

Rail North Committee Meeting - Item 4

Subject: Rail Operations and Covid-19 Recovery

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Meeting Date: Thursday 12 May 2020

1. Purpose of the Report:

- 1.1 To update Members on the rail operational response to the Covid-19 crisis, current and future service proposals.
- 1.2 To consider how rail can support the economic recovery from Covid-19.

2. Executive Summary:

- 2.1 Transport for the North and Rail North Partnership have been working to support the rail response to the Covid-19 crisis in the North of England. The response to the industry's introduction of a key worker timetable across the north has been positive. Local authority representatives have been invited to give feedback as part of the North of England Contingency Group and outcomes have been shared with Local Resilience Forums to try to ensure Covid-19 emergency responders are sighted on the north's rail activity.
- 2.2 The next steps will be to prepare for any easing of lockdown restrictions including challenges which are particularly relevant to the north. Continuing significant levels of staff absence, the introduction of new fleet and network congestion are all issues which need to be considered alongside the national challenge of reintroducing services for an unknown passenger demand. Transport for the North is working with partners and the industry to develop proposals for how the industry can, in due course, support the wider economic recovery.

3. Operational Rail Update:

3.1 [The Response to Covid-19](#)

[Transport for the North Response](#)

Transport for the North has sought to support the industry in its response to the crisis by working with partners to shape service

propositions such that they meet key workers' requirements and also reinforce the messaging that those who don't need to travel should stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

The main mechanism for this has been through Transport for the North's coordination of the North of England Contingency Group – bringing together lead officers with representatives of the industry. This has helped ensure a direct link between industry planning and local needs. Train operators have responded very positively to suggested changes to the key workers' timetables taking into account specific local needs.

3.2 **Rail North Partnership and Industry Responses**

The work of the team during this period has been on clarity (principally of message on the rail offering during the Covid outbreak and who should travel); consistency across the operators on the basis of their approach and priorities; sustainability of the timetable and services delivered; and readiness for recovery when conditions permit.

A reduced timetable was introduced on March 23 and after initial higher-than-expected levels of travel, the industry worked together to communicate priorities for travel. These have sat alongside the central message from government and have been greatly supported by the member authorities of Transport for the North and other partners in the north

As the economic situation of rail franchises crystallised, the Rail North Partnership Management Team (RNP MT) supported the transition at pace of TransPennine Express (TPE) onto an Emergency Measures Agreement (EMA), designed to allow, across the industry, an integrated approach to service delivery during the crisis and to avoid immediate financial distress to rail operations.

Northern Trains Ltd (Northern) is already under government ownership and is not technically part of the EMA transition although it will work to the same principles.

3.3 **The Key Worker Timetable**

Both Northern and TPE have successfully introduced a stable Key Worker Timetable which has gone through several iterations and was shaped by insight gathered from the North of England Contingency Group.

3.4 **Operational Performance**

Services are, in the vast majority of cases, performing well with the Public Performance Measure (PPM) regularly in excess of 90 per cent for both Northern and TPE. The latest figures at the time of writing for TPE show that over the weekend Friday April 24 to Sunday April 26, PPM was around

96 per cent. During the same timeframe, Northern also averaged around 96 per cent PPM.

3.5 Passenger Demand

At the beginning of the lockdown, passenger numbers had dropped by 70 per cent and this has now reduced further to only around 5 per cent of the usual total for Northern and TPE, allowing for services to operate whilst observing appropriate levels of social distancing.

Train operators and the Department for Transport (DfT) are carrying out passenger research to understand future demand better. Local Authority representatives on the North of England Contingency Group have assisted the operators in identifying local priorities and likely areas and times of demand, with the operators looking to amend their key worker timetables where possible to meet these.

3.6 Emergency Measures Agreements

Under the EMAs which are effective from 1 March 2020 until 20 September 2020, the normal financial mechanisms of the franchise are suspended, and cost risk is transferred to the government. The EMAs secure the continuity of rail services for the duration of the crisis and enable operators to adapt to the changing circumstances however they will face greater financial scrutiny as a result of the agreement.

A maximum two per cent fee based on the cost of the franchise before the pandemic is designed to incentivise operators to meet their agreement targets.

3.7 Next Phase of Rail Service Operations

At the time of writing, the train operating companies have been asked to prepare for an increase in services to ensure the rail network is ready, and doesn't constrain, any lockdown decision. Early preparation is necessary due to the long lead times inside the rail industry for the planning of service changes and is needed even if the restrictions are not ultimately timed to the timetable change date.

Although May 18 has been discussed as the date for uplift, no decision has yet been finalised.

Alongside increasing service provision, the industry will need to consider appropriate systems of operation at stations and on trains and other facilities for both passengers and staff.

The timetable uplift will, for the northern operators, mean effectively the existing key worker timetables with significant enhancements.

TPE is focussing on 'travel to work' rather than leisure passengers and where possible, will seek to increase day-time frequency and reduce

evening frequency to manage the number of staff required to run the services.

Northern is planning for the uplift based on its pre-existing December 2019 timetable. This allows them to use fleet and available staff more effectively which helps to achieve a more stable performance. Its previously-planned May 2020 timetable had few significant uplifts planned, meaning this approach fits with the rest of the planned uplifts in regional service patterns.

Both plans are shaped by traincrew resource and targeted at areas where there is predicted to be increased demand as and when restrictions change.

Existing social distancing measures greatly limit capacity on trains and, by extension at stations. It also impacts operators and services differently given the different service types, train and station layouts, the ability or not to limit reservations etc. With current levels of demand this has not been an issue, but any demand increase will require additional consideration.

The industry has been actively working through the issues around social distancing and PPE. Consideration is being given to the likely increased demand from passengers when lockdown measures are eased and arrangements for social distancing, e.g. reservation-only trains for some operators, to manage current and increased passenger numbers against social distancing restrictions. It is acknowledged by the industry that high-volume commuter flows, such as those that are provided to and between our towns and cities by both Northern and TPE, with traditionally sharp peak demands, especially in the morning peak, provide a particular challenge.

It is recognised there will be a need for robust messaging which is likely to need to be adapted to address the different challenges faced by train operators.

3.8 **Supporting the industry-side recovery from Covid-19**

Rail North Partnership will continue to support a smooth transition to EMAs and highlight issues to the DfT and Transport for the North which are pertinent to rail operators and the industry in the north. The team has recently expanded thanks to the temporary loan of DfT and Transport for the North staff to help support our work, which is greatly appreciated.

Challenges around the introduction of new fleet, driver training etc. have in many ways been exacerbated by the Covid outbreak and restrictions - the impacts of which we will need to work with the operators to fully understand. Alongside this, Northern will shortly introduce its 100 Day Plan. The work of the Cross-Manchester Recovery Task Force and planning for the Transpennine Route Upgrade

also continues. The next six months will be challenging - the Rail North Partnership Management Team will keep the committee apprised of developments.

3.9 **Supporting the wider recovery from Covid-19**

Future phases of the crisis are likely to be more difficult to manage for the rail industry and the travelling public. We don't yet know the speed or phasing it will be possible to return to normal activities. We don't yet know how passenger sentiment will alter travel behaviour. We don't yet know the full impact of the pandemic on all sectors of the economy, or how long these might last.

3.10 It is a fact that rail services help keep the economy moving, and that supporting rail services over the coming months and years will underpin the recovering economy and signal that Britain is open for business. A significant proportion of rail demand is from office workers and those who work in service sectors supporting the working week. It is probable that the legacy of successful home-working will endure, so we can expect to see rail demand remain below pre-pandemic levels - possibly for a significant period of time.

3.11 At the same time, the Government has fully underwritten railway operations - taking full revenue and cost risk for all franchises - at least for the 6 months of the Emergency Measures Agreements. There will be significant pressure to control and minimise costs in the light of reduced revenue streams, possibly exacerbated by lower passenger inclination to travel in crowded environments.

3.12 Recovery from the pandemic in the rail sector will be a balance between supply and demand, affordability and economic stimulus. Transport for the North will play a role in advising on the priorities for services in the region, and on assessing the role rail is playing in rebuilding confidence in the economy. We will also be able to help shape how services and markets are best served as the opportunities offered by these extraordinary circumstances emerge. For example, it may be sensible (while demand is lower) to focus on train performance, rather than capacity. Over time, the behavioural changes resulting from the pandemic may provide an opportunity to prepare and deliver a better rail service for the future. Transport for the North intends to work closely and co-operatively with DfT and industry partners to achieve this goal. This is particularly important for making meaningful progress in the decarbonisation agenda.

4. Recommendations:

4.1 That the report is noted.

4.2 That members discuss how rail can support the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis.

List of Background Documents:

There are no background papers to this report.

Required Considerations
Equalities:

Age		No
Disability		No
Gender Reassignment		No
Pregnancy and Maternity		No
Race		No
Religion or Belief		No
Sex		No
Sexual Orientation		No

Consideration	Comment	Responsible Officer	Director
Equalities	A full Impact assessment has not been carried out because this is a paper for information only	Jane Cornthwaite and Gary Bogan	David Hoggarth

Environment and Sustainability

	No
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Consideration	Comment	Responsible Officer	Director
Sustainability / Environment – including considerations regarding Active Travel and Wellbeing	A full impact assessment has not been carried out because this paper is for information only.	Jane Cornthwaite and Gary Bogan	David Hoggarth

Legal

	No
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Consideration	Comment	Responsible Officer	Director
Legal	There are no direct legal implications to Transport	Julie Openshaw	Dawn Madin

	for the North identified in this paper.		
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Finance

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Consideration	Comment	Responsible Officer	Director
Finance	The paper highlights the financial impacts of Covid-19 particularly as a result of reduced passenger revenue. Financial risk on rail services is borne by the DfT.	Gareth Sutton	Iain Craven

Resource

	No
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Consideration	Comment	Responsible Officer	Director
Resource	There are no direct human resource implications to Transport for the North identified in this paper.	Stephen Hipwell	Dawn Madin

Risk

	No
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Consideration	Comment	Responsible Officer	Director
Risk	There are new risks highlighted in this paper relating to the impact on rail services from the Covid-19 crisis. These will be included in the relevant risk register.	Jane Cornthwaite	David Hoggarth

Consultation

	No
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Consideration	Comment	Responsible Officer	Director
Consultation	A consultation has not been carried out because the paper is for information	Jane Cornthwaite and Gary Bogan	David Hoggarth