

# Manchester Recovery Task Force Public Consultation

## Introduction

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the MRTF consultation exploring possible future options of rail timetable design

### **Question 1: Do you support the aim of standardising and simplifying service patterns if this will significantly improve overall train performance?**

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council has major concerns about the level of evidence presented and has reservations over the timing of the consultation and review exercise given the impacts of the covid pandemic on rail travel.

As set out in the draft South East Manchester Multi-Modal (SEMMM) Strategy Refresh and Greater Manchester 2040 Transport Strategy, the Council's position is that we wish to see the rail industry offer an attractive and viable means of travel that is accessible to as many of our residents and businesses as possible. The concept of standardisation is superficially attractive, unfortunately the document fails, by some margin, to provide sufficient evidence to evaluate the options being offered or justify the level of intervention and the disruption to established travel patterns that would result.

When this review was initiated in 2019 the level of service reliability was unacceptably poor, and this was further exacerbated by the obvious fragility of the entire network which was repeatedly exposed by failed timetable changes, rolling stock replacement programmes and crew training issues.

While accepting that the constrained infrastructure declaration made in 2019 was the trigger for this review, the use of 2019 passenger figures and performance data as a basis for this review is clearly problematic. While the report recognises the Covid pandemic it has failed to take into account the enormous impact the pandemic has had on public transport use and in particular rail passenger numbers, which at the time of writing was at approximately 16% of pre Covid levels.

The rail industry has responded to the volatile business environment by adjusting timetables, reallocating rolling stock and redeploying crews. That willingness and ability to respond should be acknowledged and applauded. The outcome of that agility in service design is that we currently have a relatively reliable and stable level of service that broadly reflects demand levels across a wide range of routes. At the same time, with passenger numbers being at 16% of pre Covid levels, the network in early 2021 clearly has very substantial room to accommodate growth in passenger numbers.

### **Question 2: Do you support the approach of measuring the service level and performance impacts across all passengers to allow fair trade-offs between options?**

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council has major concerns about the level of evidence presented and has reservations over the timing of the consultation and review exercise given the impacts of the covid pandemic on rail travel.

The approach would be reasonable if sufficient background and detailed information was provided to actually assess the impacts of the proposed options. While the document points out that the key issue is traffic through the Castlefield Corridor and services crossing the throat of Piccadilly, it fails to acknowledge other infrastructure issues.

The consultation paper goes to some lengths to acknowledge the numerous service failings that emerged following the construction of the Ordsall Chord and the attempted large scale timetable recast after the launch of the latest Northern and Tran Pennine Express Franchises.

Because the consultation is predicated on the 2019 Constrained Network declaration made by Network Rail covering the Castlefield Corridor the paper is heavily focused on services through the corridor and Piccadilly Station. It was disappointing to note that there is no acknowledgment of the very longstanding infrastructure capacity issues and obsolete signalling equipment in and around Stockport and the service capacity issues that result.

The fundamental failure of the consultation is that it also fails to recognise the reality of the situation that the rail industry and the wider economy is now facing.

The consultation bases its rationale on projecting improvements in time keeping and growth in passenger numbers on the 2019 timetable's performance, a timetable that no longer exists and furthermore projects passenger growth on passenger numbers that currently do not exist. The entire UK (and world) economy is entering completely uncharted territory, at this point in time nobody can predict with any certainty how travel patterns will change once lockdown restrictions are eased. There is much speculation as to how much working from home has become the 'new normal'. While we can see several examples of large national companies in the service sector declaring that working from home will, for many of their staff, be the new standard working condition, we cannot know if that will truly come to pass or on what scale.

The uncertainty surrounding future passenger demand combined with the potential disruption of introducing NPR and HS2 infrastructure and services runs the risk rendering the entire exercise irrelevant in the medium term.

### **Question 3: On the basis of these results, which is your preferred option?**

One of the themes that runs throughout all of the proposals is the need to increase the need for passengers to interchange between services rather than having a single start to finish service, each option incrementally raises the need for interchange in particular those going to Manchester Airport. There is clear evidence to suggest that increasing the need for interchange acts as a significant deterrent to the use of rail services. The options presented increase the need for interchange along two of Stockport's busiest movement corridors (the A6 and A34), increasing the likelihood of people choosing to travel by car. This fundamentally goes against the aims and objectives of both the Greater Manchester 2040 Transport Strategy and Draft South East Manchester Multi-Modal (SEMMM) Strategy Refresh by contradicting efforts to encourage modal shift to more sustainable and public transport options.

Furthermore, the proposed options result in a potential loss of service from Stockport to Manchester Airport, via Piccadilly, and also a loss of direct local services to some stations in north Manchester; Oxford Road, Deansgate and Salford Crescent. All these locations are key employment locations for Stockport residents and it is unavoidable that a reduction in service to these locations would result in increased car usage along key road corridors in Stockport.

The Council is unable to support any option which will result in increased traffic congestion by deterring people from using rail services. This is particularly important as lockdown restrictions are lifted and passengers begin to form new travel habits.

In addition, the consultation also provides a table that shows the expected improvements in service reliability that each option will create, as with passenger projections each increasing level of intervention is expected to generate incremental improvements in time keeping reliability.

It is noted that the service reliability improvement figures are in minutes and the potential improvements are in fractions of a minute. Even the most ambitious intervention (Option C) only offers the potential of 0.9 of a minute (54 seconds) increase in average reliability over the do nothing option. While it is acknowledged that the figures are averages across the entire network the gains are nevertheless marginal and again these figures are based upon the admittedly poorly performing 2019 timetable rather than the current timetable in operation.

For the reasons outlined above Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council does not favour any of the options outlined and does not consider the evidence presented as being adequate to make such a decision and has reservations over the timing of the entire exercise. In 2019 when the process was initiated the situation required addressing, however circumstances have changed beyond recognition and this consultation does not recognise those changed circumstances.