

# **Suspension of Train Services between Rose Hill Marple and Manchester via Hyde**

## **Briefing Note**

### **Introduction**

Northern Rail announced, in a letter to local MPs on 16<sup>th</sup> July, that they propose to suspend all train services between Rose Hill Marple and Manchester Piccadilly via Hyde from mid-September to mid-December 2020. There will be no trains to or from Rose Hill, Woodley, Hyde Central, Hyde North and Fairfield. The number of trains at Romiley, Guide Bridge, Gorton and Ashburys will be reduced compared to the current “Key Workers Timetable” that has been operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. At present Northern are operating 1 train per hour from Rose Hill to Manchester via Hyde, 3 trains every 2 hours between New Mills and Manchester via Bredbury and 2 trains per hour between Hadfield/ Glossop and Manchester.

This Note has been prepared to comment on the impact of the proposals and on the reasons that Northern give for them.

### **Impact of the Proposals**

In summary, the effects of the proposed suspension will include:

1. It will severely inconvenience the users of the suspended service. Although the number of passengers may have been low during the lockdown, they will increase as people are encouraged to return to work and to go into Manchester for shopping and other activities.
2. It will be difficult, and in some cases impossible, for school and college students to access educational institutions, further worsening the loss of education since March and reducing their life chances. For example over 100 students commute daily to Rose Hill Marple from Romiley and beyond to access the High School and Sixth Form College.
3. Many of those affected will switch to travelling by car, with consequent pollution and congestion effects. Increased pollution has been shown to worsen the symptoms of people who are infected with COVID-19.
4. Others will be forced to use less convenient bus and rail services, increasing pressure on these services and making social distancing harder.
5. Increased usage of the remaining Glossop/ Hadfield and New Mills/ Sheffield services may make it impractical to maintain safe social distancing, forcing passengers to either travel in unsafe conditions or find alternative means of transport.
6. Some may choose not to travel at all, undermining the Government's attempts to get the economy growing again

Northern argue, in the letters sent by Chris Jackson (Regional Director) to MPs, that the inconvenience to passengers will be limited due to the availability of other public transport services including “nearby stations”. In reality the walking distance to the nearest stations to those which will lose their service are:

- Rose Hill to Marple – 1.6 kilometres;
- Woodley to Bredbury – 1.5 kilometres;
- Hyde Central to Newton – 1.8 kilometres or Flowery Field 1.5 kilometres;
- Hyde North to Flowery Field – 0.8 kilometres;
- Fairfield to Gorton – 2.2 kilometres.

In addition there is a steep hill between Marple and Rose Hill. The generally accepted maximum walking distance to a station is 800 metres. Clearly all the above stations, except Hyde North, are

further than this from their nearest alternative. This means that most passengers who wish to continue to use rail will need to either drive or catch a bus to the station. This will cause extra pollution and congestion if they use car or increase pressure on bus services, as above.

### **Possible Mitigations Suggested by Northern**

Northern have suggested several mitigations that they *might* introduce to alleviate some of the impacts of the service suspension. These are:

- Operate a circular feeder service on a Romiley – Rose Hill – Marple – Romiley route using accessible coaches, primarily for students at Marple Hall but also available through the day for other users;
- Provide a dial-a-ride service targeted primarily at users with disabilities from the Woodley and Hyde areas to an accessible station;
- Obtain acceptance of rail tickets on Stagecoach Buses service 383/384 between Romiley, Marple and Rose Hill.

Our understanding is that none of these are committed and they may not happen. Even if some or all of them were implemented they would not be an adequate alternative because:

1. There is no certainty that capacity would be adequate as the number of students using the train to Marple is at least 100, while Northern seem to believe it is about 35;
2. There is significant peak period congestion between Marple Town Centre and Dan Bank and on Compstall Road Marple Bridge at peak periods so any service would be slow and unreliable;
3. Even outside peak periods, it will be very hard to give customers confidence that feeder services will connect with trains;
4. A pre-booked dial-a-ride service is not an adequate alternative to a regular train service and may not provide sufficient capacity if it is used to any significant extent.

### **Why Northern are Reducing Train Services**

Northern, and other train operators, have been instructed by the Department for Transport to only schedule the level of service that they can operate reliably with the trains and train crew that they have available. This appears to be laudable in principle – it does not benefit anyone if a service is unreliable. However there is clearly a balance between the number of trains scheduled and the risk of a cancellation. The only way to ensure no trains are ever cancelled is not to operate any!

We have been told that the principal constraint is the availability of drivers, rather than trains or guards. Northern claim that they currently employ their full complement of drivers and this should be sufficient to operate the complete timetable under normal circumstances. However:

1. Some drivers are recent recruits and are not yet fully trained on the various types of train used by Northern and the routes they operate on;
2. There is a backlog of drivers awaiting training on the new types of train being introduced;
3. There may also be an issue with drivers returning from sickness or shielding, whose knowledge may need re-assessment;
4. While Northern claim to have used simulators, on-line training and in-depot familiarisation, lack of space in cabs makes safe training on the network very difficult;
5. There is inevitable uncertainty about future sickness levels, especially about the possibility of a second wave of COVID-19 infections.

It should be noted that point 4 above does not necessarily mean less drivers are available. If they are unable to be trained on new trains, experienced drivers can be operating existing types such as the Classes 142, 150 and 156 used on the New Mills and Rose Hill services.

Northern have also said that, while many of their drivers are trained to operate both the Rose Hill via Hyde route and the New Mills/ Sheffield via Bredbury line, some may be trained on only one of these. If true, removing the Rose Hill service reduces the number of drivers available to work on the Goyt Valley routes as those only trained to operate Rose Hill are not available at all, though presumably they can be re-deployed elsewhere on Northern.

Overall it is probably true that Northern do not have enough drivers available to operate the full service reliably, although we do not know if they have been excessively cautious in the assumptions they have made about driver availability and therefore about the number of services they can operate. Their assumptions should be challenged to ensure they are robust. It may be that more services could be operated without significantly impacting on reliability, although we do not know this because we do not have the necessary information.

### **Why the Rose Hill via Hyde Route**

At present a reduced service operates on both the New Mills via Bredbury and Rose Hill via Hyde routes. Northern argue that the best use of limited resources is to concentrate on providing more trains via Bredbury and suspend the service via Hyde completely. This decision seems to be based on:

- Outdated ridership data, ignoring the 40% increase in ridership between 2016 and 2019 (Office of Rail and Road Station Usage statistics) at the stations which will lose their service;
- Use of a 2016 AM peak usage diagram, which ignores the more recent improvements to peak hour services from Rose Hill, which have increased morning peak period usage by over 50% since 2015;
- Use of inappropriate modelling tools. They have used the MOIRA package which simulates the ridership impacts of timetable changes. This is designed for assessing marginal changes not the complete suspension of services. In some respects it also is very dated. For example a key input is the profile of demand through the day and the profiles used pre-date privatisation and do not reflect the changes in travel patterns over the past 30 years. Nobody would decide whether to buy a VW or a Fiat car today on the basis of the models these manufacturers were making in 1990!;
- Lack of local knowledge; for example they seem to believe that only 35 students at Marple Hall School use the train to get there, while our count data shows at least 100.

Based on the ORR station usage data, about 2.8 million passengers used the 2 routes between New Mills/ Rose Hill and Manchester in 2019. Of these around 300,000 would have used trains on the Glossop line, which shares tracks with the Hyde Loop service between Guide Bridge and Manchester. Of the remaining 2.5 million the split between Bredbury and Hyde trains is about 60/40. Passengers using the Hyde Loop services from Romiley and Guide Bridge could switch to other trains, but about 600,000 people travelling from other stations will have no alternative to the suspended service. This suggests that it would be right to operate at a rather higher frequency via Bredbury, but not to suspend the existing (already severely reduced) hourly service via Hyde.

Clearly current ridership on both routes is much lower than in 2019 and Northern state that ridership has held up better to the North and West of Manchester than the South, possibly due to fewer people being able to work from home. However this could change as retail and leisure activities resume and office workers are encouraged to return. There is no evidence that ridership will build up faster on one route relative to the other, if services continue to be provided on both.

We have no confirmed information about service cuts that Northern are proposing elsewhere but they have indicated that through services from Manchester to Cumbria may be suspended together with the Preston – Ormskirk route. South of Lancaster, the Manchester – Cumbria service is entirely duplicated by other Avanti West Coast, Transpennine Express and Northern services, with no station

losing all its trains. Total ridership at the stations which would temporarily close between Preston and Ormskirk in 2019 was 53,000, less than 10% of those affected by this proposal.

### **Longer Term Impacts**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to sudden and dramatic falls in public transport usage, of 90% or more in some areas. As the economy starts to recover and people begin to travel more, public transport use is starting to increase but the activities people engage in and their travel patterns are changing. If rail is to re-build its market share it needs to provide a credible service to meet these changing needs. Otherwise there is a serious risk that people will change their behaviour and choose to travel by car instead with the congestion and environmental problems this will cause. The longer the service suspension lasts, the harder it will be to re-build ridership. The impact of the proposed 3 month service suspension, at a time when usage is starting to grow again will be severe. But Northern cannot guarantee that the suspension will not be extended beyond December, potentially creating an even worse situation.