

Winner of CILT award for best practice in passenger transport (2013)

promoting quality public transport.....

NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2021

Chairman's Introduction

May I wish each and every one of you a Happy New Year and in doing so fervently hope that 2021 will reverse the gloom that has beset us during most of 2020. John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress referred to 'The Slough of Despond' and now, having lived through the long months of 2020, I can understand the desperate despondency which has afflicted so many people. Sadly some have not survived to hope for a better future.

During the latter part of 2019 there were mutterings of a new illness in China but in that typical stoic British manner we kept calm, carried on, and enjoyed Christmas and the early months of the new year. Then the proverbial bomb dropped. Within days public transport became a no-no. Trains and buses ran to provide a necessary service for people with indispensable jobs - but they naturally carried a fraction of their previous loadings. Government advice was to avoid public transport, despite there having been research which showed that travelling by bus or train with appropriate social distancing was very safe. Ironically the punctuality of our trains reached a record high – giving a clear indication that in earlier days the network was far too overloaded.

In common with wider civilisation, TravelWatch NorthWest has discovered Zoom! Previously unknown to most folks, this wonder of technology has enabled management activities to carry on, albeit in a limited manner. Our conference in Lancaster (February 2020) was to be our last and since then we have 'hibernated'.

That said, TWNW board members have not been completely idle. We have responded, via Company Secretary John Moorhouse, to consultations on HS2 (and its links to the north west), the Northern Powerhouse and others and have made a recent contribution to the rail replacement buses debate via a letter to Rail Magazine. We have made tenuous plans for future conferences in the positive expectation that the vaccines will progressively beat the virus and return the world to reasonable normality.

We agreed that Chris Dale, our former chairman, should be remembered in a tangible manner, so the installation of a commemorative seat at Macclesfield Station is planned. The order has been placed, Matt Worman of Avanti Trains is guiding us through the complex process of seeking Network Rail consent and virus conquest permitting we hope to hold a short remembrance ceremony in due course.

David J Butterworth 5th January 2021

Here we are at the start of a new year which we fervently hope will be an improvement on the previous one. In our last newsletter in September last year we were lamenting the near empty trains and buses that were roaming our rail and road systems. It has to be said that if anything the situation is worse, down to the second spike of the virus and now full lockdown. Clearly the vaccines are now our best hope.

We held our AGM on 15th October 2020 and launched our Annual Review on the same date.

With the vaccination programme now under way, we are starting to look at the prospects for the coming year and when we will be able to resume our normal programme of conferences. **June is likely to be the earliest** we will be able to have a traditional gathering. I will keep everyone informed about that. We have considered virtual conferencing but are not convinced that the nature of our events would sit well with that methodology. Our audiences appreciate above all the ability to participate freely and to be able to network, not possible on line.

Clearly the single dominating issue will be attracting people back to using public transport. The railways are being propped up to a high degree by the government and the fear is that if passengers do not return, especially with a projected increase in home working, there will be pressure from the Treasury for services to be reduced. Indeed there have been recent hints that with rising costs and poor patronage rail services could be reduced to around 80% of current levels.

We have previously put in our own views to a number of bodies about the future. We hope for a time when public transport will come back into its own and support those who would have faith in investment to bring a more attractive encouragement to a return to services in the future. The world has changed and much more needs to be done to assure potential passengers that it is safe to travel on trains and buses.

There does still seem to be faith in investing in public transport, particularly rail, for the future. For example the National Infrastructure Commission has recently published its final report on the Rail Needs Assessment for the Midlands and the North. We had responded to the consultation on this earlier in 2020.

The report has concluded that improving rail links between cities in the North and Midlands should be the first priority of a new approach to end stop-start investments and help level up the UK as part of a wider economic strategy. The report advocates capacity improvements especially around the urban centres and a rolling programme of investment rather than the by fits and starts regime which has characterised rail investment for many years.

There is, though, some criticism of a neglect for lesser, yet important, links and a hint that it would affect the long term strategies of Northern Powerhouse Rail and the HS2 Eastern Leg beyond the East Midlands.

Rose Hill train services

We had made our views known on the proposal to completely cut off passenger services to Rose Hill Marple for the Autumn period. Others, including the friends of Rose Hill, did also protest of course and it was good that following this and other interventions a skeleton service with mainly schoolchildren in mind was reinstated. It is pleasing that from December last year the full service was reinstated.

Buses

Greater Manchester Combined Authority have launched a further consultation on their proposal to introduce bus franchising and the impact of Covid-19. We understand that the consultation will explain why GMCA considers that bus franchising remains the right way to reform the bus market, having considered the possible effects of Covid-19. We will be submitting our views by the deadline date of 29th January 2021.

We support the government's National Bus Strategy which we understand is now planned to be launched, hopefully, in the not too distant future. This strategy is to be based in the government's announcement last February of a 5 year funding package worth £5 billion for bus services. We said at the time that some of this should be used to reinstate bus routes which have vanished in recent years due to cuts in local council funding.

Chris Dale's Memorial Seat.

As David has said, we have got the go ahead from Avanti West Coast for the plaque and seat at Macclesfield station in memory of Chris. There has been some hold up with getting the necessary permissions and paperwork together allied to the COVID difficulties. I have kept Chris' family in the picture and they are very supportive. In some ways the delay is not a bad thing as hopefully we will be able to formally unveil the seat in the Spring /early Sumer when restrictions on gatherings may be relaxed. The seat & plaque will cost in excess of £1000 and I do hope that his many friends and colleagues will be able to contribute to this amount and I will be contacting you again on this soon. The seat will be a fitting memorial to Chris and his extensive work on behalf of passengers at a station that he used very frequently and was well known at.

John Moorhouse

Company Secretary
5th January 2021