karen Shore	Potteries;
Cllr Rupert Swarbrick	Lakeland;
Mayor Steve Rotheram	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority;
Mayor Jamie Driscoll	North East
Cllr Martin Gannon	North East
Cllr Mark Ieronimo	North of Humber;
Cllr Paul West	North of Humber;
Cllr Tim Mitchell	South of Humber;
Mayor Oliver Coppard	South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority;
Cllr Stephen Harker	Tees Valley Combined Authority;
Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe	West Yorkshire Combined Authority;

Partners in Attendance:

Andy Mellors	Avanti West Coast
Simon Leyshon	Network Rail
Rob Warnes	Northern
Tricia Williams	Northern
Chris Jackson	TPE
George Thomas	TPE

Officers in Attendance:

Name	Job Title
Martin Tugwell	Chief Executive
Gary Rich	Democratic Services Officer
Julie Openshaw	Head of Legal
Adam Timewell	Head of Programmes Northern
Chris Roberts	Head of Programmes TPE
David Hoggarth	Head of Strategic Rail
Charlie French	Investment Planning Manager
Darren Oldham	Rail and Road Director
Gary Bogan	Rail North Partnership Director
Caroline Young	Senior Project Manager
Joanne Barclay	Senior Solicitor

Item No: Item**1. Welcome and Apologies**

1.1 The Chair welcomed Members. In opening the meeting, he highlighted the important role that the Committee has played in expressing concerns about the proposed closure of ticket offices. Members were clear that the closure of offices would have had a significantly greater impact in the North of England than elsewhere due to there not being the same facilities at stations. He emphasised the continuing need for ticket offices in the North as people require ticket office staff to provide assistance in stations due to the amount of disruption and complexities.

1.2 Apologies were received from Cllr Browne, Cllr Duncan and Cllr Les.

2. Declarations of Interest

2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

3.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2023 were considered for their accuracy.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2023 be noted.

4. Rail Accessibility Task and Finish Group

4.1 The Chair highlighted that accessibility to stations is of fundamental importance to many residents that Members represent including disabled and older people. He stressed the importance of the industry placing a greater focus on standards of accessibility at stations and requested that Members support the establishment of a task and finish group which will develop a plan for addressing these issues.

He commented that the fundamental issues of accessibility need to be addressed as well as more innovative ways of funding access improvements such as through greater commercial use of stations, community use, and more devolved responsibility for managing rail stations in order to open up our rail stations to all people.

4.2 Members received the report from the Rail Strategy Manager who then outlined the key aspects of the report.

4.3 In relation to the formation of a task and finish group the Chair reminded the Committee that Cllr Swarbrick had volunteered to be a member of

the group at the previous meeting and requested volunteers from the North East, Yorkshire and Humber areas.

- 4.4 Members were supportive of the work being undertaken with both Mayor Coppard and Mayor Driscoll stating that they would return to the Chair with nominations for the task and finish group for their areas.

The Chair stated that the Great British Rail Transition Team and Network Rail would also be involved in the group. He then outlined what he believes the group needs to do, stating the need to look at practical issues in order to make progress. He then highlighted the importance of the role of the industry in doing this and emphasised the need to work differently. He added that the industry can be difficult to work with in relation to enhancing rail stations which need adaptations and stated that a clear message needs to be sent to them that a different and more flexible approach is required so that these issues can be dealt with urgently.

- 4.5 Mayor Rotheram suggested that train manufactures need to be invited on to the group as there are still manufacturers building rolling stock with step access. He then highlighted the positive work in the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority on this matter and shared his ambition for a fully accessible network in the area. He added that they have built a new station which not only takes into consideration people with mobility issues but also factors such as neuro diversity and audio and visual impairments and believes that this is the model that all stations should be working towards.
- 4.6 The Chair mapped out what he believes should be the plan for more stations becoming accessible and the Committee addressed the issue of funding, with Mayor Rotheram highlighting the 'access for all' funding pot as a way of funding the required improvements, although he noted the funding quantum has not changed in a number of years. He added that the Government will need to be asked for an increase in the quantum funding in order to increase the number of stations that can be brought up to standard more quickly.
- 4.7 The Chair stated that the funding arrangements position should be explored and a more devolved approach taken. He also requested that this item be a standing item on future agendas

Resolved:

- 1) That the formation of a Task and Finish Group to oversee progress on the issue of accessibility be approved;
- 2) That the composition of the working group be approved;
- 3) That the following objectives for the member working group be approved:

- To develop a detailed proposition for the future of accessibility at the North's railway stations, for approval at a future Rail North Committee meeting
- Support this proposition with a timeline and action plan.

5. Ticket Office Next Steps

- 5.1 In introducing this item the Chair thanked Members for the cross- party approach taken on this issue as well as the work done by Transport Focus which reflected the feeling of the public. He also thanked the Government for listening and cancelling the proposals.

He highlighted the fact that had the proposal gone ahead, then there would have been a huge loss of staffing presence at stations with some stations in the North having no human presence at the station at any time of the day.

He emphasised the need for innovative thinking on stations regarding accessibility and service standards, leading to them being used to greater effect and benefiting communities. He believes that stations need a more devolved future, so that the possibilities can be fully realised.

- 5.2 Members received the report from the Rail and Road Director who highlighted the key aspects of the report.
- 5.3 Cllr Hinchcliffe sought assurances that some of the vacancies that the operators had been holding back pending a decision on the closures will now been released. This will help with some of the staffing issues that are now being experienced and she enquired as to how long this will take.

Together with Cllr Ieronimo Cllr Hinchcliffe questioned whether savings would look to be made from somewhere else within the industry.

- 5.4 Mayor Rotheram placed on record his thanks to the Chair for the political lead that he took on this matter which helped lead to the reversal of this decision.
- 5.5 The Chair stated that there must be resistance to the narrative that efficiencies need to be made.
- 5.6 The Rail and Road Director highlighted the growth in passenger numbers in the North, believing that this is something that is not highlighted enough. He made specific reference to the bounce- back in Liverpool where passenger numbers are 140% of pre- Covid levels. More generally, he stated that recovery levels across major stations in the North are better than those in London.

In response to the question on staffing, he emphasised the importance of recording staffing levels as well as available posts and stated that

these figures would be captured in the December dashboard for Committee members.

On the issue of funding, he agreed with the Committee that the proposal to close ticket offices appeared to be a cost reduction measure. He believes that this is something the Committee will need to monitor over the next year, as the status quo remains the same for 2024 where there has been no saving, but neither has there been an adverse impact. Additionally, whilst TfN is unaware of any planned cuts concern remains that cuts may be looked for elsewhere. He assured the Committee that as soon as TfN becomes aware of any such cuts Members will be informed immediately.

- 5.7 The Chair requested full details mapping out the growth in the North's railways post-pandemic as he does not want to see the revenue growth in the North being "swept back" into a general Treasury pot of funding. Additionally, in understanding this growth it will help in understanding what revenue is coming into the North's railways and establishing what would be a fair use of that revenue.

The Rail and Road Director confirmed that this would be possible and would be reported to Committee members on a quarterly basis.

- 5.8 Cllr Mitchell reinforced that the best way of making stations attractive, safe and accessible is by fully integrating them with the with the local communities.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

6. East Coast Mainline December 2024 Timetable

- 6.1 In introducing this item the Chair informed the Committee that this issue is of great concern to Members on the East of the Pennines, particularly those in the North East region. Additionally, he brought the Committee's attention to a letter that had been received from the Minister on this just prior to the start of the meeting. He then highlighted the fact that it is getting close to agreeing arrangements for this timetable change.
- 6.2 Members received the report from the Head of Strategic Rail who outlined the key points within the report.
- 6.3 Members then received a presentation from Mr Simon Leyshon of Network Rail and an update from Mr Rob Warnes of Northern Trains.
- 6.4 The Chief Executive provided the Committee with an update. He informed Members that he and the Chair of the Transport for the North Board had met with the Rail Minister and raised concerns about the East Coast Mainline timetable.

Prior to commencement of the Committee meeting, a written response had been received from the Minister. Within the letter the Minister addressed the issues of infrastructure on the East Coast mainline north of York, which is being developed through the Business Case process. He explained that this work is in the pipeline and therefore a case for investment does not need to be made and subject to the work being completed this will go into delivery. The Minister also provided a recognition of the importance given by the north to increasing services, connectivity and growth of rail services as part of the long term strategy for the North and the need to provide an enhanced service between Newcastle and Manchester. The final point highlighted the need to strengthen the working relationship and having a stronger voice in the North.

- 6.5 Cllr Gannon acknowledged and recognised the representations made by the industry and then stressed the importance of having an additional hourly service between Newcastle and London because of the benefits it will bring for not only for Newcastle but for the wider national economy as well.

He then provided the Committee with background on this issue explaining that this issue dates back to 2021 where the East Coast Main Line became critically constrained with local trains, cross Pennine trains and freight trains all running on the same line. This resulted in trains not stopping at a number of important stations across the North East.

In addressing the issues raised in the Minister's letter he recognised the firm commitment that things will be examined positively; however he believes that something more than reassurances are required. He highlighted the disastrous timetable change of 2018 and the assurances that were given to the North West about infrastructure investment that would be made prior to the implementation of the timetable, which didn't happen.

He informed the Committee that he believes there are proposals to increase the capacity on the East Coast Main Line and that engineering interventions can be made, of which he requested to see the details. He expressed concern that details have been shared with officers but are subject to non-disclosure agreements which he believes is unacceptable. He requested that at a minimum, details of the engineering interventions and timetable for their implementation should be shared. Additionally, he wanted to see that they are costed and funded and that they will be implemented before the timetable changes, or at least a guarantee that they will be completed.

- 6.6 Cllr Hinchcliffe stated that the investment on the East Coast Main Line needs to happen and that a firm timetable showing what is going to happen and when it is needed. She stated that services where profits are made should be reinvested into the network to make sure that other services can be introduced and run. She enquired as to whether a

business case has been produced for the whole network enabling them to see if profits can be used to sustain other routes which are currently not as strong.

6.7 Commenting on the proposals, Cllr Harker believed that they are the 'best of a bad job.' Whilst accepting the current position on capacity, he expressed concern about what will happen in the future with regard to required infrastructure changes to improve capacity. He was also keen to establish that the same situation will not be faced in a year's time for the December 2025 timetable.

6.8 The Chair expressed his support for Members in the North East and agreed that they need to have access to the proposed interventions and the timetable outlining when and where work will take place.

Additionally he was appreciative of the Minister's commitments, but stated that if the benefits of these changes are to be realised then there needs to be a commitment to the services between Middlesbrough and Newcastle and Leeds and Sheffield as well as a commitment as to when these services will be funded.

6.9 In summing up the Committee's conversations, the Chair highlighted the clear request of the Committee for the funding of new services that are made possible by this timetable. On the interventions that are being discussed but have not been shared, he stated that any changes to the timetable without clarity about when the rest of the infrastructure will go in are not right and fair to Members, who feel the effects of these changes.

6.10 The Chief Executive stated that he would take the Committee's comments away and work with the industry as quickly as possible in order to provide reassurance. He agreed to bringing an update to the Full TfN Board on 14 December.

6.11 The Chair requested that Chief Executive send a letter to the Minister summarising the Committee's discussions and to seek further assurances on infrastructure. He further stated that there is overcrowding on the railway in these areas so the business case for additional services should be relatively easy made.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Committee advises the Rail North Partnership Board that the timetable does not meet Transport for the North's minimum requirements;
- 2) That Members comments on the next steps required to enable the required level of regional connectivity be noted;
- 3) That the Chief Executive responds to the Minister's letter summarising the Committee's debate and seeking further assurance on infrastructure.

7. Future Infrastructure and Service Development

The Chair deferred this item until the next meeting.

8. Rail North Partnership Operational Update

8.1 In introducing this item, the Chair highlighted the noticeable improvements in both Northern and TPE. He also informed the Committee that Avanti West Coast will address concerns about their performance and their announcement of a reduction to the December timetable between London and Manchester which will impact on the public over the Christmas period.

8.2 Members received an update from Mr Andy Mellors who outlined the Avanti West Coast recovery plan. He explained that the plan has allowed them to build back the timetable from December 2022, including the restoration of the three trains per hour on the Manchester route. He informed the Committee that the plan is working and delivering significant measurable improvements in performance as well as rebuilding the trust and confidence of customers and communities.

He then highlighted some key areas of work which included: improving train crew availability, expediting drivers through training, tackling structural issues in rostering to make sure that resources align to service requirements and reducing reliance on overtime working.

Additionally, he explained that a third of the Avanti driver workforce is over 55 years old and as a result they are recruiting 70 trainee drivers per year over the coming years, already having introduced over 100 new drivers into productivity.

He then highlighted the challenges of the last couple of months in relation to punctuality as a result of infrastructure and weather disruption. He stated that they have been working with Network Rail to address these issues.

He provided the Committee with an explanation as to why they have needed to reduce the timetable between London and Manchester in the run up to Christmas, stating that this is due to residual crew availability issues caused by historic leave agreements that predate the recovery plan. He stated that by working in this way they hope to provide a more reliable service during these weeks. He also informed the Committee that during this period the 11-car Pendolino fleet will be used on the Manchester route. He explained that in order to address the leave issue going forward they are working with employee representatives to get a better spread of leave throughout the year; negotiations are ongoing and it is hoped that revised annual leave rosters can be secured for the start of January 2024.

8.3 The Chair expressed concerns at how Avanti is currently operating and stated that the railway needs to move to be in a different place in 2024.

He highlighted the fact that only a quarter of Manchester to London trains arrive on time and whilst understanding that some of the issues are out of Avanti's control, others are. He was critical of the service being provided for one which is so vital to the economy.

He then enquired as to how many drivers they currently have and how many are needed to ensure that there is not a repeat of the 2023 issues in 2024.

In response Mr Mellors stated that there are over 600 drivers currently on the books at various stages of their careers. At any time just under 200 productive drivers are needed to run the service on a daily basis. Currently there are around 500 productive drivers with the balance going through training. He stated that once the balance have completed their training they will be in a sustainable position to deliver the current timetable as well as some timetable uplifts into next year.

He then went on to provide assurance that they are working hard to reduce the risk of this sort of thing happening in the future.

- 8.4 The Chair on behalf of Mayor Rotherham enquired about their commitment to have two trains per hour from Liverpool and asked for an update on when this timetable will be delivered.

In response, Mr Mellors informed the Committee that the delivery of their new Hitachi trains early in 2024 will help to support an uplift in the Liverpool service to the two trains per hour. It is anticipated that they will start to operate some of those services from the June 2024 timetable change.

- 8.5 Lord McLoughlin enquired as to when the new Hitachi Trains will come into passenger operation. He also expressed concerns about the short notice given when informing the public about the recent changes and asked if anything can be done in future to give more notice.

In response Mr Mellors hopes that the Hitachi trains will be in operation at some point during the Spring of 2024. On the issue of greater notice, Mr Mellors explained that industry timescales for making changes to the timetable are currently 8 weeks and the changes made were within the industry timescales, although they are keen for a return to the pre pandemic timescale of 12 weeks notice.

- 8.6 In summing up the discussion, the Chair stated that he believes the service is not where it should be with only a quarter of services arriving on time. He highlighted the poor travelling experience that many have with on-board facilities. He stated that 2024 needs to be better and asked for Avanti to return to the Committee every 3 months throughout 2024 in order that the service can be monitored.

In response to the poor travelling experience raised by the Chair Mr Mellors explained that there are investment programmes that have been in the pipeline for some time which will be coming to fruition to address those customer service issues.

The Chair then invited Ms Tricia Williams and Mr George Thomas to provide updates from Northern and TPE respectively.

- 8.7 Ms Williams updated the Committee on the current situation with Northern. She explained that performance levels are not where they want them to be, and this is as a result of sickness tracking higher than their resource plans had accounted for and not where they want them to be. She also highlighted Sunday working as an issue as this is not part of the working week for many of their drivers. On the issue of rest day working, she informed the Committee that a rest day working agreement has been agreed with ASLEF locally for their drivers, which will allow these days to be used for driver training as well helping to address any spikes in sickness. She hopes that the agreement that is in place for six months will help in addressing training issues. Additionally, a new occupational health provider has been appointed and will start in February 2024.

An update was also provided on their rolling stock strategy.

- 8.8 Mr George Thomas provided an update from TPE. He stated that performance has improved over the last month which has allowed them to deliver positive customer service and reduce the training backlog which has improved from 55% to 68% of drivers having all the competencies.

- 8.9 Cllr Hinchcliffe enquired as to how the improvements so far at TPE fit with recovery plan.

Of Northern she asked whether they are able to measure overcrowding on the trains.

- 8.10 Mayor Coppard raised the issue of Northern cancellations in South Yorkshire.

Ms Williams apologised for the cancellations and stated that she is confident that the Rest Day Working agreement will help them to address skills shortages and give more train crew with more ability to cover different types of traction and different type types of route. It will also allow them to address sickness "spikes" allowing them to prioritise the use of training days to areas where they have been more adversely hit.

In addressing the issue of measuring overcrowding Ms Williams explained that they have the ability to count passengers so they can then make sure that they are reviewing how effectively the timetable changes have

been and they can then examine demand and insight from customers to check and review if it can be maintained.

On Cllr Hinchcliffe's question on the recovery plan Mr Thomas stated that they are on plan with their driver training; however, the challenge will come next year when they are forecasting that a large number of drivers will leave the business. Whilst there are new drivers coming in behind them, the challenge will be getting them through to the desired level of competency.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Committee notes the information in the report and the actions that Transport for the North and Rail North Partnership (RNP) are taking to ensure operators focus on delivering the services passengers need;
- 2) That in light of the temporary changes to Avanti West Coast services highlighted the Managing Director of Avanti be invited to the next meeting of the Committee to set out their plans for the remainder of the contract.

9. Transport for the North Business Plan and Member Contributions 2024/25

This item was deferred until the next meeting.

10. Exclusion of the Press and Public

To resolve that the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of Items 11 and 12 on the grounds that:

- (1) It is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if members of the public were present during such item(s), confidential information as defined in S100A(2) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) would be disclosed to them in breach of the obligation of confidence; and/or
- (2) it / they involve(s) the likely disclosure of exempt information as set out in the Paragraphs [listed below] of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) and that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

11. Transpennine Express Recovery: Nova 3 Options

- 11.1 The report was received by Members who were then invited to ask questions and make comments.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12. Manchester Configuration State 2 Service Options

12.1 The report was received by Members who were then invited to ask questions and make comments.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.