

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

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Winner of CILT award for best practice in passenger transport

promoting quality public transport.....

9th August 2013

West Coast Main Line Improvement works between Warrington Bank Quay Wigan North Western and Preston 13 July to 21 July 2013

Members of TravelWatch NorthWest travelled on and observed rail and coach services during the above engineering blockade. A limited sample of journeys was made but this report hopefully gives a flavour of events as experienced. There was much to be commended particularly in the rail/coach transfer arrangements that were observed but we did have serious concerns about rail services. We trust the following report will be taken in the spirit of constructive comments which could be taken into account in future planning of engineering work.

Rail services in practice

Perhaps the overriding issue during the blockade was the frequently observed very heavy overcrowding of First TransPennine Express Anglo – Scottish services. In a letter to Virgin Trains, First TPE, Network and the Office of Rail Regulation dated 26th June 2013 we said that it was unfortunate that the work was scheduled to take place during Glasgow fair week and Scottish school holidays and that services between Carlisle and Preston would be severely reduced. There was an expectation therefore of inevitable overcrowding .between Carlisle, Preston and Manchester, with greatly increased pressure on already popular TPE services between the North West and Scotland.

This indeed happened with, it appeared, passengers between North of Preston and London opting to travel by making one change of trains at Manchester Piccadilly (joining London trains at point of departure) rather than changing twice at Preston and Stockport. Even though the latter involved cross platform changes at both stations this could still entail a long walk if passengers found themselves at the wrong end of the next train, especially if carrying heavy luggage. Also enquiries to NRES could well favour options with fewer changes/quicker overall journey times.

In contrast to TPE services the 10 car Voyager services between Preston and Birmingham were observed to be lightly loaded in the main.

We do recognise issues surrounding the availability of suitable rolling stock but ideally the Preston – Birmingham Voyager services should have run through from beyond Preston to minimise the number of changes and relieve pressure on TPE services. It is also of concern that the Voyager services did not call at Manchester Piccadilly. In addition, in view of relatively light loadings perhaps these services did not need to be restricted to a set down only call at Stockport southbound (we note that northbound they did not call at Stockport as interchange could be made at Preston).

When it must have become clear early in the week what was happening on TPE trains, there should have been a joint effort to re guide passengers onto the lightly loaded Virgin services - regardless of the type of ticket they may have held, or whether it was limited to a particular TOC's services. If the Voyager services could then have been made to call at Manchester Piccadilly many passengers could have been pointed towards those services by announcements and staff guidance at Preston, for instance, and likewise with services north from there.

With regard to TPE overcrowding it might have been useful to have deployed on board staff to assist passengers to find seats and stow luggage most efficiently. Virgin used to do this on the heavily loaded West of England holiday trains when they had the Cross Country franchise.

Information about how to travel

As well as information for passengers regarding replacement coach services being available at coach interchange stations the printed timetable for Mondays – Fridays was also evident at those stations. We have already made some criticism of this document in our previous letter (cited above) including the lack of an equivalent printed timetable for Saturdays and Sundays. There were also several mistakes in the publication and as previously stated we felt that with some adaptation and perhaps omission of less relevant information such as North Wales services Saturdays at least could have been incorporated into the Mondays to Fridays timetable.

An example of the importance of correct information – a traveller had been advised to travel from Liverpool to Oxenholme via Manchester Oxford Rd on Saturday 13th July. There were “Sardine” conditions on the 13:19 service to Glasgow with arguments between passengers who had reserved seats. Passengers from Liverpool to the north should have been advised to travel via Ormskirk and used the hourly enhanced Ormskirk/Preston service. This would have avoided putting additional passengers onto trains which would already be full to capacity.

Information/Announcements at stations and on trains

We received a number of reports from our observers, particularly about the paucity of on train announcements regarding the revised arrangements. Some

examples are given below -

- Saturday 13th July – at Warrington Bank Quay (WBQ), for passengers arriving at the station to make a southbound journey, the CIS showed departure details for the Euston trains, which included an extra stop at Crewe. This additional stop was to enable connections into the diverted West Midlands services, but no mention was made, either by CIS or PA, that these connections could be made.
- Tuesday 16th July – the 10:06 from Oxenholme to Glasgow was well filled. There were no additional announcements on the train even approaching Carlisle to change for Edinburgh. Edinburgh was not mentioned. On the 15.49 from Carlisle to Oxenholme no mention was made of the arrangements beyond Preston. There was also no announcement on the 10:27 from Oxenholme to Preston approaching Preston as to onward travel arrangements.
- Wednesday 17th July - a traveller on the 09:26 from Oxenholme to Preston (07.37 ex Glasgow) heard only pre-recorded announcements and nothing was mentioned either at Oxenholme or leaving Lancaster about the disruption. Arriving into Preston an announcement was made – “terminating here. We shall be arriving into platform 6, passengers for London Euston cross to platform 5 and catch First TPE to Manchester Piccadilly and then the 11:15 to Euston” (no other helpful information such as cross from platform 13 to platform x).
- Wednesday 17th July – the 12.04 Crewe – WBQ left at 12.10 with very few passengers. There had been no information regarding arrangements beyond WBQ on the screens at Crewe nor any similar announcements on train leaving Crewe. Just an automatic announcement saying this train is for WBQ (there was also no ticket check). A manual announcement was made just before arrival at WBQ to say change for replacement road services to Wigan and Preston. Apologies for inconvenience were also given.

Coach interchange arrangements and on coach experience

Interchange arrangements were largely observed to be good at WBQ, Wigan North Western (WNW) and Preston with plenty of First Rail Replacement and rail staff visible. Signing was generally good and information screens were used to good effect. Hot and cold drinks (water) were available (though not always offered). At WNW a large display stand gave details of the work being undertaken during the blockade and this was observed to be attracting a lot of attention with some passengers being overheard saying that it was good to know why their journeys were being disrupted.

Some areas could be improved e.g. the consistency of ticket checks on the coach and the regular provision of destination indicators on coaches. The coaches observed were not heavily used. Examples given below–

- Saturday 13th July - a coach for WNW from WBQ had an A4 sized notice in the windscreen displaying the fact that this vehicle was for Warrington Bank Quay! Prior to departure, one of the staff gave an announcement regarding the destination of the coach plus estimated arrival time. Also information regarding use of seat belts, smoking and consumption of alcohol. The coach departed on time and arrived in WNW about 7 minutes early. No ticket checks were undertaken at either Warrington or Wigan. 7 passengers.
- Saturday 13th July - A passenger in a wheelchair arrived at WNW and a taxi was summoned, arriving in less than 5 minutes. The passenger was assured that Preston had been informed of her impending arrival.
- Wednesday 17th July - 12.40 WBQ coach to WNW. Destination sign on windscreen said "Wigan North Western". Ticket checked. Good announcement made on coach before leaving. Comfortable - air conditioning. Toilet available (did not inspect). Seat belts (awkward). 6 passengers. Arrived WNW 13.10.
- Wednesday 17th July - 13.45 WNW coach to Preston. No Preston sign in windscreen (driver said not available). No ticket check. No announcement on coach. Apparently an older less comfortable vehicle than some coaches. Driver not particularly helpful. Air conditioning not very effective on a hot day. 3 passengers only.
- Friday 19th July – At Preston signs directing passengers to coaches were on platforms and staff (both TPE and Virgin) were on hand to assist. On arrival at the coaches, a large number of helpful staff were available to guide passengers to their correct coaches which departed from well signed stands. –

Stand A for local service to St Helens Central.
 Stand B for service to Wigan North Western
 Stand C for service to Warrington Bank Quay

On platforms 3 and 4 staff were distributing free ice creams to passengers which were appreciated on this extremely hot day.

Future disruption planning

For many the experience of rail travel on the Glasgow – Preston – Manchester corridor exhibited the railway in a very poor light with avoidable pressure being put on trains that were incapable of coping with the demand. Unfortunately blame for this was often apportioned by passengers to the wrong train operator and better planning and coordination could have avoided this. It really did demonstrate a fragmented system and a lack of appreciation that passengers recognise a single railway system.

In recent days members of TOWNW together with rail user group representatives, were invited by TPE to attend a consultation event about future disruption north of Carnforth scheduled for January 2014 and this was attended by the other operators on the route. Unfortunately Network Rail did

not attend, but a healthy dialogue resulted with a set of constructive suggestions and proposals to manage the issue. We can only suggest that this is "common sense" and such liaison should take place for all future disruptions. Pre-planning by all parties will undoubtedly bring about better solutions and there can be no excuse for not learning from the problems we have recently experienced in the future, particularly when previous examples of disruption management have worked well. We hope that TOCs and Network Rail will all take these suggestions as constructive criticism and that we can now see an end to such poor customer care.

A specific point at this meeting made by a TOWN member concerned the lack of provision for running any services via the Settle & Carlisle line, pointing out that there had been only one a day during the recent Lancaster blockade. The VT representative appeared to be hardly aware of the possibility. However, he obviously made contact with his colleagues during the meeting and came back later with the response that the assumption was that there would not be any Voyagers available because VT's proposed services to Blackpool and Shrewsbury would be employing them. However, these services have now been refused or at least postponed until May 2014 so the situation has changed. We will always maintain that there should be as full a use as possible of diversionary routes in future planning as passengers prefer to keep on a train rather than a replacement bus even though this is likely to mean extended journey times. Research by Passenger Focus in the Autumn of 2012 confirms this.

That research also said that passengers were unhappy at paying a train fare and getting a bus journey and that it warranted a discount on the normal train fare. During the current work at Nottingham station East Midlands Trains is offering a 15% discount on tickets purchased for travel between 20th July and 5th August that involve travel on a replacement bus. We have long advocated this approach which we believe should logically now form the basis of compensating all passengers affected by pre-planned disruption (and in short term situations caused by a problem within the rail industry) where replacement buses are used.

John Moorhouse
Company Secretary