

Transport Select Committee: Impact of Coronavirus on Rail Transport for Greater Manchester, June 2020

This written evidence supports and supplements the oral evidence provided by the Mayor of Greater Manchester to the Committee on 17 June and addresses the impact of coronavirus on rail in Greater Manchester (GM).

Summary of Key Recommendations

1. Making the best use of what is available now

The performance of reduced timetables since the onset of the coronavirus lockdown starkly demonstrates the impact the congested network had on service reliability in GM pre-lockdown. With the progressive tapering down of lockdown and the return of businesses, it is vital that we do not go back to the status quo on performance. To do so would only exacerbate existing challenges around people feeling confident travelling on public transport in the wake of a pandemic and would risk a widespread shift from rail to the road, adding to congestion and pollution.

Since the reduction of services from the start of lockdown, train operators have consistently achieved a public performance measure above 90% and large decreases in the number of cancelled services. It is clear that operators have benefited from fewer reactionary delays as a result of the quieter network. **DfT must adopt a common sense and collaborative approach when reintroducing services to ensure a timetable isn't returned to which unnecessarily embeds delays and reliability issues.** TfGM's preference is for timetables to better accommodate local needs and the needs of freight operators, this should be undertaken through proactive stakeholder engagement which prevents operators competing directly against each other for passengers to the detriment of the wider network.

2. Building Back Better on local rail infrastructure

In GM, passenger rail performance pre-Covid has been encumbered by the resilience and capacity of rail infrastructure, which has not been able to carry the number and frequency of services demanded.

In recovery, there will be an opportunity to push forward with ambition and determination on the rail infrastructure upgrades which will enable the industry to grow the railway again when demand returns.

Making urgent progress to improve our rail infrastructure now will help GM to Build Back Better from coronavirus in a low-carbon, fair and sustainable way, and underpin the significantly improved and more stable operational performance demanded of a growing city-region. This includes **working with government to secure the right solution for Central Manchester, including the Castlefield Corridor**, and the necessary investment in rail infrastructure to unlock capacity both for the next decade and beyond.

3. Clarity on reform

It is important that government soon takes a clearer position on passenger rail reform. When the current emergency arrangements expire, they will need to be replaced by something sustainable and the industry will need sufficient notice from, and preferably to work in partnership with, government on whatever is to come next. The Williams Review reported to government months ago yet we are still to be advised what it will lead to and when. It is vital that rail industry reform is an active tool of recovery and supports GM's agenda to Build Back Better to a low carbon, green and fair economy.

In Autumn 2019 TfGM and the GM Mayor, in 'Our Prospectus for Rail', set out a long-term vision for 'GM Rail', aligned with the Mayor's Our Network vision for a fully integrated transport network. Greater devolved oversight over GM's local rail services remains an important objective which would be valuable in ensuring services are calibrated to support the recovery needs of the city-region. However, without clarity on the government's position regarding reform and the outcome of the Williams Review, our ability to make and implement plans for the role of rail in recovery is limited.

Impact

In the immediate lockdown period, with the introduction of two-metre social distancing and guidance discouraging the use of rail except for essential journeys and if no other options was available, trips by rail in GM declined by approximately 90%. While, since the return of non-essential retail on 15 June, rail trips have increased, it is still well below pre-Covid levels and is likely to remain so for some time, particularly given ongoing limits to capacity onboard trains due to social distancing (whether two-metres or one-metre plus) and continuing messages from government and the industry to encourage rail travel only when necessary.

Building into Recovery

Indications suggest rail may see a slower recovery in terms of attracting passenger numbers after lockdown and into recovery compared to other transport modes. This is a likely reflection of the higher proportion of journeys on rail undertaken by people in office-based jobs located in urban centres, many of whom were able to work from home during lockdown and many may continue to do so more regularly post-lockdown. Similarly, rail journeys taken for long-distance leisure or business travel will have largely disappeared during the lockdown phase.

This is why it is important that government takes a proactive position to re-building trust in the railways and ensures capacity can be maximised through the provision of financial support for as long as it is needed to deliver services.

When combined with making progress to address long-standing challenges with the rail infrastructure in and around GM so that the long-term direction remains to grow the railway, the government and the industry will be in a stronger position to respond to the impact of the pandemic and to mitigate the risk of long-term modal shift from rail to road.

We would expect the recovery of different rail markets to occur in different ways:

- *Commuting* – As rail (pre-lockdown) held a high share of AM peak commuting trips into central Manchester, in the short-term there is unlikely to be sufficient road or car park capacity for a significant modal shift from rail to car for these kinds of journeys as commuters return to working in their offices. Unless there is a major shift towards home/flexible working, it is unlikely that Manchester's economy can recover or grow without a return to significant use of rail for commuting. The government will need to support the industry as it addresses the need for additional capacity and the implications on the timetabling of services if peak travel periods become elongated or fewer days are spent in the workplace.
- *Leisure* – Leisure travel is the dominant mode for West Coast, Cross Country and TPE, therefore a return to previous levels of demand (and revenue) is going to be a challenge without promoting rail for leisure purposes. As a form of 'non-essential' travel, this is going to be difficult and there is an expectation that leisure demand will be slow in coming back, meaning those operators may find lower average loadings than those which are more commuter focused. In the longer term, a decline in the domestic aviation industry and a reluctance for holidaying abroad could support a return of leisure rail travel.
- *Business* – Long distance intercity rail corridors, such as the West Coast, account for a significant portion of business travel. TfGM surveys showed 53% of West Coast AM peak journeys from Manchester Piccadilly were for business travel. With the expanded use of video conferencing and digital other distance-working technologies, the extent to which business travel demand will recover is unclear.
- *Freight* – There are around 48 freight trains per day moving 7.7 million tonnes of freight each year to, from and through the Greater Manchester area. As a result, rail freight makes a tangible contribution to the economy and environment of Greater Manchester. Rail freight is wholly operated on commercial terms and, therefore, demand is sensitive to fluctuations caused by wider economic factors. Freight capacity will be particularly valuable if the construction sector is to have a significant role in stimulating recovery and recognition needs to be given to the potential for rail freight to contribute to decarbonisation and road congestion.