



Department
for Transport

Sir Mark Hendrick MP
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From the Minister of State
Jo Johnson MP

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29 AUG 2018

Dear Mark

03 SEP 2018

Thank you for your email of 30 July to Chris Grayling, on behalf of your constituents about Northern rail services. I am replying as Minister responsible for rail.

I realise that the train service on many routes in the North-west has fallen well short of what passengers rightly expect. The train service provided in Lancashire and Cumbria has not been good enough. I can only imagine the inconvenience and distress that your constituents have experienced during train journeys in recent weeks.

Network Rail notified Northern of a delay of several weeks to the electrification of the Blackpool-Preston line in April. This meant Northern had to take over 450 train drivers from five depots off their normal duties to train them on the newly electrified line at the same time as trying to run the new timetable. The combination of running the new timetable and carrying out the driver training was a massive challenge and contributed to the increase in cancellations. It was recognised that to continuing to do both was not an option and an interim timetable was introduced to provide more certainty and stability to the service. I can confirm that the percentage of cancellations in June and July has reduced, and whilst still higher than we would wish to see, is down to less than 8%. I expect the railway industry to continue their hard work to further reduce disruption to passengers.

Only 5.6% of Northern trains operated with fewer carriage than scheduled in Lancashire and Cumbria. Since the delays to the electrification affecting North Manchester and Lancashire, Northern had built up its electric fleet in preparation, but is now having to make its residual diesel fleet cover more of its services. In addition to this, Northern have continued with the refurbishment of their fleet to provide high standards to customers on-board, with new or refurbished seats and real-time passenger information systems.

These factors, combined with some additional displacement arising from the interim timetable, has meant that Northern's train formations are less reliably at full length. They recognise the impact this has on customers and are working on ensuring that each train runs and that it is of the appropriate length.

Network Rail is currently continuing work to electrify the Bolton line including during a nine day closure in August, when peak passenger demand is traditionally lower than at other times. Once the upgrade of the Bolton line is complete, Northern will use four coach electric trains on the route to deliver additional capacity for passengers along the Bolton corridor.

I am pleased to say that as of 30 July more services have been reintroduced on a number of routes. These include the reintroduction of the full service on the Lakes Line to Windermere and the Morecambe line. Now that the electrification of the line between Preston and Blackpool North has been completed, four coach electric trains can operate services linking Blackpool, Liverpool, Manchester and Manchester Airport; the full Blackpool to Manchester. Additional train services have been reintroduced between Blackpool South and Colne and also on routes to and from Manchester Victoria. Further train services are due to be reinstated by Northern on routes in Lancashire in September.

From December 2019, passengers travelling on Northern services from Blackpool to Preston and beyond to either Manchester Airport or to Leeds and York will benefit from a comprehensive range of improvements with the introduction of Northern Connect — a new high-quality level of service on 12 longer-distance routes served by the Northern franchise. The Northern connect services include:

- Improved connections: faster journeys and/or extra direct services on most of the twelve routes.
- Better trains: brand-new trains covering more than 90% of mileage across the Northern Connect network; fully-refurbished trains covering the remainder.
- More comfort: air conditioning, Wi-Fi, fixed or fold-down tables, power sockets and CCTV on every train.
- Dedicated customer assistance: Northern Connect stations staffed 0600 to 2200 daily, with catering facilities at every one.

Finally, the Secretary of State has commissioned an independent inquiry¹ by Stephen Glaister of the Office of Rail and Road, the independent regulator, to examine why we are in this situation and to reduce the chances of it ever happening again. An interim report is expected to be published in September ahead of a final report by the end of the year.

Thank you again for your letter and for raising your constituents' concerns with us. I hope this reply is helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jo Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a smaller "o".

JO JOHNSON