

COVID 'reset' for trains in the North

October 19, 2020



Mayors, Council Leaders and senior representatives from across the North's local authorities will be told on Wednesday that there is an opportunity to build on 'reset' train services in the North and support the rail industry in regaining confidence and trust.

A period of reliability returned to train services across the region's rail network for the first time in years following lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The industry has now highlighted that people can travel with confidence and has implemented a wide range of measures, including frequent deep train cleaning, to help keep passengers safe.

Working in concert with the Department for Transport and the Rail Delivery Group, train operators have deployed shared messaging to encourage rail users to buy tickets in advance, wear face-coverings, maintain social distancing, and wash hands before and after travelling.

With fewer services operating, and only around 30-35 per cent of the normal passenger numbers now using trains, both Northern and TransPennine Express have been operating with high levels of reliability across the region.

The new performance levels present a stark contrast to the poor reliability seen during the summer of 2018 when services effectively saw a major meltdown on the introduction of a new rail timetable, but parts of the North are currently restricted to 'travel for work, school or caring responsibilities or as part of a longer journey' advice as new tiered COVID restrictions come into force.

Now both Transport for the North and the rail industry are determined to work to keep the network's new punctuality, despite the challenges of COVID, as they further shape rail services over the coming months.

On Wednesday, members of Transport for the North's Rail North Committee will be told that, for Northern, the timetable uplifts introduced last month have been embedded successfully and continue to deliver high levels of operational performance, both in terms of punctuality and low levels of cancellations.

Before lockdown just three-quarters of Northern trains reached their stops within three minutes of the scheduled time. In April, after the national lockdown, that figure rose to 96% and despite several uplifts in services, the figure still stands at levels of 90% plus.

TPE has seen a similar trend with performance to three minutes of schedule at 88%. While both operators saw an increase in demand over the summer following very low levels of usage during lockdown, rail passenger numbers have since fallen from the summer highs by around 10% as leisure travel dropped off and commuter travel failed to materialise with local lockdowns further impacting demand, highlighting the need to build back a better, more resilient service to attract passengers back.

David Hoggarth, Strategic Rail Director for Transport for the North, said: "Throughout the COVID pandemic we have been working very closely with industry to adjust services so we could be sure they would meet essential travel needs. We want to ensure people can travel safely as they respect and comply with local lockdown restrictions. As we work to further tailor services, all of us are conscious that, for the moment at least, we have a more reliable railway and we want to do everything we can to keep it that way.

"There will still be challenges, and the second wave of the COVID pandemic puts increased pressure on everyone, including the rail industry and its resource levels," said David, adding that "the rail industry is well-placed to respond if plans need to be amended."

Over the last seven months, the North of England Contingency Group which brings together industry and local transport authorities, has helped to shape and monitor rail services as industry worked to create a safe, clean and reliable rail travel environment fully compliant with COVID requirements.

Currently, Northern's plans for December 2020 will see a rise in service provision from 82% of normal levels to 89% of full-service provision. TPE also plans to step-up its services for December 2020, as part of a phased, measured, and considered move toward full timetable introduction.

"All this," said David, "is of course subject to whatever challenges may be thrown at us as the impact of the COVID pandemic continues to be felt across all sections of society and daily life. What we have now though are the mechanisms and the experience in place to work together and take whatever action is needed."

Passengers are encouraged to look at their local operator's COVID guidelines and safe travel messaging which is prominently displayed on their websites.

Rail North Committee meets at 11am on Wednesday 21 October 2020 to discuss:

- Priorities for future rail services
- Rail reform matters
- Operational rail issues

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