

Northern leaders seek further commitments before new rail timetable is agreed

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The North's leaders have said they won't accept stripped-back train services unless the Government fully commits to delivering key rail investment projects in the North leading to increased capacity and connectivity.

Members of Transport for the North's (TfN) Rail North Committee say that planned infrastructure upgrades such as new signalling, track work and platform lengthening haven't progressed quickly enough in recent years. As a result, congestion on the North's railways is so bad that services previously running are now proposed to be removed from December 2022 just to make the timetable operate more reliably.

It comes as the North's leaders considered proposed service changes following a consultation to tackle congestion in and around Manchester's Castlefield Corridor.

However, with the Government having yet to publish the Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands,

the mayors and political leaders say they are being asked to make decisions about services on behalf of the North's passengers whilst 'totally in the dark' about funding and timing of rail investments over the next decade.

The Committee has now resolved that they will only reluctantly accept changes to next year's rail timetables when the Government provides a response on the below conditions:

- The Integrated Rail Plan to be published this month (July 2021), detailing what rail projects in the North will be funded and when they will be delivered
- An accelerated timetable for a package of initial rail infrastructure schemes in Manchester, to start earlier than currently planned
- Ensure the infrastructure schemes in Manchester enable long-held commitments for new connections, including services from Bradford and the Calder Valley to Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport
- Provide firm commitment to reinstate the direct rail link between South Yorkshire and Manchester Airport, if removed in December 2022, and timescales of when the service will be reinstated
- Satisfactory resolution of the detailed Cheshire and cross-Warrington service pattern (and Manchester services) during the next phase of timetable development

Transport for the North has now written publicly to Ministers on behalf of the North's passengers with the above conditions. The leaders on the Rail North Committee have requested a quick response and will meet again before the end of July 2021 to consider next steps.

The issues centre on congestion on the Manchester corridor – a key rail hub impacting the reliability of many of the North's rail services. This part of the network supports over 116,000 passenger trips into Manchester daily, with a 72% increase since 2002. It's also key for east-west routes that carry thousands of cross-Manchester journeys, including over 7,000 passenger trips per day to Manchester Airport.

However, TfN's Members say this is also a wider northern issue. Without the Government's Integrated Rail Plan, there is no holistic plan for rail upgrades in the North, or firm commitment to the delivering in full major projects such as Northern Powerhouse Rail; HS2 and the Transpennine Route Upgrade, amongst other upgrades.

They added that what is needed is a clear programme with strong leadership and accountability rather than siloed project-by-project nature of the rail industry. Members want to see a clear plan that allows services and connections lost as part of reducing the number of trains on the Manchester Corridor to be reinstated as soon as possible. Members are also calling for similar 'joined-up' approach to the timetable (planned for May 2022) and the infrastructure interventions on the East Coast Main Line.

Members of the Rail North Committee commented:

Dan Jarvis, Mayor for Sheffield City Region, said: "Losing the direct rail link between South Yorkshire and Manchester Airport is a retrograde step that would leave Sheffield one of the only cities in the world without a direct train to a major international airport. I've been clear since these discussions started that I would never support a move which would have such a negative impact on my region."

“Not only is this direct rail link a key attraction for both international investment into the region and international students to our universities, removing it will inevitably force more people to make the journey by car, increasing congestion and pollution along the already crowded Peak District routes.”

“Moreover, there have been fundamental issues with this whole process. We were consulted on an option that was then declared undeliverable, while the now preferred option of losing our direct rail link to Manchester Airport, has never actually been consulted on. Worse still, all this is before we’ve even seen the government’s list of rail investment projects. It’s impossible to make decisions about rail connectivity while the Integrated Rail Plan remains unpublished.”

“Being asked to approve this timetable change with no context, no plan and no information about when it will be reinstated is unacceptable. If this government is sincere about levelling up the North, then reliable, affordable, regular train services connecting our Northern towns and cities are essential. I’ve been clear since these discussions started that I cannot support an open-ended timetable change full of compromises for South Yorkshire.”

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, said: “The North of England is being asked to accept a reduced rail timetable because of the failure to prioritise our rail network for the investment it desperately needs.

“This is unacceptable to me and many other Mayors and Leaders across the North. We can’t keep making decisions that impact on communities without a commitment to deliver the infrastructure we need to make sure passengers don’t have to suffer longer.

“We need the government to give a clear timetable for work to solve rail congestion in Central Manchester. We are fed up with being fobbed off and need action, not words.”

Tracy Brabin, Mayor of West Yorkshire, said: “The fact we are being asked to make these choices shows the rail network is at bursting point. This is why we need commitments to Transpennine Route Upgrade, Northern Powerhouse Rail, including a new line between Manchester and Leeds with a stop at Bradford Central, as well as HS2, to create the breathing space needed to improve services for all users.

“A much more transparent and accountable process is needed for how rail network investment is planned and prioritised, which must be achieved as part of the Williams-Shapps rail reforms.”