

Northern Mayors: “The time for warm words is over”

December 1, 2022



Northern mayors have issued a joint statement calling on the Transport Secretary to “step in and clean up this mess” following a meeting about rail services.

It follows a meeting with Mark Harper and mayor’s from West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire and the North of Tyne, on Wednesday.

In a joint statement, Tracy Brabin, Andy Burnham, Steve Rotheram, Oliver Coppard and Jamie Driscoll said: “The absolute bare minimum of levelling up means being able to get to work and college on time – but Northerners have been robbed of this basic right because of the chaos on our railways. That must end.

“This was a positive meeting and we welcome the new Transport Secretary saying he will grip this crisis, which is causing misery for millions and damaging our regional economies.

“But the time for warm words is over. We’ve had enough of broken promises – passengers are rightly demanding action now.

“We made it clear to Mark Harper that he can and must step in and clean up this mess, which was made worse by his predecessors.

“If thousands of trains were being cancelled in London and the South East, we know this would be dealt with as an emergency – and we expect that same level of urgency.

“That means putting operators – such as Avanti, Transpennine Express and Northern – on notice to improve. The government mustn’t reward these appalling levels of service by signing-off on contract extensions when they come up for renewal.

“We need the Department for Transport to set out a clear timetable for reform, with ambitious targets that would bring service in the North in line with the performance enjoyed in the South.

“We have a new timetable coming in on 11 December 2022 so our challenge to the Transport Secretary is clear: he must get the network running properly, deliver the full timetable, and ensure the disastrous scenes we’ve witnessed over the summer and autumn aren’t repeated.

“We will hold him to account on that for the nine million people across the North that we serve.”

Following the meeting, Mark Harper Tweeted: “Very constructive meeting with Northern Mayors today. We all agree rail services in the region currently aren’t good enough. We’re training more drivers & introducing more services but, to fully solve the problems, reform must be delivered and industrial disputes resolved.”

In response, an Avanti West Coast spokesman said: “We know in recent months our customers have not been getting the service they deserve. We are sorry for the enormous amount of frustration and inconvenience this has caused and are grateful for the patience our passengers have shown.

“Over the last few months, our sole focus has been to do everything we can to return to a more resilient operation which delivers more services for our customers and communities. Crucially, the new timetable is based on a robust and sustainable roster for our people without reliance on overtime, and has been achieved by working with our people and the unions. It provides a better working pattern for staff and our customers will benefit from more trains, greater connectivity and tickets on sale much earlier.”

Tricia Williams, chief operating officer at Northern, said: “We recognise that the rail network across the North of England has not performed as well as we’d have liked over the last few months and we’re sorry for the disruption and inconvenience caused.

“This is due to several factors which are impacting rail industry performance including fully-trained driver availability and the on-going industrial relations issues with the trade unions. We are working very hard with other train operators to improve service reliability.”

A spokesperson for TransPennine Express said: “Prior to December 2021 TransPennine Express had posted its best ever performance results, and was subsequently recognised as “Train Operator of the Year” at the Rail Business Awards.

“Since then, prolonged disruption affecting our services has been caused by a range of issues including ongoing high levels of train crew sickness, a persisting training backlog as a direct result of Covid, and infrastructure issues outside of TPE’s control. Combined, these factors have seen a number of on-the-day or ‘evening before’ cancellations being made.

“In normal circumstances, we have enough people to fully operate our scheduled timetable – and have more drivers now than ever before – however the combination of factors has put unprecedented pressure on our ability to effectively operate our services.

“Our customers want, and deserve, reliable and punctual train services, and we are sorry have not been able to consistently provide that due to the ongoing issues. TPE’s team continues to work flat-out to deliver higher levels of service delivery and to tackle the issues that are being experienced by customers.”

Photo credit: Shutterstock