

Manchester Recovery Task Force Public Consultation

West Yorkshire response

March 2021

Executive summary

The West Yorkshire Combined Authority acknowledges the need and supports for case for restructuring timetables to improve reliability on the North's rail network. Improved reliability is a high priority for passengers and will be crucial in recovering and growing demand.

Regarding the options presented in the consultation, West Yorkshire does not have absolute preferences for any option, but detailed analysis is provided.

The proposal in options B and C for two trains per hour on stopping services between Manchester and Huddersfield is strongly welcomed. This will provide regular half-hourly services to local stations at Slaithwaite and Marsden, which is a long-held priority.

Maintaining regular (at least hourly) direct connectivity for Leeds, Dewsbury, and Huddersfield with Manchester Airport remains an important priority.

It is also important to highlight that, of necessity, this consultation is taking place before the details of actual specific services' timetables are known. It is therefore possible that other issues could emerge in that context, and the Combined Authority therefore reserves its right to make any further representations that become relevant in this way, including via the usual timetable consultation processes.

The next phase of the Manchester Recovery Task Force work will consider infrastructure needs to address network capacity in and around central Manchester by 2030, which has strong support from West Yorkshire, including to deliver the maximum benefit of Transpennine Route Upgrade.

The infrastructure phase must accommodate through-services from the Calder Valley to Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport. Securing connectivity between Bradford, Halifax, and Rochdale to Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport is a long-held priority. Providing this missing north – south connectivity across Manchester was an important aspect of the original 'Northern Hub' infrastructure proposals and must continue to be a driver for future investment.

The need to restructure timetables in and around central Manchester is only one part of a wider problem. Further changes will be required in and around other network congestion hotspots, including Leeds and the lines east of Leeds. The Combined Authority is keen to engage with DfT, TfN and the rail industry to inform such reviews as part of 'building back better'.

As with central Manchester, investment in additional capacity in and around Leeds and other congestion hotspots will be vital for service reliability and for accommodating future growth.

1. The West Yorkshire Combined Authority

The West Yorkshire Combined Authority, working in partnership with the Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, operates to ensure that our region is recognised globally as a strong, successful economy where everyone can build great businesses, careers, and lives. We bring together local councils and businesses to achieve this vision, so that everyone in our region can benefit from economic prosperity and a modern, accessible transport network. In this context, the City Region is defined as encompassing the districts of Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield.

2. The MRTF and this consultation in context

Before commenting on the consultation, it is imperative to emphasise that, as the Transport for the North (TfN) Board and Rail North Committee have said, the potential timetable changes discussed in this consultation can and must only be viewed as short-term palliative interventions intended to mitigate the unacceptable performance that has resulted from attempting to provide better levels of connectivity without adequate investment in infrastructure. Such timetable changes are therefore only acceptable at all in the short term and will only be accepted against the background of a Government commitment to providing the badly overdue infrastructure upgrades that are needed to provide acceptable levels of connectivity, capacity, and performance on the railway in the North – including but not limited to Manchester itself. We therefore strongly support the work that TfN is seeking to take forward on Phase 2 of the Task Force work, as discussed further below, and cannot overemphasise that it is vital that this work be prioritised, and the relevant investment commitments secured.

We also agree with, and welcome, the comments made in the consultation document (paragraph no. 18) in relation to the impacts of COVID-19: it is West Yorkshire's view too that not only does the pandemic not weaken the long-term case for interventions of the types being considered by the MRTF, but it has provided some valuable "breathing-space" to reappraise what we need the railway to provide around Manchester, and the need to provide capital investment in sustainable and valuable projects as a way to re-start the struggling economy has never been greater.

Officers of the Combined Authority have had some involvement in the Manchester Recovery Task Force (MRTF) work hitherto, including contributing to the development of potential future service specifications for the longer-term solutions for the Manchester area (i.e., MRTF Phase 2, targeted on 2030). However, due to shortcomings in the process followed, we cannot be certain that the options put forward in this consultation for Phase 1 (regarding short-term timetable interventions) necessarily represent a good spread of choices nor include the optimal choices.

Finally in this regard, given the nature of this consultation as being "upstream" of normal timetable consultations, we note that details of specific services' timings are not included. This being the case, it is possible that issues may emerge that we have not identified in this response, and we therefore reserve the right to raise these, including via normal timetable consultations and other channels as appropriate.

3. The consultation options

In light of the above, while we consider it likely that all three of the specific options set out in the consultation contain elements that are of merit, and we have highlighted those elements, we do not consider it appropriate to lend the Combined Authority's full support to

any one of them. We consider it likely that all the options also contain potential weaknesses, and that certain potential service configurations not included in any of the options ought to have been considered, and so are disappointed that they neither feature in any of the three options, nor have we seen evidence that they have been tested as potential options.

This being the case, and as the specific questions listed in the consultation document do not lend themselves to raising such issues, we have instead set out our response in this format.

4. Scope of the options presented

While it is expressly not the case that the following imply service configurations that West Yorkshire would necessarily support, we note that few significant changes to the Trans-Pennine Express (TPE) Diggle-route services appear to have been considered, and would wish to see discussion of the potential merits (performance and connectivity) and disadvantages of potential shorter-term changes such as:

- Reversion of one or more TPE Diggle services from the Ordsall Chord to the “old” route from Stalybridge to Manchester Piccadilly via Guide Bridge, in order to reduce the burden of TPE services at Victoria and around the Ordsall Chord onto the Castlefield Corridor
- The switching of Ordsall Chord services from being long-distance services to being those of a local character (such as those starting at Stalybridge and/or Huddersfield), again in order to reduce the amount of delay imported via the Ordsall Chord onto the Castlefield Corridor; the more passengers have to change to reach the Airport and/or south side of Manchester, the more critical the reliability of the Ordsall Chord services is
- Alternatives to the current configuration of TPE services north of York, (although the link to the East Coast Main Line timetable consultation is noted) – this is particularly important given the evidence that such services are particularly prone to importing delay to the Manchester area

In this context, we would note that it is not clear how well the proposed service patterns under Options A, B and C would fit with the emerging TRU delivery strategy. Delivery of TRU will inevitably require substantial and lengthy possessions over various sections of the Diggle line, necessitating the use of diversionary routes such as the Calder Valley, Hope Valley, and other routes further east. We understand it to be the case that many of these diversionary route configurations will not support the full quantum of TPE services operating over the Pennines to/from Manchester.

As such, we consider none of the options to be satisfactory, as a whole, as regards the Diggle line, as they all appear to leave some of the biggest performance issues largely untouched, and their compatibility with TRU delivery is not apparent.

5. Essential considerations for West Yorkshire

From the West Yorkshire point of view, we consider that the following features are essential to the service configuration and must be retained, even in the short term:

- On the Calder Valley line (it is assumed that services not passing through Manchester will remain unchanged under all options, unless stated):

- 2tph (evenly spaced) from Leeds via Bradford, Halifax and Hebden Bridge to Manchester
- 1tph from Leeds via Dewsbury, Brighouse and Hebden Bridge to Manchester
- From a connectivity point of view, where (if anywhere) these trains continue to beyond Manchester is not critical (see note below regarding Manchester Airport): through services to Warrington, Chester and Wigan are certainly useful to West Yorkshire, but their principal benefit is actually in performance terms, in that such through links obviate the need to carry out operationally complicated and capacity-sapping moves crossing the throat of Victoria station and terminating there. For this reason, West Yorkshire does not agree with proposals that would terminate Calder Valley services at Manchester Victoria, as it is our view that these would harm performance on both the Calder Valley itself and, due to the conflicting moves, on the Diggle route.
- While West Yorkshire is committed to exploring every possible option to deliver the committed Bradford – Manchester – Manchester Airport service as soon as possible, it is accepted that it may be difficult to do so by May 2022 without unacceptable sacrifices to others’ existing services; this link must however be provided within the scope of the Phase 2 MRTF interventions.
- On the Diggle route (again, it is assumed that services not passing through Manchester will remain unchanged under all options, unless stated):
 - At least 1tph (but preferably 2tph at even intervals) from Leeds and Huddersfield to Liverpool and to Manchester Airport, of which at least 1tph should serve Dewsbury; it is not however critical from a connectivity point of view that all Airport trains should go via Victoria and the Ordsall Chord
 - 2tph at least in the peaks at all local stations – moving towards 2tph (at even intervals) all day
 - No skip-stopping at local stations – this was a component of the failed May 2018 timetable, was highly unpopular with passengers and stakeholders, and did nothing to benefit performance
- Where direct connectivity is broken or continues not to be provided for important flows, it is vital that convenient and reliable connections are provided and maintained, wherever possible using cross-platform or same-platform interchange and with reasonable connecting times to ensure that through journey times are not rendered unattractive. The railway must also be operated day-to-day in a manner that “puts the passenger first”, including at times of disruption; during 2018, it was all too common, for example, for passengers from West Yorkshire and further afield bound for Manchester Airport to be “dumped” at Victoria, or indeed Stalybridge, with no onward connections – such practices must not recur.
- Taking all options as whole packages, it is vital that compelling evidence being put forward to verify that, both in peak and off-peak periods, they definitely do deliver significant performance benefits. West Yorkshire has suffered along with most other regions of the North from unacceptable performance levels in recent years, and therefore our interest extends beyond service patterns on the two routes that directly touch West Yorkshire. We are, in this context, particularly keen to see options across the relevant network that, while they do not cause unacceptable connectivity sacrifices to any area, wherever possible:

- reduce conflicting moves at key junctions,
- bring Castlefield Corridor traffic levels down to sustainable levels,
- do not “move the problem” such as from south Manchester to the north side (see below),
- simplify service patterns, and
- reduce the potential to import delay from other areas

Changes to service patterns must not simply “move the problem”. For example, while the Castlefield Corridor is rightly the greatest single focus of this work, option development needs to acknowledge the risk of potentially shifting the problem to the north side of Manchester: Victoria is also not fit for purpose in terms of modern connectivity and capacity needs, and there is a real risk of exacerbating already unsatisfactory performance around this area – with knock-on effects that would be felt across West Yorkshire, Lancashire and more widely. As highlighted below, we believe that some of the proposed interventions could risk doing this at Victoria.

6. Positive features of consultation options

In the context of our wider comments, we welcome the following specific features which are included in one or more of the three consultation options, and would wish to confirm West Yorkshire’s support for these elements – though not necessarily for the option packages as whole:

Intervention	Option(s)	Comments
1tph Leeds – Bradford – Calder Valley – Manchester Vic extended to Wigan	A	While not a connectivity priority (1tph already links to Wigan), we consider this to offer performance benefits because this train would no longer carry out the undesirable crossing and reversing moves at Victoria.
1tph Leeds – Bradford – Calder Valley – Manchester Vic extended to Chester	C	Analogous to the above, we consider there to be potential performance benefits from removing the Victoria turnback, provided that performance risk is not imported from the Chester or Warrington areas. Additional benefit of creating the opportunity for an even-interval 30-minute standard Leeds – Bradford – Calder – Manchester – Warrington – Chester service. In this regard, this option is therefore potentially superior to Option A from a connectivity point of view – and both are substantially preferable to Option B from a Calder Valley point of view, which we consider both to remove connectivity but also to risk making performance worse rather than better (see below).
2tph Stalybridge – Huddersfield stopping	B & C	This is a long-standing West Yorkshire priority to bring local services up to acceptable standards, would pave the way towards TRU ¹ , is consistent with TfN’s Long-Term Rail Strategy, and is strongly supported.

¹ Trans-Pennine Route Upgrade

7. Consultation option proposals causing concern

Conversely, we have specific concerns at the following elements of the options:

Intervention	Option(s)	Comments
2tph Leeds – Bradford – Calder Valley – Manchester Victoria (terminate)	B	We believe terminating Calder Valley trains at Victoria to be operationally unwise, because it would heighten conflicts in the east throat of Victoria station between these Calder Valley services and TPE Diggle trains, many coming from a long distance away, and therefore unsound from a performance point of view.
Diggle line, generally	All	We are disappointed that none of the options proposes re-examining the pattern of services provided over Diggle by TPE. We consider this to be a weakness of the MRTF work so far. See separate more detailed comments above.
Terminating TPE Newcastle service at Manchester Victoria	B, C (peak)	<p>This move was proposed to be introduced in December 2020, but the relevant service is not currently operating. Practical operating experience may demonstrate that it is viable, but at present we are concerned that terminating a train too long to fit in a bay platform at Victoria, and one which requires a fairly long system “reboot” process as part of a turnback, could represent a significant performance risk to Victoria and its approaches. The trains will either need to shunt out of platform 1 or 2 into the west-side turnback siding, and back again, or occupy a platform for a lengthy period. Given the congestion in an around Manchester Victoria, this could be problematic in terms of propagating any delays from TPE to other services on the north side of Manchester.</p> <p>Victoria is also significantly inferior to Piccadilly for passenger connectivity: it is less attractive for many parts of Manchester itself, and far worse for access to connecting train services not only the to the Airport but to a wide variety of locations across the Midlands and South.</p> <p>While we are aware of serious constraints in the trainshed at Manchester Piccadilly too, terminating at Piccadilly (approach via Guide Bridge) could be operationally preferable, and would certainly be preferred from a passenger connectivity point of view.</p>

8. Next steps

We have already emphasised West Yorkshire’s firm support for the principles behind the MRTF work, and our support for elements of the proposals, but also our misgivings about other aspects. Looking forward, we would be keen to see:

1. Further development of the options for May 2022, including additional / alternative service options and consideration of the interactions with TRU strategy, including better sharing of the emerging evidence. It follows from the above comments that we would wish to see new options generated that would answer the concerns and address the priorities listed above, whilst preserving the positive features of the existing options, or to show how the existing options address them.

2. The prioritisation of Phase 2 of MRTF's work, i.e. the identification of the infrastructure interventions necessary to deliver the connectivity, capacity and performance needed for 2030. The specification of this work needs to continue to have special (though not exclusive) regard to areas that have particularly lost out as against what the Northern Hub scheme was intended to deliver, including the commitments embodied in the former 2016 Northern or Trans-Pennine franchises – Bradford being a particularly striking case in point, though by no means the only one.
3. A commensurate strategic focus on other areas where the North's rail network is close to, or beyond, capacity and cannot support good performance and adequate connectivity levels. Perhaps the most obvious such area is Leeds, especially but not only the Leeds – Micklefield corridor, but there are also significant issues around Sheffield, Doncaster, York (including the East Coast Main Line north of York) and elsewhere. In several of these cases, including Leeds and Doncaster, there is already a strong body of evidence from, for example, Network Rail's CMSP work, and it would be valuable for TfN to build on such foundations to make the case for early delivery of much-needed schemes that would provide major benefits to capacity and performance.