Rail North Committee
Minutes

Wednesday 21 February 2024
Virtual

Present:

Attendee	Local Authority
Mayor Andy Burnham (Chair)	Greater Manchester Combined Authority;
Cllr Craig Browne	Cheshire East;
Cllr Rupert Swarbrick	Lancashire;
Mayor Steve Rotheram	Liverpool City Region;
Cllr Martin Gannon	North of Tyne
Cllr Paul West	North of Humber
Cllr Stephen Harker	Tees Valley;
Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe	West Yorkshire Combined Authority;

Also in Attendance:

Lord McLoughlin (Observer)	Chair of Transport for the North Board

Partners in Attendance:

Andy Mellors	Avanti West Coast
Ben Simkin	Cross Country
Phil James	Network Rail
Nick Donovan	Northern
Chris Jackson	TPE
Graham Meiklejohn	TPE

Officers in Attendance:

Name	Job Title
Martin Tugwell	Chief Executive
Gary Rich	Democratic Services Officer
Katie Day	Director of Strategy Policy and Communication
Paul Kelly	Finance Director
Julie Openshaw	Head of Legal
Chris Roberts	Head of Programmes TPE
David Hoggarth	Head of Strategic Rail
Charlie French	Investment Planning Manager
Gary Bogan	Rail North Partnership Director
Darren Oldham	Rail and Road Director
David Worsley	Rail Strategy Manager
Caroline Young	Senior Project Manager
Joanne Barclay	Senior Solicitor

Item No:	Item

1 Welcome and Apologies

1.1 The Chair welcomed Members to the meeting. In opening the meeting, he outlined the issues that the Committee will discuss specifically highlighting the operator updates and the station accessibility. He commented that whilst there is still a lot of work to do on this issue, he is encouraged by the start the Task and Finish group have made on this and are beginning to examine this area more deeply.

1.2 Apologies were received from Cllr Kilbane, Mayor Coppard and Cllr Renwick.

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 14 November 2023 were considered for their accuracy.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2023 be noted.

It was noted that Lord McLoughlin attended the meeting as an observer.

4 Accessibility Task and Finish Group - Initial Output

4.1 The Chair expressed his gratitude to Members of the Committee who have been involved in the task and Finish Group.

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

4.3 The Chair highlighted to the Committee the unacceptable amount of time it will take to have all stations fully accessible if work continues at the current pace. He suggested that a 10-year deadline should be set for completion of this work.

4.4 On the £1.5 billion cost of completing this work, the Chair stressed the importance of being creative through station devolution with local authorities and local areas taking control of stations, as well as ways of attracting new investment to help offset some of the costs.

4.5 He stated that a clear proposal needs to be put to the next Government outlining the North's intention and the importance of this work being done consistently and within the requirements of the Equality Act.

4.6 Cllr Swarbrick agreed with the Chair that the timelines were too long but that this is also the case with a ten-year timetable. He informed the Committee that during the Task and Finish Group he pushed for work to start on some of the "quicker wins" where work can be done out of

existing budgets and stressed the importance of working creatively in order to generate the required funds.

4.7 The Chair highlighted that just 43% of stations in Greater Manchester are fully accessible and he expects that this is the case in stations across the north. He stressed that on such an important matter a timetable of 20 years or longer is simply unacceptable and sends a message to disabled people that they aren't important.

4.8 Cllr Browne cautioned against losing sight of existing commitments and asked if confirmation can be gained on the position of the delivery of accessible projects, which Network Rail and DfT have already confirmed.

4.9 He highlighted two examples of stations within his area and requested clarity on their situations.

4.10 The Head of Strategic Rail stated that this is being considered by the Task and Finish group, and they want to understand what the commitments are in order for this to form part of the base assessment being undertaken.

4.11 The Chair requested that "quick wins" be explored as soon as possible and asked that they should also be considered in the light of a devolution proposal, highlighting that where there is regeneration potential around stations and where a local area has ambitions for regeneration around stations then this context needs to be taken into account.

4.12 In response the Rail and Road Director stated that this will be incorporated. Additionally, whilst a five-year timeline for "quick wins" has been established, the group will look again at this to ensure that devolution aspects are fully incorporated.

4.13 The Chair suggested that Members put forward names of stations in their areas which they would like to be included as a "quick win" and that if there is a devolution angle this should also be included.

4.14 Mayor Rotheram commented that this issue must be pushed up the political agenda in Westminster and that the support of both main political parties is vital in achieving the improvements required. He also suggested that local MPs should be lobbied on this issue.

4.15 The Chair suggested that a list of ongoing schemes coupled with "quick win" schemes and stations suggested by constituent authorities be compiled into a list and presented to MPs as the first phase of a 10-year programme to deliver accessibility at stations, the list to be ready for the commencement of the next Parliament.

4.16 Lord McLoughlin agreed with the Chair and commented that a list would allow the Committee to be more public about its ambitions and the requirements needed to make stations accessible.

4.17 He informed the Committee that the Government has published the Bill on the future of the railways and explained that it is currently at the consultation phase and will be scrutinised by the Select Committee, with TfN preparing evidence to present to the Select Committee on this matter.

4.18 The Chair suggested that at the next Board Members discuss the draft legislation as well as any submissions that might be made to the Select Committee both from an operations and an infrastructure in stations point of view.

4.19 In summarising the Committee's conversation the Chair stated that there needs to be a 10-year deadline for this work as well as "quick wins" which need to be completed in the early part of the next Parliament. Additionally, there needs to be a schedule outlining how the work will be carried out over the next 10 years and how many stations will need to be worked upon annually in order to achieve this goal.

4.20 The Rail Strategy Manager stated he can work on an output for five and ten year programmes. He added that there is already information available on the likely costs which will help with the development of profiled expenditure which he will look to include in the June report. He also welcomed information that constituent authorities could provide on local stations as this will help to inform the work.

4.21 On the estimated £1.5 billion cost, the Chair commented that much of that could be offset, through creative ways of maximising the use of station assets, land around stations and building regeneration around them.

4.22 Building on the Chair's comments about stations being fundamental to their communities and businesses, the Chief Executive explained that the draft business plan for 2024/25 emphasises the importance of drawing on the knowledge and skills that exist within the technical teams in TfN of which this work is another example.

4.23 He informed the Committee that he is reassured and energised by how the Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) has engaged with TfN on this issue and believes that this bodes well when preparing for the next spending review. He also believes that the strong relationships that TfN has within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on a placed based approach will help put the North at the forefront on work around practical requirements.

4.24 He highlighted the strong linkages around this theme and stated that the point is around accessibility for all from an economic, environmental and societal perspective.

4.25 The Chair agreed with the Chief Executive and hoped that this will lead to greater thinking about place base on the railways and on rail assets.

4.26 Commenting on the number of stations across the North that are accessible, the Rail and Road Director noted Mayor Rotheram's observation as to the level of accessibility in the Liverpool City Region and commented that in other parts of the North they may be below average but the figures in the Liverpool City Region may be masking this. He stated that the figures would need to be scrutinised further.

Resolved:

1) That the Committee notes and supports next steps for accelerating delivery of station accessibility improvements in the North

2) That the Committee supports the provisional recommendations which were agreed at the first meeting of the Accessibility Task & Finish Group, namely:

- The Terms of Reference of the Task & Finish Group should be expanded to include:
    - Assembling sufficient accurate data about current accessibility provision to enable the prioritisation of future works and the monitoring of their completion
    - Considering wider inclusivity issues (such as safety concerns) which may deter some groups from travelling by rail
- The audit of accessibility provision which was recently undertaken by Atkins on behalf of the Department for Transport shall be the primary source of information as to the current status of our infrastructure (subject to devising technical solutions for simplifying the large amount of data which was gathered)
- In order to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of work to improve accessibility, the various parties involved (Train Operating Companies, TfN, Network Rail, Great British Railways, Local Transport Authorities) shall establish joint teams, so that staff with the necessary expertise can cooperate, co-locate and build momentum for the necessary enhancements.

5 Rail North Partnership Operational Update

5.1 Members received the report from the Rail North Partnership Director. The Committee then received updates from CrossCountry, TPE, Northern and Avanti West Coast Mainline.

5.2 Members received the presentation from Mr Ben Simkin (Cross Country) who provided an update on the current situation.

5.3 Chair asked Mr Simkin how CrossCountry is handling the issues regarding half term and how it is communicating with customers to inform them about any problems.

5.4 Mr Simkin explained that when it is known that trains will need to be cancelled, the approach tends to be to protect the long-distance intercity journeys and focus more on regional services for cancellations, which was the approach during the February half term. He went on that information is put on the website where there are dedicated landing pages, and social media is also used. He acknowledged that there are challenges across the industry about how disruption is communicated to passengers and there is a lot of work taking place on how this can be improved and exploration of how new technologies can be used to help.

5.5 Regarding the disruption graph in the presentation Lord McLoughlin asked if there is a way of breaking down the cancellations that occurred as a result of issues at CrossCountry and those that were are result of external factors.

5.6 Mr Simkin explained that the graph shown is only the disruption relating to their train crews and trains and does not include disruption as a result of external factors. He offered to consider this further in order to provide the additional information being requested.

5.7 The Chief Executive explained that through the Rail North Agreement there is a contractual relationship between TfN, the DfT, Northern and TPE where TfN engages in the train operators' annual business planning processes and the Chief Executive sought the agreement of CrossCountry to establish a similar arrangement with them.

5.8 Mr Simkin agreed to this in principle and commented that such an agreement will enable TfN to advocate for CrossCountry. He stated that he would need to work out the timelines to understand when the best time to involve TfN will be.

5.9 Mr Chris Jackson then provided an update on TransPennine Express. He reported that the temporary timetable introduced in mid-December is performing well and that cancellations caused by train crew are now fewer than 5% with "P code" cancellations all but disappearing. Overcrowding and complaints about overcrowding are also down. Whilst informing the Committee that customer satisfaction is now 86% he acknowledged that there is still further work to do in order to win back trust and confidence.

5.10 The temporary timetable changes have also allowed for an acceleration in driver training which has also led to an improvement in day to day delivery at the same time.

5.11 As a result of the improvement in performance the Committee was informed that there will be an uplift in the timetable from June that will see an increase from 34 to 40 trains per day on the West Coast Main Line. This will provide more services between Greater Manchester and Merseyside to Lancashire, Cumbria and Scotland. There will also be additional trains between Liverpool and Manchester to cater for the night time economy, and additional peak weekend summer services between York and Scarborough. He believes that these are a sensible spread of service reintroductions that will provide benefits across the north.

5.12 He then outlined plans for the December 2024 timetable change, where TPE will look to reinstate route services which were suspended in December 2023 as well as looking to bring forward the plan to transfer the Leeds to Huddersfield service to Northern with a gradual transfer introduced where the operation of these services will be shared between Northern and TPE.

5.13 TPE will also look to improve the connectivity between Newcastle and Northumberland from December as there will be an increase in Newcastle to Edinburgh services from 6 to 8 trains a day, roughly every two hours.

5.14 The Committee was also updated on the rest day working agreement where negotiations have begun to extend this for a further 12 months which will be used to carry out outstanding driver training.

5.15 Noting the improvement of TPE and the pending reintroduction of services, the Chair asked whether the improvement will be sustainable

with the reintroduction and whether "PPM" (Public Performance Measure) figures and cancellation figures can be maintained.

5.16 Mr Jackson stated that he would not be advocating an increase in services in June if he did not believe that TPE could operate those services reliably and sustain them until December 2024, as well as delivering the December uplift which is being promisied. He explained that this is reliant on an extension to the rest day working agreement, but that he is confident that this will happen.

5.17 Cllr Hinchcliffe asked for the rationale behind the services that had be chosen are being re-introduced. She also referred to overcrowding and sought reassurance that the initial concerns that service reductions had not led to overcrowding. She asked to see any that they may have that illustrate this. Additionally, she enquired about the current situation with regards to rolling stock.

5.18 Explaining the rationale behind the reintroduction of certain services in June, Mr Jackson reminded the Committee of the tests set at the end of 2023 and noted that some of those tests had been passed at some of the depots, but not at York and Manchester Piccadilly where the training burden is greater. The uplifts have therefore been focussed on routes where there is confidence that they will be able to sustain and deliver services reliably from June.

5.19 Addressing the issue of crowding, Mr Jackson informed the Committee that a weekly report is shared with officers and within this report the issue of crowding and complaints about crowding is covered. He reassured the Committee that overcrowding has reduced compared to the situation with the old timetable, and this is being monitored.

5.20 Regarding rolling stock Mr Jackson explained that the operating companies have really been listening on this issue and they are able to specify the types of trains that they want to operate rather than this being specified by people far removed from the north. He further stated that the correct people are being consulted and they are using the correct contacts and connections with stakeholders and customers and accessibility groups with the result that trains are fit for purpose. They are working closely together with Northern on this matter.

5.21 Cllr Hinchliffe sought confirmation that it is York depot that is stopping more services being reintroduced in Leeds.

5.22 Mr Jackson confirmed that this is the case in York and at Manchester Piccadilly and is the reason why in West Yorkshire from June they have only been able to commit to uplifting services from four to six trains per day. He explained that he would have liked to have done more but was unable to do so as it could not be achieved reliably.

5.23 The Chair was pleased to see that the update showed progress and hoped that this will be sustained.

5.24 The Chair informed the Committee that this will be Mr Donavan's last meeting and acknowledged the work he has done to improve Northern over the last few years.

5.25 Mr Nick Donovan thanked the Chair and informed the Committee that the Tricia Williams will be taking over from him and that a handover has already begun; like him, she will be committed to providing same transparency, openness and engagement with the committee as he has done. Matt Rice has been appointed to replace Ms Williams.

5.26 Mr Donovan then provided a progress update on performance at Northern. He advised the Committee that there had been an improvement in cancellation levels which have fallen to 4.7% but he recognised that there is still room for improvement. He explained that the rest day working agreement that is in place has enabled Northern to improve work on the skills agenda as well as increase the level of route and traction knowledge training across the business by about 30%, which will improve resilience in the future. Additionally, there is a new occupational health provider in place which is providing a more robust contract and better support.

5.27 Whilst Mayor Rotheram was encouraged by the direction of travel, he highlighted that over the last 12 months between TPE and Northern 72,000 trains have been cancelled and he questioned if the trajectory for the next 12 months would see a fall in the number of cancellations.

5.28 In response Mr Donovan informed the Committee that Northern is in the process of agreeing its performance trajectory for next year and will return to the Committee once this has been agreed. After the Chair sought an approximate projection, Mr Donovan commented that the number will be significantly lower, based on assumptions around training and that the rest day working agreement will continue.

5.29 Cllr Hinchcliffe sought reassurance on sickness levels and that Northern is heading in the right direction and that the work being done by the new occupational health company is working. She suggested that the figures on sickness be shared with officers of TfN and Rail North so a judgement can be made on the impact.

5.30 Mr Donovan informed the Committee that these figures are regularly shared with the Rail North Partnership highlighting that mental health is the highest cause of sickness and this is a common issue across operators. He stated that Northern has built a positive partnership with Andy's Man Club and staff are benefiting from this work . He explained that the increase in resilience of delivery of the resource plan through route and traction knowledge has given greater resilience against higher sickness levels.

5.31 The Head of Strategic Rail also provided reassurance on this. He told the Committee that the recovery plan and sickness is being monitored and together with the Rail and Road Director they meet regularly with Mr Donovan and Ms Williams to review progress. He stated that it is clear that sickness is the biggest driver and has been off target for the last year. Viewing the plans to reduce sickness has highlighted a concern that they are ambitious compared to the target, but the situation will continue to be monitored on a monthly basis.

5.32 The Chair then moved on to Avanti West Coast and before introducing Mr Andy Mellors he expressed his concern at the performance of this operator.

5.33 Members received a presentation from Mr Andy Mellors who provided an update from Avanti West Coast.

5.34 The Chair commented on the difficulty in reconciling the performance reported by Mr Mellors against the reality of the situation for passengers. He raised a number of issues with Mr Mellors including the February half term and the late information delivered around train cancellations on Saturday 17 February which made it difficult for football supporters to return to London following a football match. He also challenged Mr Mellors on station arrivals within three minutes of schedule, cancellations and PPM. The Chair also expressed his frustration at the Avanti's relationship with the constituent authorities with Avanti failing to work with them and inform them of problems in order that these can be managed together. Currently authorities are being informed too late so that people cannot be informed early enough.

5.35 Cllr Gannon expressed his disappointment in Mr Mellors' presentation commenting on the company's inability to accept that there is a problem. He believed that all Avanti has done is offer excuses and blame others for their poor performance. He commented that it is embarrassing that passengers were unable to get a train after 6.55pm on a Saturday evening between two of the biggest cities in the country.

5.36 In response Mr Mellors said that the company has been in recovery measures for the past 18 months and believes as part of the recovery they have been transparent about the challenges they have faced. He also highlighted the backlog of driver training the company has and stated that it have been working hard to get drivers through the training pipeline as well as taking steps to improve the availability of productive drivers in the right place at the right time with some roster changes.

5.37 Cllr Swarbrick believed that the time has come to sharpen the focus on Avanti and provide additional scrutiny on its performance.

5.38 Mayor Rotheram commented that the media article highlighting a slide pack at an Avanti meeting speaking of the availability of free money has been a public relations disaster for Avanti, and that an external investigation into the issue would be more effective than an internal investigation.

5.39 On Avanti performance Mayor Rotheram stated that his experience of travelling on Avanti is different to the picture painted by Mr Mellors. He then highlighted the importance of these services and whilst understanding the need for Avanti to make a profit he emphasised the importance of the London service along the West Coast as it connects the whole infrastructure of the UK, connecting people not only with places, but with opportunity. He also highlighted the significant effects poor service levels have on the wider economies.

5.40 Mayor Rotheram requested clarity on his understanding that from July there will be two trains an hour from Liverpool as the presentation from

Mr Mellors indicated that this will only be the case if there is availability of fleet with regards to the timetable.

5.41 In response Mr Mellors stated that during engagement with Liverpool City Region Avanti had clearly set out the expectation of putting on a second train in each direction as part of the June timetable. He explained that they have the slots in the timetable, but have been very clear that this is conditional on the availability of the rolling stock and getting driver training to a particular position.
He added that they are still working to this but the first priority is to introduce the Hitachi trains and then the first electric trains will be used on the Liverpool route once they have been delivered.

5.42 The Chair did not believe that the Committee had seen what is required from the company, and what has been said has not given confidence that matters will improve. He suggested that a decision on the next steps be considered at the March Board meeting.

5.43 The Chief Executive stated it is clear that the Committee expects more work to be done on this and suggested that officers set out the options to be presented to Board for Members to consider.

5.44 On the issue of two trains an hour for the Liverpool City Region the Chief Executive requested more clarity on whether there are any contingent infrastructure requirements on Network Rail to be able to deliver the additional Liverpool services. He understood that there are existing constraints which need to be overcome
before that outcome can be delivered.

5.45 Lord McLoughlin was concerned that when Avanti was presented with figures by the Chair these were not recognised by them and Avanti and the Committee need to work together in order to reach an agreement on what the accurate figures are.

5.46 In summing up what the Committee had discussed and the feelings of the Committee, the Chair stated that together with the West Coast Mainline this is the most important railway line in the country and it shouldn't just be a passable service; it needs to be the best if the best message is to be delivered on "UKPLC".

5.47 He further stated that the company needs to start working with Members differently, providing more information in advance when knowing a problem will occur. Regarding the investigation on the slide pack, he commented that it is not good enough to say that the results will not be published due to it being an internal matter.
In his view, it is clear that there are issues internally that need to be addressed, and sharing the results of that investigation would be easier than answering questions on why Avanti has not published them.

Resolved:

1) That the Committee notes the information in the report and supports the actions that Rail North Partnership (RNP) is taking to ensure operators focus on delivering the services passengers need
2) That officers prepare a report to be considered at the March Transport for the North Board setting out the options it might consider in providing

advice to the Secretary of State regarding the future of Avanti West Coast contract.

6 Infrastructure Focus

6.1 Members received the report from the Investment Planning Manager who then highlighted the key points within the report.

6.2 Cllr Hinchcliffe requested that in the letter to the DfT about the task force for Leeds in Sheffield, there is an explicit reference to the need that the land from HS2 be safeguarded for a T-shaped station at Leeds.

6.3 She also raised the issue of landslips and requested that a study be undertaken on the number of landslips that have occurred in the last year on railway lines and how this compares to 10 years ago and how the industry can deal with it. She believes this issue will affect economies and that steps need to be taken to address it.

6.4 The Investment Planning Manager stated that these points can be included into the next steps and that he will liaise with officers with regard to an assessment of the environmental impact and where activity can be proposed.

6.5 The Chief Executive highlighted that network resilience is an increasing problem and suggested working with Network Rail with a view to having a more substantive conversation in the future.

Resolved:

1) That the Committee notes the updates provided in relation to each of the programmes in development and delivery across the North.
2) That the Committee endorses the proposed activity set out as next steps, supporting the aspiration for improved engagement with the industry and greater involvement by TfN in the development and delivery of schemes within its region, recognising the opportunities for greater integration of changes.

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

7.1 Members received the report from the Head of Strategic Rail who then highlighted the key points within the report.

7.2 The Chair suggested that the Committee also needs to discuss the emerging draft legislation and whether or not there is the correct level of devolution and local control proposed.

7.3 Lord McLoughlin suggested that this should not be held over to the next meeting and needs to be discussed sooner.

Resolved:

1) That the Committee endorses the approach set out in the report to the 2024/25 rail elements of Transport for the North's Business Plan and notes the Department for Transport funding allocation for 2024/25.

2) That the Committee approves the approach to the 2024/25 Member Contributions as outlined in this report.

3) That the Committee notes the two governance matters relating to the change in composition of two sub-regions and the change in Rail North Partnership Board members.

4) That the Committee notes the proposed forward plan for future meetings.

8 Rail Outlook including Initial Rail Reform Proposition (ensuring that the growth and transformation agenda is addressed) and Strategic Rail Report

8.1 Members received the report from the Head of Strategic Rail who then highlighted the points within the report.

Resolved:

1) That the Committee notes the content of the report including the strong growth aspirations set out in the Strategic Transport Plan if rail is to play its full role in supporting the economic, social, and environmental aspirations of the North.

2) That the Committee endorses the final version of the Strategic Rail Report noting that there is still an opportunity to provide further input before it is finalised.

9 Date and time of next meeting

The next meeting will take place on Tuesday 4 June 2024 at 11am.

10 Exclusion of the Press and Public

To resolve that the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of Items 11,12 and 13 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 Private Minutes of the Previous Meeting

11.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2023 were considered for their accuracy.

Resolved:

That the private minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2023 be noted.

It was noted that Lord McLoughlin attended the meeting as an observer.

12 Train Operator Annual Business Plans for 2024/25

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

Resolved:

That the report be noted

13 Rolling Stock Strategy

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

Resolved:

That the report be noted