

Timetable options to improve rail performance in the north of England

Reply to Manchester Recovery Task Force Public Consultation

From: Ormskirk Preston and Southport Travellers' Association (OPSTA)

Date: 15th February 2021

OPSTA has over 300 households in its membership along with most of the parish and town councils in West Lancashire.

OPSTA supports the objective of dealing with the severe issue of congestion in central Manchester in the immediate term and accepts it will be necessary to rationalise operations until the infrastructure and network capacity can be improved.

This response, however, is an objection to the consultancy proposals as they stand.

The solution must be holistic and based on an objective 360 degree assessment of specific travel requirements into Manchester that has recognised each of the five city centre stations serves as a destination in its own right according to travel purpose.

On the basis of information in this document OPSTA has serious reservations that the significance of this has not been understood or reflected in the analysis of routes and creation of timetables.

OPSTA proposes an alternative option. In reply to question 3 some amendments are recommended to Option C that will better serve passenger need and slot readily into the 'standard 15 minute frequency' sought for the Bolton corridor.

The scale of the issue and gaps in the existing options is explained and quantified in the replies to the other questions.

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

No.

The options proposed in the consultation document make it apparent that the term "standardising and simplifying" means route rationalisation which is one but not the only way of "reducing the number of services" as it is stated in the consultation description.

Consequently the question reflects the approach taken to meeting the objective which appears not to consider meeting travel requirements to be the most important critical success factor.

All options create a significant gap in the routes offered that will affect at least 500k of the northwest population namely the Southport – Wigan - Westhoughton rail corridor through to the south side of Manchester calling at Deansgate, Oxford Road and Piccadilly. The impact is expanded on in reply to question 4. The corridor passes through five parliamentary constituencies and the service is used by constituents of at least three more.

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?

No. The data presented does not allow this to be assessed. The evidence and explanations in the document indicate what might reasonably be interpreted by rail users as “fair trade-off” has not been achieved.

In para 15, it states “the task force has looked at the timetable from first principles” but surely the first principle is where do passengers need to get to which is why, rightly, the first consideration of para 32 is the impact of change on passengers.

Yet in the changes described in para 46 it states “The Southport service to Alderley Edge is split into a Southport Victoria service and Piccadilly Alderley Edge service” suggesting that the importance of each of the five Manchester stations as destinations is not understood and thus brings the methods of measurement into question; this is not a split it is re-routing. See following.

Similarly for Wigan which the document states would no longer be on the Cumbria Manchester Airport route and then implies “standardisation” through the Bolton corridor is a positive trade-off with the loss of the Wigan to Airport service. The comparison of the catchment that loses a service completely to that gaining a fourth service would indicate otherwise.

The statement in para 41, “... *making an interchange to complete a journey isn’t a deal breaker ..*” is a concern for many reasons, not only to passengers from Piccadilly to the Southport line but also from Victoria and Salford Central to stations between Bolton and Preston, including three heavily used Parkway stations:

- A further time penalty on what are already very slow and long journeys and uncertainty that connections will be made because they will not be guaranteed.
- Unnecessary change means crowds of passengers will board and disembark twice which will increase dwell times at busy stations and thus counter the aims of the service proposition.
- Moreover, if required to change at Salford Crescent, which was not designed for interchange, have passenger flows and congestion on the narrow platform been adequately modelled and risk-assessed and what contingency plans exist for handling large crowds when services run late?

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

If this means as stated the preference is **No Change**.

With concerns expressed over service reliability and numbers travelling to the airport why have so many long distance services been favoured with hourly paths through the Castlefield corridor?

There is a **better option**. Option C is presented in the consultation as the most operationally and financially beneficial. OPSTA proposes two amendments to this option that will improve these benefits and satisfy more passenger travel requirements. It entails:

- Switch of a Blackpool and Southport service.
- Extension of Wigan North Western peak service to Blackpool.

It provides both coastal towns, the Fylde, Preston and Lancashire and northwest Greater Manchester with direct access to all Manchester city centre stations.

Operationally, there would be no change of timetable or train paths from Bolton through the Castlefield corridor to south Manchester destination or Victoria to the north.

Impact and benefits over current timetable:

- Blackpool gains a third service at peak times when it retains two services to south side of Manchester, and regains direct access to north and east sides of Manchester.
- Preston still gains a peak service to the south side of Manchester and does not lose its all day service to Victoria.
- Wigan retains access to the south side of Manchester and an all day airport service.
- Southport line including west Lancs, other Wigan stations, Hindley and Westhoughton retain access to south side of Manchester and regains airport service lost in May '18.
- Atherton line (Atherton, Walkden, Swinton) gain a sought after peak service to south side of Manchester.
- Bolton will still have all of the services proposed by the task force.

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

All options create a significant gap in the routes offered that will affect at least 500k of the northwest population. If any of the proposed options are implemented as specified there will be severe adverse impact for Southport and Sefton MBC, south and west Lancashire, Wigan MBC (six stations), Hindley and Westhoughton.

The adverse socio economic impact and huge financial loss of rail revenue were quantified in a formal business case presented to the Secretary of State for Transport in January 2018 when the same route change was proposed for the Southport line; it is probably the only line and route to have justified itself with a full business case in the last three years.

This time it will be far worse under current proposals because:

- Wigan will lose its more direct and faster main line service to the south side of Manchester, and a reduction in its Atherton line services.
- Wigan, Hindley and Westhoughton will also lose the south side service via Bolton which was avoided in 2018.
- Preston and stations to Bolton will lose the direct service to Victoria.

It is not clear whether the proposed changes are intended for weekdays or all week?

Question 5: Where do you usually travel from and to? Please include your origin and destination station

Question 6: How often do you make this journey?

Question 7: What is the reason for your journey? E.g. work, business, education, leisure

Repeated passenger surveys and in collaboration with the rail authorities and train operator analysis of travel data proved for the Southport–Wigan–Westhoughton corridor:

- Journeys to Manchester are destination specific to one of the five city centre stations for reasons of work, business, study, health, leisure and in the case of Piccadilly connections to rest of the country.
- Over 70% of passengers boarding a train west of Wigan will be travelling to one of those destinations with over 60% (almost two thirds) needing to get to the south side. Prior to May 2018 timetable change an independent survey by AECOM concluded that over 72% of those joining an Airport service between Southport and Westhoughton would be impacted if it was withdrawn.
- Aggregated with those joining at Wigan, Hindley and Westhoughton means that the journeys for well over 25% of passengers travelling along what is rightly identified as the critical 'Bolton corridor' to the south side of Manchester originated on the Southport – Westhoughton line.

Pre pandemic many peak services would be over crowded and denial of boarding was a too frequent occurrence with return evening services.

Journeys towards Wigan and on to Southport are also made from both north and south sides of Manchester with travel to Southport often entailing connections at Piccadilly and Victoria.