My experiences as a at least weekly commuter to Manchester were:
First, Trans Pennine withdrew their services to and from Wigan, thus having to rely on Northern.
Secondly, Northern withdrew the direct Manchester Airport link from Wigan Wallgate, and reassigned those services to Wigan North Western. This was initially on an hourly service – previously there were two trains per hour (including Trans Pennine). When there were the initial scores of cancellations, the only option was to travel via Manchester Victoria – thus extra travelling time involved.
Thirdly, there was lack of information from staff regarding delays/cancellations. On one instance, two trains cancelled and one train heavily delayed – there was no attempt by staff to update passengers.
Fourthly, sometimes there were only two and ancient carriages, leading to gross overcrowding. A priority should have been adequate and modern carriages.
Fifthly, there is the ongoing dispute between the RMT and Northern man agreement over driver only trains with periodic strikes. There is an urgent need for speedily resolution of this dispute – it needs to be settled immediately, not just dragging on.
Overall reliability has improved, with sometimes two services per hour to and from Wigan, but with still the periodic cancellations, due to 'shortage of train crews' – this should be an extreme rarity.
Northern as a condition of their continuing franchise should be instructed to immediately ensure punctual, reliable services, and up to date rolling stock, including a minimum of four carriages on all services, and as above, immediate resolution of the disputes. Failing this, they must be stripped of their franchise, and it be brought back into public ownership as has happened with East Coast. Finally, the Transport Secretary must be be prepared to have open and public discussions with rail users.

July 2018