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Dear colleagues.

Manchester Recovery Task Force Consultation: Timetable options to improve rail performance in the North of England

This submission is on behalf of the North West Regional Group of the CPRE, the countryside charity, which consists of CPRE Lancashire and CPRE Cheshire (which, between them, cover the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Liverpool City Region) and Friends of the Lake District/CPRE Cumbria (hereafter collectively referred to as CPRE), in response to the Manchester Recovery Task Force Consultation.

1. CPRE Priorities

CPRE is a long-established environmental charity with a strong presence in the North West. We see our approach to transport as being part of our wider concerns over climate change and the need for more sustainable lifestyles. For us, planning for transport interventions is about protecting enhancing and improving access to our countryside and environmental capital and this must form the backdrop of any strategy, be it short or long-term for transport in the North West.

We want a thriving, beautiful countryside rich in nature and playing a crucial role in our nation's response to the climate emergency. We know that engaging with our natural environment, especially near to where we live, is vital for our mental and physical wellbeing. We're determined to promote the countryside and its communities to enable more people than ever before to benefit from it – including those who haven't benefited before.

We look to the future whilst staying rooted in what has inspired us for almost 100 years.

We're aiming for a countryside that is valued, enjoyed and understood by, and accessible to, everyone, wherever they live, now and in the future. That's why we describe ourselves as 'the countryside charity'. So, when planning future strategic rail development in the North we urge the Department for Transport to make sure that their plans are part of a holistic endeavour to mitigate climate change, protect the countryside for its own sake and achieve a better quality of life.

In terms of the current consultation, we would stress the need to think of a transport corridor as a two-way street. We should get away from the assumption that what matters are only the main flows into the centre (Manchester or Liverpool) from surrounding towns and rural areas. Of growing importance, especially post-Covid, will be leisure opportunities which often go against the flow to the Lakes, Lancashire Coast, Peak District and Ribble Valley.

2. Introduction

We welcome this consultation and the opportunity to respond to it. The rail network in the North West has been particularly badly affected by the major problems following the introduction of the May 2018 timetable, compounded by delays to the electrification of the Manchester – Bolton – Preston route.

We recognise that there is a need for urgent short-term action to address issues around punctuality and reliability, combined with longer-term strategies to address the future development of the network and the need for more - and more modern - rolling stock.

We are in an exceptional situation at present due to Covid-19, with rail use massively depressed. Any options for future development of the rail network need to take into account the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 on people's travel behaviour.

In particular, there is likely to be a long-term decline in daily commuting to major centres (notably Manchester and Liverpool). Set against that, leisure travel may grow and accessibility of the Lancashire Coast, Lake District and Ribble Valley/Dales is likely to increase.

We should stop seeing transport primarily as a means of getting people into major centres in the morning and home in the evening, taking a much more balanced view in which transport is a means to several ends, not just for commuting. Transport is a derived demand and not an end in itself and, following Covid, that demand is likely to be more evenly spread out as a significant percentage of the population will continue to work from home more of the time, travelling into offices less and at odd hours and probably taking fewer longer journeys for work purposes.

In an environment where the overall number of trains that can operate is clearly limited, there is a trade-off between journey time and offering a reasonably-spread service so that smaller communities are not unfairly disadvantaged. We take the view that passengers prioritise punctuality and reliability rather than the fastest possible journey time. We base this view on survey after survey, most notably by Transport Focus, which always indicate that travellers value above all else the need to know how long a journey will take them, so that they can plan around that expected

timescale. They are less concerned about the time a journey will take and saving 10 or even 20 minutes on a journey than they are about being able to rely on the scheduled travel time.

Future options must not assume a return to 'the old normal'. Instead we should look at ways of shaping a 'new' normal where optimal use is made of the rail network and complementary transport. Short-term measures must be seen in the context of a longer-term strategy for sustainable transport in the North West as part of over-arching strategies for a sustainable and attractive region.

3. Response to Questions

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

Yes. Passengers value a standardised timetable, with certainty that their train will always be at .xx past each hour. It's good for passengers and clearly improves overall performance, providing a more reliable service, which passengers – whatever the journey they are making - also welcome. And there is another dimension to this – ensuring that timetables are, much more so than now, standardised on a seven-day a week basis, with trains operating on a regular basis until late evening. If you live in the North West and you either have to travel to London for the day for business or you choose to for social reasons, you need to know that you can get home from your closest West Coast Main Line station when you arrive back there at the end of the day.

People will want to travel in the evening, to and from work but increasingly for leisure purposes. An inadequate train service in which the last service home is relatively early is not acceptable. There is an important personal safety dimension. Passengers, particularly but not entirely female, are reluctant to use stations at night and delays to trains add to further concerns and a sense of vulnerability.

We agree with the 'Objectives for the options' and the importance of putting passenger needs first. Delivering a simplified, reliable train service is, at the end of the day, about meeting passenger needs and the 'production' side of the railway should be focused on achieving that, rather than going for what may seem a cheap or easy option.

This is important in relation to utilisation of staff – both train crew and station staff. Reliability requires a number of things but ensuring that trains are despatched to time is one important aspect. Another aspect is utilisation of train crew: over-complex rosters where drivers and guards are diagrammed to make a number of crew changes can result in potential for delay, even if on paper it may give optimal use of human resources.

It is deeply frustrating for passengers having to wait (typically at Manchester Oxford Road or Victoria) because their train is delayed 'waiting for the driver/guard who is delayed on an incoming train'.

In S.40 you comment that services to Manchester Airport 'are valued very highly' by stakeholders, as well as services to more than one central Manchester station. We would not bracket the two as being of the same importance. Most passengers might travel to Manchester Airport once or twice a year. However, many passengers in the Bolton, Wigan and Preston areas will want to make a journey to central Manchester on a much more regular basis. Ensuring that there is a reasonable balance of services to both Victoria and Piccadilly is essential (noting that Salford Central station is a particularly busy station serving the north side of Manchester city centre).

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?

Yes, with caveats.

The methodology described is very generic in its approach and does not consider the particular Manchester station/s passengers might want to reach. Journey purpose is important in deciding if rail is a viable option. Whilst it might be a 'neat' solution for timetable planners to have all Southport services going into Victoria, it may not be so good for passengers who are expected to change at stations with poor facilities such as Salford Crescent.

A change of train on a relatively short journey is a big disincentive to rail use. We accept that sometimes it may be necessary, but where there are two or more services into Manchester (e.g. from Southport and Blackpool) it isn't unreasonable to expect a choice of options.

It is important that, whatever revised timetable is introduced, it improves performance BUT it is also important that the simplified timetables fully appreciate established travel patterns and the relative merits of serving Piccadilly and Victoria. Further assessment is required to establish the best pattern of services that maintains connectivity from Southport to south Manchester.

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

With some qualifications, Option C.

Clearly, staying with the same service pattern across Manchester is not sustainable. We consider Option C gives the best outcome for passengers across the study area. However, we would stress that associated measures are necessary to ensure that, whatever timetable is decided on, there is a 'total' approach to operating the railway which includes:

- Adequate staffing of trains and also at stations to ensure trains are despatched promptly and passengers appropriately advised and given assistance, especially during disruption.

There needs to be a 'culture of punctuality' which has not always been in evidence in the past on some routes/stations in the North. This includes rigorous training of both platform and on-train staff.

- Sufficient and suitable rolling stock to ensure that trains are not delayed loading and unloading
- A timetable which is realistic and allows for inevitable occasional delays which can have major knock-on effects: trains should as far as possible be timed to have adequate allowance to get to the start of the Castlefield corridor, even if it might mean waiting at e.g. Salford Crescent for slightly longer than ideal. There is a trade-off in all of these things but having trains timed at speeds which are next to impossible to maintain does not help anyone.

Question 4: Please provide your views on the details of the proposed changes which are detailed in the Appendix.

a) Liverpool to Manchester via Warrington Central

We broadly support the proposals in Options B and C. However, it will be important to ensure that connections in/out of faster services to Manchester and Liverpool are adequate rather than expecting incoming passengers having to alight at Warrington central having a long wait for their onward service (which in most cases will be to the main centres, Liverpool or Manchester).

b) Liverpool and Wigan to Manchester via Eccles

We support the proposals in Option C. However, we would like to see consideration given to routing the Manchester Airport – Cumbria service via Bolton and Wigan in order to give both these substantial settlements direct access to the South Lakes and Cumbrian coast.

We note the proposal to divert the North Wales – Manchester Airport service to Manchester Piccadilly, recognising that there will be two trains an hour from Chester to Warrington Bank Quay with important connections north on the West Coast Main Line.

- Maintaining good connections with Avanti West Coast northbound services to the Lakes and Scotland will be of great importance.
- The additional service on the Mid-Cheshire Line will offer improved access to the Delamere Forest, and we would hope this service makes a stop at Delamere for that purpose.

c) Wigan to Manchester via Atherton and Westhoughton

We have concerns about all of these options, in particular the loss of a direct service from Southport to south Manchester. Of the three, we regard Option C as 'least worst' but would argue for:

- A direct service from Southport to south Manchester – serving at least Oxford Road and Piccadilly, and either Stockport or Manchester Airport.

- Consideration given to extending the proposed Wigan – Leeds service from Blackpool, giving improved connectivity from Blackpool and the Fylde to Rochdale, Littleborough and Todmorden (and vice-versa, with Atherton line stations getting a direct service to Blackpool). The proposed South Pennines Regional Park would benefit from these links and overcome the lack of a direct Blackpool link, as Leeds- Blackpool trains ‘by-pass’ Todmorden on the Stansfield curve.

In addition, by routing the Manchester Airport – Cumbria services (see below) via Bolton and Wigan this gives an additional fast service from Manchester to Wigan via Bolton.

d) Preston to Manchester via Chorley

We support Option C in general. Having a Bolton and Chorley stop in the Manchester Airport – Scotland services is much needed, overcoming the current very limited stopping pattern for Bolton (and nothing for Chorley). Routing Manchester Airport to Cumbria services is also welcome, opening up an important market for travel to/from the Lakes from the Bolton area. However:

- We would like to see consideration given to routing this from Bolton via Wigan to overcome Wigan’s loss of direct trains to Barrow and Windermere.
- It would be worth assessing the scope to stop at Balshaw Lane, giving a connection for the Chorley area (and nearby Astley Hall, a popular visitor attraction) at a fairly new and busy station which is currently poorly served with only an hourly service (Blackpool – Liverpool).
- Rather than extended journey times on Clitheroe services there is a case for at least one Farnworth station (Moses Gate, Kearsley or Farnworth itself) being served by a Blackpool service, and also a Southport train.
- Stations such as Blackrod and Adlington must retain at the very least the current level of service
- The current limited service to Clifton should be re-assessed with inclusion of some additional stops recognising the potential of Clifton for accessing the Irwell Valley Country Park

Adding three stops onto one particular service (Moses Gate, Farnworth, Kearsley) will have adverse consequences on journey times – alternatives such as skip-stop patterns or concentrating an increase in services (up to three an hour) on one station should be examined. As a sizeable community, Farnworth is very poorly served by the rail network and we would want to see improved access from the Farnworth area (with a catchment of approx. 30,000) to rural leisure destinations e.g. the Fylde Coast, Southport and the Ribble Valley. Once again, this should not just about access to central Manchester, it should also be about enabling city and town dwellers to access the countryside and the coast in a sustainable manner.

e) Blackburn to Manchester via Darwen

We welcome the introduction of an additional service to Clitheroe. However, adding in three stops between Bolton and Manchester will significantly increase journey times. As we suggest above, a more detailed look is needed at the potential for service improvements to the three 'Farnworth' stations. Having direct access to the Ribble Valley from one Farnworth station, on one of the services, would be an overall benefit.

- Entwistle station should be a stop for all services, recognising its growing importance for access to the West Pennine Moors, with no other public transport available. 'Request stop' arrangements are not passenger-friendly and may well put people off using the train.
- Improved connections at Blackburn with east Lancashire services is important and the new timetable will be an opportunity to address this issue.

f) Leeds to Manchester via Rochdale

We broadly support Option C with the development of a half-hourly 'core' Chester – Leeds service via Calder Valley.

- As suggested earlier, we think there is a case for the Wigan – Leeds service to start from Blackpool.
- Frodsham, Helsby and Runcorn East should be served by both Chester services, providing a half-hourly service to each of these stations. There should be a more frequent connecting service at Helsby to Ellesmere Port as a medium-term objective
- We support extension of the Blackburn – Wigan service to Kirkby, running later in the evening and on Sundays.

g) Stalybridge to Manchester Victoria (local)

We support Option C. In the longer term we would support a new station at Droylsden.

h) Huddersfield to Manchester via TransPennine Main Line

We support Option C:

- The addition of an extra stop for local stations between Stalybridge and Huddersfield would open up access to the South Pennines and provide improved journey opportunities for local residents.

In the longer term, capacity must be increased on this important corridor, with gauge clearance for freight traffic, additional capacity for passenger and freight and full electrification.

i) Sheffield to Manchester via Hope Valley

We broadly support Option B/C. However, Humberside and South Yorkshire needs at least one direct service to Manchester Airport.

- A regular hourly service to local Hope Valley services is strongly supported and provides access to the popular Peak District National Park. This should be a seven days a week service.
- Given the importance of the Peak District, consideration should be given to either the Cleethorpes or Nottingham service having a stop in the Hope Valley, at a station with good bus connections. Hope station may have potential to do this.

j) South Manchester Local Services

We broadly support Option C.

- A half-hourly Buxton service would have significant benefits for Buxton itself and access to this part of the Peak National Park and the Middlewood Way.
- We regret the loss of the Alderley Edge – Southport service and urge that a link from south Manchester to Southport should be reconsidered.

k) Manchester Airport services

We broadly support Option C but would prefer the Cleethorpes service to continue to serve Manchester Airport if this is possible.

4. Our key concerns:

- That Southport should have at least one hourly service to south Manchester
- That one Blackpool service should be routed into Victoria
- That consideration should be given to routing Manchester – Cumbria services via Bolton and Wigan
- That further consideration is given to ways of enhancing rail services to the Farnworth area

5. We like:

- The overall approach being taken
- Seeing this as a short-term strategy which will point in the direction for future infrastructure investment
- Specifically, enhancements to routes providing access to the countryside – Ribble Valley (Clitheroe) and South Pennines (Slaitwaite, Marsden, Greenfield, Mossley)

6. Other suggestions:

- Look at train crew diagramming to avoid risky short change-over times

- Ensure sufficient time at the end of a train's journey to ensure a punctual departure on the return/forward journey
- Ensure sufficient platform staff for despatching
- Develop a 'culture of punctuality'
- Move to a European-style '7 Days a Week' Timetable
- Ensure sufficient rolling stock to avoid overcrowding (which can be a key cause of delays, boarding and alighting)
- Develop a longer-term strategy based on a 'new normal' post-Covid

7. Longer-term interventions

We note that this is outside the scope of the current consultation but any short-term interventions must form part of a long-term strategy to upgrade the rail network of the North West.

Medium-term measures could include:

- Electrification of Windermere branch and Lostock Junction – Wigan
- Improved station facilities, particularly at key hubs where passengers change trains
- Greater integration of transport strategies with wider access to the countryside, working with local authorities and other appropriate bodies. Stations that provide access to more remote rural areas should have 'more than basic' facilities, possibly including cycle hire (e.g. Middlewood, Entwistle, Hope, Edale, Kents Bank, Staveley, Clitheroe).

Longer-term

- Re-connect the network with an end to unhelpful barriers on what were once through routes, e.g. Liverpool – Kirkby – Wigan, Liverpool – Ormskirk – Preston
- Further electrification including TransPennine main line, Hope Valley, Bolton – Blackburn – Clitheroe/Colne
- Re-openings: Colne – Skipton, Burscough Curves, Woodhead, Peak Line (Matlock – Millers Dale)
- Improved services between Manchester and Crewe in time for the arrival of HS2 to Crewe

Additional questions 5-7

These are not relevant to a group response but we welcome the seeking of individual passenger views.