Written evidence submitted by Dr Katherine Twomey (RTC0042)

Summary

- The rail network serving Manchester, Lancaster and surrounding areas was consistently unreliable before the May timetable changes, and has not improved since.
- Stations and carriages are dangerously overcrowded.
- Advance tickets appear to have been reduced, meaning the cost of commuting has increased substantially.
- Trains on the Lancaster to Manchester route longer stop at the major station which serves three universities.
- The inability to reliably travel to and from major cities in the North-West is damaging the local economy and having a major negative impact on individual lives.

I have been commuting from Lancaster to my job at the University of Manchester since September 2017. Before the May timetable changes my commute was beset with frequent delays and cancellations, sometimes taking up to three hours longer than it should have done. The lack of reliability of services meant that I had to spend hundreds of pounds on hotels in Manchester so I could be sure I’d be at work at 10am to give lectures. Nonetheless I consider myself extremely lucky to have a job with a relatively flexible start time and which allows me to work from home to avoid particularly bad days. It’s unimaginable that someone from Lancaster with a 9-5 job in Manchester would be able to stay in that job for long.

Since the May timetable changes the rail network is no better. Trains (Northern and Transpennine) are still cancelled and delayed for a constellation of reasons, the most frustrating being drivers themselves being delayed and the almost daily train faults. Platforms and services are dangerously overcrowded, to the extent that passengers faint in the heat and many are left on the platform. Clearly, it would be impossible for disabled commuters to use peak-time services.

On a personal level, I was inappropriately touched on a crowded train – no other passengers could see this happening because we were packed into the vestibule. When I challenged the man who was doing it he told me that I had to expect it because the train was so crowded. I filed a complaint with Northern; their reply was effectively a shrug and the boilerplate text about their investments in the rail network. A side effect of the change to the timetables is that the cheaper advance tickets don’t seem to be available. My commute now costs me up to £10 more a day, for a service I can’t rely on. Delay repay is laughable. I currently have four delay repay cheques totalling £18, accounting for hours of my time and £80 worth of tickets, and 8 free tickets for Northern services which I cannot fully use because the service I previously used has been cancelled.

In addition to the dangerous conditions and abject unreliability of Northern’s service, the majority of trains on this line no longer stop at Manchester Oxford Road, despite going through this station. Oxford Road is the station that serves not only the University of Manchester, but also Manchester Metropolitan and the Royal Northern College of Music. In
late August there will be no trains at all running on this route, for an entire week. There will be rail replacement buses but it’s difficult to see how they’ll be able to provide sufficient capacity on this extremely busy commuter route, let alone provide a manageable journey time.

I am deeply concerned about the effect of this astonishing mismanagement on the economy in the North-West. I’ve spoken to several of my fellow commuters who are considering leaving Lancaster because of impossibility of getting to work on time. Others are considering leaving their jobs. The North-West’s reputation is suffering; in higher education alone, this network serves Manchester, Liverpool and Lancaster, home to at least seven universities. We need to be able to attract students and staff, and an inability to do so has a knock-on effect on the local economy, not just those unfortunate enough to have to use the trains.

This situation is the result of decades of underinvestment and lack of interest in Westminster. While I’m delighted these issues are now being taken seriously, major investment needs to be made immediately; this is damaging the region in general and businesses and institutions specifically, as well as having a profoundly negative impact on individuals’ lives.

August 2018