

TravelWatch NorthWest

Disrupted Rail Journeys

The Impact of Engineering Work on
Passengers



A Progress Report – December 2011

North West Public Transport Users' Forum Community Interest Company trading as TravelWatch NorthWest

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1.0 Introduction

Some five years ago, in June 2006, TravelWatch NorthWest published a report under the above title. This report followed a considerable number of complaints received from passengers about train replacement bus services when lines were closed due to engineering work.

Numerous engineering blockades between 1998 and 2005 gave rise to criticism of the way in which the rail industry handled passenger needs and the generally poor quality that was experienced by them during their disrupted journeys. Observations and surveys that were undertaken by members of the former Rail Passengers Committee and its successor body, TravelWatch NorthWest, had revealed much dissatisfaction and a general lack of care by both Network Rail and many of the train operating companies. It has to be said, however, that whilst the general picture was poor, there were some good practice examples and there did appear to be signs that lessons were being learnt and improvements implemented. Nevertheless the overall image still left much to be desired.

The purpose of this new report is to witness what progress has been made following the findings of the 2006 document and if its recommendations have

been heeded. Between January and October 2011 members of TravelWatch NorthWest experienced for themselves the effects of engineering blockades and consequent rail replacement services. This report records these findings and compares them with what was being experienced in 2006.

2.0 Recommendations from the 2006 Report

- *The present practices of line closures for engineering work should be reviewed and reduced;*
- *Wherever possible one track should be kept open to allow services to continue;*
- *Where closure is necessary it should be kept to the shortest possible length and for the shortest possible time;*
- *Compensation for passengers using replacement bus services should be considered*
- *Rail replacement bus operations should be guided by the principles of Good Practice set out in the report;*

For the 2006 report it was assumed that Train Operating Companies (TOCs) maintained a list of approved bus and coach operators within the affected areas and could provide vehicles that met established minimum standards. However, in gathering the evidence for this latest report it was still apparent that vehicles unfit for purpose were occasionally being deployed and there appeared to be little planning on the application of vehicles to services resulting in some severe problems at peak times of day.

Other recommendations from the 2006 report were:

- Minimise length of bus journey;
- Provide express buses as well as intermediate stopping buses;
- Provide service to operating rail lines off - route if feasible;

- Use service buses where feasible with rail ticket acceptance;
- Take advice on planned road works on selected routes;
- Ensure bus drivers are conversant with the route and stopping points;
- Operate a single point of dedicated contact help-line;
- Ensure suitability of interchange point to effect seamless transfers;
- Provide clearly identifiable temporary bus stops at affected stations;
- Consider additional authorised stopping points e.g. in town/village centres;
- Provision of sufficient staff at interchange points and affected stations;
- Provide good quality comfortable vehicles with adequate luggage capacity;
- Provide for passengers with special needs;
- Agree, test and publish workable timetables with provision for peak times;
- Work to optimise connections at transfer points;
- Provide drinking water for passengers on long transfers;
- Ensure clear directional signage and posters at stations;
- Ensure vehicles display purpose and correct destination signage;
- Ensure all front line staff are fully briefed on the disruption well in advance of start date;
- Provide information to passengers at strategic points well in advance of start date;

- Optimal use of media in affected localities to inform travelling public in advance of and during disruption period;
- Display and distribution of posters and leaflets in advance of and during disruption period;
- Ensure destination screens at stations are suitably amended to cater for disruption and clear alternative information is displayed;
- Ensure optimum communication with passengers and stakeholders in lead up period;
- Continual monitoring of loadings and remedial action where necessary
- Optimise revenue protection and provide travelling staff on buses for safety and security issues
- Ensure contingencies are in place to cater for overcrowding, breakdowns, missed connections, and engineering over-runs;

3.0 Experiences in 2011

In the run up to the 2006 report the rail network of the UK was undergoing major re-engineering in many locations, and the number of blockades was at an overwhelming level. This continued after the publication of the report and as a new decade begins it is clear that most of the work has been completed and the railway is fairly close to be what should be deemed as normal. This meant that the number of locations observed where rail replacement bus services had to be provided were not as numerous as in the previous report. However it was felt that the principles of the recommended best practices should still apply and so where there was identified pre planned engineering work and consequent journey disruption, members of TravelWatch NorthWest observed events against the set of guidelines and criteria. They were encouraged to also submit anecdotal information about their experience to

allow for the individuality of differing situations. The locations observed were as follows:

1. The Furness Line between Carnforth and Barrow in Furness during the blockade from March to July 2011 when Arnside viaduct was closed and simultaneously, for a shorter period, when Lindal Tunnel was also receiving attention.
2. Services between Liverpool/Manchester and Warrington Bank Quay via Earlestown during April 2011.
3. Services between Todmorden and Manchester Victoria via Rochdale during August 2011
4. Services between Wigan Wallgate and Manchester Victoria (via Atherton) during July 2011.
5. Services between Manchester Victoria and Southport during October 2011.
6. Services between Birkenhead North and New Brighton during October 2011.
7. Services between Stockport and Northwich in November 2011

3.1.0 Findings

3.1.1 *Furness Line*

The closure of the line had been well publicised in all appropriate media and a number of consultation surgeries were carried out in the area during the run up to the period of closure. Posters were displayed prominently at all stations and special published timetables were distributed from mid-February with plentiful supplies.

A series of bus services was deployed to replace trains in what was an extremely complex operation. During the first 3 weeks trains were replaced by buses from Barrow to Oxenholme to interchange with the West Coast Main Line, with some operating via all stations whilst others called at intermediate

stations only. After this period, when the Lindal tunnel work was completed, trains were able to run between Barrow and Grange over Sands thus reducing the bus services to a shuttle onwards towards Oxenholme. A train service was also operated between Arnside and Lancaster, with some trains proceeding to Preston and Manchester Airport in established paths, and a shuttle bus was also operated between Arnside and Grange to ensure optimum journey availability and options.

It was quite clear that much research and planning had gone into the operation and resulted in a fairly seamless operation. There was an over-provision of available vehicles for the replacement services and in some cases these were able to provide longer journey connections where trains were missed due to traffic or late running of connecting services. It was also clear that staff provision had been a priority with a helpful team providing directions, information and revenue protection services at all stations.

On the days of observation there were no reported problems and everything was working to plan. Staff deployed at stations to manage transfers were said to be extremely pleasant and helpful as were bus drivers. Some of the mini buses used between Arnside and Grange only just managed to cope with the number of passengers and their luggage but it is known that all passengers were encouraged to use interchanges at Oxenholme and Carnforth where vehicle capacity was always better.

During the first three weeks, when replacement bus services were running through to Barrow, delays and resultant lost connections ensued due to the commencement of major road works commenced at the same time on the A590. After a few days the works were called off until a later date, but this does indicate a vital need for effective liaison between the TOC and the appropriate highways authorities and their maintenance contractors, especially when long-term and longer distance alternative services are being planned.

While connections bus-to-rail at Grange generally worked successfully, there were occasions noted when passengers alighting from a coach arriving a few minutes late, because of main line delays or traffic conditions, saw the

Northern train departing for Barrow before they could reach the platform. On such occasions TPE staff were usually able to send the coach forward to Barrow, but not without incurring further delay for passengers. Better liaison between TOCs may have been able to avoid some of this.

It was additionally noted that there was a general lack of announcements on trains as they approached Lancaster from the South (from where passengers would normally change for the Furness line or remain aboard if it was a through train) to advise passengers to stay on the train until Oxenholme. An occasional amount of confusion was noted by passengers whom, it is assumed, were unaware of the arrangements and this could be improved for future reference.

Overall, however, the results were pleasing and difficult to fault. They covered most of the Best Practice recommendations from our previous report apart from compensation for disrupted journeys, but it was noted that Trans Pennine Express did offer a reduced fare for a 2 week period for passengers travelling from the line as a “thank you” for their patience. It was a pity that Northern trains did not make the same offer as it led to some inconsistency and confusion amongst passengers who do not differentiate between train companies.

3.1.2 Liverpool/Manchester – Warrington Bank Quay via Earlestown

During April 2011 Warrington Bank Quay was closed at weekends due to engineering work on the West Coast Main Line (WCML) and on the chord to Manchester. This resulted, not only in train replacement buses from Warrington to the North and South, but also for trains that normally pass through on their journey between North Wales and Manchester and services from Liverpool. Observations were undertaken on Saturday 23 April.

It was apparent that there was little in the way of information or signage on the observed stations (Warrington BQ and Earlestown). Just one poster was seen at Earlestown and one at Warrington BQ, although the latter did have information on electronic display screens but they did not display any

intermediate destination calls and only information in summary. At Earlestown two members of staff were in attendance to direct passengers to buses, one of whom was very helpful but the other giving off an air of dis-interest. Warrington BQ acted as a major interchange where all passengers were obliged to change buses to travel onwards to N. Wales, Manchester, Earlestown (for Liverpool) and North & South along the WCML This made for a busy location but with departures restricted to hourly it resulted in numerous dis-satisfied passengers trying to complete their journey. The five staff provided, whilst being very helpful and cheerful, struggled to cope and our observer found himself helping distraught passengers trying to find out how to get to their destinations. Later, on observed journeys, heavy traffic in Manchester would further delay them.

On enquiring at the ticket office about the general lack of available leaflets our observer was brusquely informed that the information was in the timetables, but on inspection, it could not be found.

The situation was chaotic to say the least and it was obvious that a hard pressed staff were under great pressure, but, apart from the one individual at Earlestown, they tried their best to deal with a complex situation.

It is clear that the whole project suffered from poor management and supervision and the quality of information to passengers was unacceptable, giving a poor image of the railways. Much could have been done in preparation in the knowledge that with a bus interchange for five directions on a busy weekend, more staff would be required and maybe a provision of more frequent services would have been helpful. In future we would recommend that a flexible Management Plan be implemented and monitored if such a complex set of arrangements is envisaged.

3.1.3 *Todmorden and Manchester Victoria via Rochdale*

The line between Todmorden and Manchester Victoria was closed at weekends during August 2011 and services were provided by replacement buses. Observations were undertaken over three weekends at Rochdale,

Manchester Victoria, Castleton, Littleborough and Todmorden as well as whilst travelling on buses between these points.

Poster information on the stations was variable with only two posters on most stations and some of these were poorly located and failed to catch the eye of passengers. Staff were provided at main stations and appeared to be fairly helpful and pleasant. However the same cannot be said for some of the coach drivers, although it must be recorded that the majority were pleasant and helpful. Those that were observed that were less than helpful committed a catalogue of misdemeanours by failing to properly display destination information on the bus, failing to hail passengers waiting on platforms,(who were obviously wishing to travel but had been unaware of the bus arrangements), displaying an abrupt and uncaring manner and generally treating passengers poorly. At most stations the pickup point was close to the station but at Rochdale was located about 40 yards away due to Metrolink work being carried out around the station forecourt. This also caused a dangerous situation as the bus had to park facing on-coming traffic due to a temporary one way traffic system meaning that passengers had to embark, and disembark on the road rather than the pavement. At Smithy Bridge the pick-up point was half a mile away from the station, due to constraints, to allow coach turning in the vicinity of the station. It was also apparent that some drivers did not have any route knowledge and had to be directed to stations by passengers or ask for directions from pedestrians.

Reports were received of information screens on stations displaying only partial information, seemingly having "frozen" on one page, but this did not give any hint that trains had been replaced by buses.



Time sequence of screens at Littleborough station indicating three (only) sequential messages. No bus mentioned, and with the second message suggesting a train.

Overall this disruption appeared to have been poorly managed and little preparation appeared to have been carried out in advance. Had it not been for the work of some representatives of the local rail user group in helping passengers at some points, it would have been much worse. Sadly, whilst there were good things to record, they were overshadowed by arrangements that exhibited little progress in provision of bus replacement.

3.1.4 Wigan Wallgate and Manchester Victoria (via Atherton)

Observations were made on 17th July between Manchester Victoria and Walkden when buses operated on this route. Information to passengers seemed adequate with posters on display at appropriate points, PA announcements being made and electronic departure board information at Victoria. A dedicated member of staff was on duty at Victoria who was said to be pleasant and helpful. He also carried out ticket checks but was not selling tickets. The buses observed did not display any destination information and passengers were obliged to ask the driver.

Overall the system seemed to be working adequately but it was noted that passengers for Wigan could have been directed to use the free city metro bus to Oxford Road station where they could join a direct train.

3.1.5 Manchester Victoria and Southport via Wigan

In October 2011 the lines between Bolton and Southport and Kirkby plus Wigan Wallgate and Salford Crescent were closed for engineering works at Wigan and other points on the route. Trains were replaced by a network of buses running on various routes according to the day of the week and the portions of route closed. Buses basically followed the rail routes, but made additional stops at some stations to make the system serve passenger flows better

A train service was provided non-stop between Manchester Victoria and Wigan North Western via Chat Moss to provide connections to the buses at Wigan. The conductor on the train used gave no information regarding bus services to complete the journeys.

On arrival at Wigan North Western there were no signs or information on the platform, booking hall or at the entrance to the station, despite the fact that the buses were described in the temporary timetable as departing from there as opposed to Wallgate station where the Southport trains normally operate.

The buses were actually departing from the main road (Wallgate) which joins the two stations and due to road works they were departing from near Wallgate station. Signs and staff were easily visible at Wallgate station and by the coaches being used for the services.

All coaches had a clear line of route diagram with details of all stops in the front windscreen near the door and a member of staff assisting passengers at each coach.

There was no revenue protection activity here or at any other station on the route.

At Burscough Bridge Station the booking office was staffed and shelter provided in the booking hall. First bus staff were also in attendance directing passengers to the right coach.

Westthoughton is an unstaffed station, but there were notices at the station entrance and the route to the platforms was roped off. A Transport for Greater Manchester standard bus stop map showed a bus stop about 100 yards away as the stop for rail replacement services. The map only showed one of the stops as being used by the buses, which suggested that the buses were operating on a one-way circuit at this point.

The stop had a shelter and a member of First staff was available to assist. He advised passengers to use the shelter until the Southport bus arrived on the opposite side of the road.

A 20 page leaflet was provided with a diagrammatic map showing the section of line closed and a full timetable. Full information regarding the pick-up points for the buses at all stations was included.

3.1.6 *Birkenhead North – New Brighton*

The Merseyrail line between Birkenhead North and New Brighton was closed for engineering work between 16th and 23rd October 2011 with an all stations bus service provided as a replacement. As this is only a short journey, and the route passed the two intermediate stations at Wallasey Village and Wallasey Grove Road, there was no need for an express service to be provided. The trains to and from Central Liverpool were operating to the normal 15 minute timetable with the buses connecting at Birkenhead North.

The train was joined at Liverpool Lime Street where the CIS screens were showing the departure for Birkenhead North. This was repeated by the on-train system and the automated PA also confirmed Birkenhead North as the final destination. Leaflets were available and a poster displayed at this station.

Shortly before arriving at Birkenhead North the Conductor announced that the train was terminating at this station, all change. No mention had been made regarding the onward bus service at this point.

Just as the train was arriving at Birkenhead North, the automated PA stated that the train was terminating here, please change here for stations to New Brighton. Again, no mention of a bus service.

At Birkenhead North there were no signs or information on the platform and the only information displayed was by a poster outside the booking office window. Bus times were not included on the CIS at the station. This was the same at all stations.

A bus was waiting outside the main exit, but no staff were visible. The bus destination merely displayed “Rail Replacement” with no route information or calling points at all. This was standard on all buses observed. All the buses were standard Arriva double deck service buses with no wheelchair or buggy access or spaces. No information was seen regarding these passengers or cycles. The driver confirmed the destination of the bus, but there was no revenue protection here or at any other station on the route. Although the bus was not new or well cared for, the seating was adequate for the short journeys and loadings experienced on this route.



Rail Replacement Bus at Birkenhead North



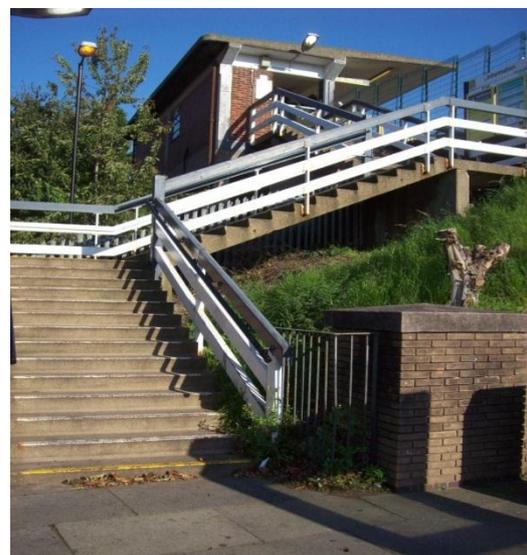
New Brighton Station – no information outside

At New Brighton no information was displayed outside the station. A poster was displayed inside the booking hall with a message on the CIS that buses were operating. No staff were in attendance outside the booking office.

At Wallasey Village buses were using the normal bus stops outside the station, but there was no information regarding this fact on the flags at either stop. There was a note on the timetable displays that rail replacement buses used the stops, but no times were displayed.



Hand written notice half way up stairs at Wallasey.



Long climb at Wallasey Village to view CIS Information

A special timetable leaflet was available at all stations with details of the disruption and the revised timings.

The arrangements can only be described as adequate at best. The positioning of posters could have been improved if more had been provided and had been located where passengers could have immediately seen them, i.e. outside stations and on platforms. Equally information displayed on buses could have been better, and whilst local residents may know the locations, strangers to the area would have been left very confused. Audio announcements on trains were less than adequate and would have been

improved by mention that onward journeys would be provided by a bus service.

3.1.7 Stockport – Northwich November 2011

Observations were made on Sunday 20th November 2011 when the line between Stockport and Northwich was closed for engineering works to enhance gauge clearance on the route for diverting freight trains during the Chat Moss electrification. The trains were replaced by a bus service calling at all stations. A train service was provided between Northwich and Chester.

On arrival by train at Stockport there were no signs on the platform, but the CIS screens showed bus departures. In the booking hall, a sign pointed the way from the underpass to the bus departure point. No information was provided for passengers arriving at the station from the town, except for the CIS screens. No timetable was provided. The PA announcements included reference to the onward train service from Northwich to Chester.

The buses departed from the bus stop near the station entrance, usually used by the 300 Metroshuttle service. The only information at the stop referred to the 300 service.

The coaches used for the rail replacement service had a clear line of route diagram with details of all stops in the front windscreen near the door. No staff were present at the stop.

There was no revenue protection activity here or at any other station on the route.

A member of staff from First accompanied each bus service, but did not announce the arrival at any station on the route. On the journey from Altrincham, he left the bus at Navigation Road to talk to some intending passengers on the platform. These were apparently for a service towards Northwich, but the bus times were about an hour different from the trains they were replacing

Altrincham station booking office is situated within the transport interchange, but is separate from the main entrance to the platforms. The only information at this point was on the CIS departure screen, but this is not visible from the entrance, only from within the booking office. There was no information showing the departure point for the buses.

There was a full timetable on display on platform 4, but the CIS screen was showing “Passengers please be aware that train doors may close up to 30 seconds before departure time”

When the Metrolink services are disrupted, replacement buses operate from the adjacent bus station at Altrincham. However on this occasion the rail replacement buses left from the rear entrance of the station adjacent to platform 4. The shelter at this point was completely devoid of any glass and had apparently been in this state for some years.

A member of Northern staff attended the arrival and departure of the buses, but did not undertake any revenue protection duties.

4.0 Unplanned disruptions

It is recognised that there are occasions that dictate unplanned emergency use of buses to replace a train service which cannot run because of infrastructure or weather related problems. Without the usual opportunity for forward planning, the organisation of a replacement bus service can lead to a degree of crisis management where procurement can only be achieved in the light of vehicle availability. It can be difficult to find suitable buses or coaches during peak hours, with the result that passengers sometimes have to endure delays to their journeys. Low-floor, DDA compliant, buses are normally fully committed and so the only available transport maybe a coach which, although comfortable, may not allow access by mobility impaired passengers or the carriage of larger prams or cycles. Obviously it is expected that such occasions are managed to minimise delay to passengers but also to offer the best alternatives to those with special needs.

5.0 Conclusions

We recognise that Disrupted Rail Journeys and alternative travel arrangements are difficult and challenging to manage and each situation is different. However there are core principles that apply across the board. Whilst many of the recommendations from the 2006 report do appear to have been heeded there is still much cause for concern. There still appears to be a reluctance to keep a single track train operation operating during engineering works and, apart from the Trans Pennine Express post works promotion, passengers are not recompensed for having to endure delays due to the disruption. Rail Replacement Bus services during times of disruption are still extremely variable as exhibited in the foregoing observations. The industry appears to be capable of getting it very right, as exhibited on the Furness Line but very wrong as exhibited on the Rochdale line and at Warrington.

Where problems were recorded it is quite apparent that these could have been avoided by prior planning and good management. It is here that they fail and this can be eradicated from the outset. There is no excuse for bus drivers not knowing the routes and locations of stations or for the poor attitude of some staff.

Information is a vital provision and must be available at all points where passengers will notice it. In too many cases inadequate or failing information provision was recorded, such as bus destination boards, station electronic displays, and poor locations of posters. Similarly the bus boarding points were sometimes in locations a distance from the station with little connecting information for passengers to easily follow. In route planning it was apparent that liaison with Highways Authorities had not always taken place and roadworks causing delays were encountered.

It has to be remembered that this is a “people” industry and the quality of care given to passengers during times of disruption has to be paramount if the rail industry wants to retain a good image. Consequently some of the Best Practice Recommendations made in the 2006 report need to be re-visited. In

particular we would suggest attention be paid to the following points where failures were recorded:

- ***Plan the management of disruption well in advance of start date, taking into account any planned roadworks;***
- ***Properly train all customer facing staff, including bus drivers, in Customer Care, corporate responsibility and on the issues that they will face when being questioned by passengers;***
- ***Ensure sufficient staff are available to deal with passenger needs and that they (including bus drivers) actively “look” for passengers in need of help and direction, with particular regard to less mobile passengers. Over-staff rather than under-staff;***
- ***Ensure that bus drivers have full knowledge of the routes to be taken and the location of stopping points, and are briefed to look for passengers at stopping points when they are operating vehicles alone;***
- ***Ensure practical arrangements are made for luggage, prams, wheelchairs, cycles, etc.***
- ***Properly supervise the operation with management visits and mystery shopping;***
- ***Exploit consistency of information provision and ensure it is provided at strategic points where it will be seen. Over provision is better than under provision;***
- ***Fully exploit workable alternatives that offer the least disruption to passengers;***

- ***Ensure there is consistency in the level and standard of rail replacement services and that there are sufficient buses, fit for purpose, available to provide capacity as well as contingency arrangements to cater for missed connections, late running, traffic conditions and over-crowding;***
- ***In planning a period of Rail Replacement bus services, consider the whole operation as it would appear to a visitor who is unfamiliar with the area and the routes. Do not assume that all passengers will have geographical knowledge of the area. Consider using an outside agency to experience the plans before they are instigated;***

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