

Letter from Northern to Stakeholders May 2018

As you may be aware our plans for modernisation are not all being delivered in the way we want. This is hugely frustrating for everyone that works at Northern and I know that this is causing some customers significant disruption and inconvenience and I'd like to apologise for this.

Sadly, Network Rail has not delivered all the improvements to the railway that they were supposed to and the biggest improvement project is now two years late. We are working hard with them to fix this as quickly as possible.

This work is essential so that we can start running our new £500m fleet of trains and so that we can phase out very old trains like the Pacers. This will mean that we will be able to deliver the extra and better services our customers deserve and expect. We are doing everything we can to get things back on track as quickly as possible for our customers across the North.

Northern's modernisation plan

Northern is committed to modernising rail travel across the north with new and refurbished trains, removal of Pacer trains, better stations and 2,200 extra train services a week by 2020. These modernisation plans depend upon the on-time delivery of new or upgraded rail infrastructure by Network Rail. The increase in these train services are delivered each year during May and December when national timetables change across the UK. For Northern, the May 2018 timetable change was planned to be a key milestone in delivering more services.

Service improvement delays

Frustratingly, Network Rail announced in January 2018, a further delay to the biggest infrastructure project necessary for Northern's modernisation, the electrification of the Manchester to Preston route via Bolton. This brings the delay to completion of this project to two years and, in the short-term, severely impacts our plans to increase services and capacity across the network. This is because we are unable to run electric trains along the Bolton corridor (until electrification is completed) and therefore we are having to reallocate diesel trains from elsewhere to continue to be able run these services, rather than them being available to enhance services elsewhere. As a result, whilst we will be delivering an increase of 1,300 new services a week from May 18, disappointingly for customers, 900 new services a week will not be delivered until December 2018.

For Northern's train planners, the electrification delay was also a major set-back, leaving them less than four months to fully re-plan our May 18 timetable, less than half the normal time required. Unfortunately, due to this condensed planning time some routes will see a deterioration in timetabled services. This also means that opportunities for resolving last-minute train scheduling problems have not been available. Therefore, we are not able to make even minor changes to train times for several months, whereas a normal timetable process would have allowed for this.

The May 18 timetable change will see around 90% of our services change and an extra 1,300 train services introduced across our network, the biggest change to local rail for many years. This is a significant operational challenge, and given the late nature of the planning for this, we do expect some localised service disruption, which could happen at very short-notice whilst the new timetable beds in. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure we minimise any service disruption and keep customers informed. Over the last four weeks we have been focused on ensuring our customers know that timetables are changing with a 'check before you travel' message across stations, trains and online channels.

Driver availability

Northern has 1,529 trained drivers, 180 more than when we started the franchise in April 2016. However, availability of drivers to operate timetabled services has been an issue over the last few weeks in some locations for two unexpected reasons.

Firstly, the completion of the electrification of the Blackpool to Preston line by Network Rail was delayed at the last minute, by three weeks, which meant that driver training became a real challenge. Before trains can operate on new lines, drivers have to undergo essential safety related route training, and for Blackpool this meant training 400+ drivers from all depots who operate this route. This means that some drivers are unavailable for their normal train driving duties whilst they are undergoing this training.

Secondly, we have been unable to ask our drivers to work on their Rest Days for the last three months. Rest Day Working is a normal industry practice adopted when there are short-term training requirements, which enables us to absorb those exceptional or last-minute training needs, and provide additional flexibility for train driver rosters.

The combination of these two factors has meant that we have faced a shortage of available drivers in a number of locations which has, unfortunately, led to a far higher level of delays and cancellations to train services. We're sorry for these delays and cancellations and we are working hard to complete our driver training. We are also working with our colleagues and ASLEF with a view to getting Rest Day Working reinstated, which in turn will further help improve driver availability.

I hope this provides you with a good overview of our current position.

Craig Harrop
Community & Sustainability Director