Written evidence submitted by Slaithwaite & Marsden Action on Rail Transport (SMART) (RTC0049)

Executive Summary

1. Services running from Slaithwaite and Marsden to Manchester Piccadilly and to Leeds by First Transpennine Express (TPE) since 20 May have been poor and caused considerable inconvenience to passengers travelling from Slaithwaite and Marsden.

2. Despite representations made by rail user groups; the West Yorkshire Combined Authority Transport Committee; and the Member of Parliament for the Colne Valley representing Slaithwaite; neither TPE, nor the government, have acknowledged the scale of the deterioration in rail services from Slaithwaite and Marsden since 20 May, and the effect the deterioration in services is having on passengers lives, or done anything to address the problems.

3. TPE and government should be made to focus on the experience of passengers using the stopping services at Slaithwaite and Marsden (and other stations on the same line); acknowledge that the failure of these services has a significant and damaging effect on peoples working patterns and home lives; and rectify them it the earliest practicable date.

Who is the submission from

4. My name is David Hagerty. I am a resident of Slaithwaite in West Yorkshire. I am making these representations on behalf of Slaithwaite & Marsden Action on Rail Transport (SMART). SMART represents rail users from Slaithwaite and Marsden in West Yorkshire, and are active in trying to promote better services for local people trying to use the train services for work and leisure.

Factual Information

5. Slaithwaite is an intermediate stop on the railway line from Leeds to Manchester and is almost equidistant from Leeds and Manchester being about 20 miles from each city by rail.

6. Marsden is an intermediate stop on the railway line from Leeds to Manchester and is 18 miles from Manchester and 22 miles from Leeds by rail.

7. Before 20 May hourly stopping services from Slaithwaite and Marsden to Manchester and Huddersfield were delivered by Arriva Northern. Although not perfect, and subject to the occasional cancellation (usually as a result of failure of elderly rolling stock in the winter), by and large a passenger could expect to turn up at Slaithwaite or Marsden stations and find a service at the advertised time to deliver him or her to the destination advertised.

8. Before 20th May the stopping service to and from Manchester was half-hourly at peak times. Since 20 May the peak frequency has been reduced, and in the case of Manchester to Slaithwaite, halved from 6 to 3 in the evening peak.
9. A further change since 20th May has been that services now go to Manchester Piccadilly rather than Victoria and Salford Central, notwithstanding that passenger surveys showed a strong bias towards the latter stations as the preferred destination for commuters. One consequence of this is that journeys to Victoria and Salford Central now require a change at Stalybridge (and for Salford Central, sometimes a second change at Victoria). Changing trains at Stalybridge in order to make this journey is dependent on the punctuality and reliability both of TPEs trains from Slaithwaite and Marsden, and Northern’s trains between Stalybridge and Victoria.

10. There are other aspects of the new timetable, both in its design and its operation, which are unsatisfactory (regarding disability accessibility, for example) but these are arguably outside the scope of this enquiry.

11. Since 20 May the majority of the hourly stopping services have been delivered by TPE. Since that date the services have been subject to frequent cancellations and delays and expecting to reach a destination at the advertised time, or at all, has become a lottery.

12. Slaithwaite is now served by two TPE Services. The Westbound service to Manchester Piccadilly, which calls at Stalybridge and Mossley, and the Eastbound Service to Hull which up to Leeds calls at Huddersfield, Dewsbury and Leeds. The TPE services are timetabled to operate mostly at hourly intervals in both directions.

13. Marsden is now served by two TPE Services. The Westbound service to Manchester Piccadilly, which calls at Stalybridge and Greenfield, and the Eastbound Service to Leeds which calls at Huddersfield, Dewsbury and several other stations to Leeds. The TPE services are timetabled to operate mostly at hourly intervals in both directions.

14. In addition to the hourly service provided by TPE, Arriva Northern run a small number of additional trains at peak times between Manchester Piccadilly and Huddersfield. These do not stop at all stations, and whilst they provide additional frequency and capacity to and from Huddersfield at peak times, they do not provide for cross-boundary commuting from Slaithwaite and Marsden.

15. Slaithwaite and Marsden are not little-used stations. Notwithstanding that the service is only hourly, ORR figures for station usage in 2016/17 are 204,946 journeys pa for Slaithwaite and 179,912 journeys pa for Marsden. Most stations with similar levels of usage in the Manchester and Leeds travel to work areas have a much more frequent service.

16. Many residents of Slaithwaite and Marsden rely on the services to take them to work in either Manchester, Huddersfield or Leeds.

17. At the time of writing the new timetable operated by TPE has been running for about twelve weeks.

18. TPE has failed to deliver a reliable service either eastbound or westbound since 20 May and there have been only five weekdays since 20 May when there has been no cancellation of services from Slaithwaite or Marsden in either direction. The cancellations and delays since 20 May affecting Slaithwaite and Marsden are summarised in the next paragraph.
19. Number of cancellations or part-cancellations of trains serving Slaithwaite and Marsden since 20th May up to 21st August

- of which Northern services: 19
- of which TPE services: 481
- of which full cancellations: 279
- of which started/terminated at Stalybridge: 219

[Source: recenttraintimes.co.uk.]

20. The most common problems experienced with the TPE services since 20 May are that:

(a) Westbound services to Manchester are cancelled leaving the passenger to wait one hour for the next service. If the next service is cancelled, as has happened many times since 20 May the passenger is delayed for two hours. In the worst cases where two or three consecutive services have been cancelled passengers have been left without a service for three or four hours.

(b) The Westbound service to Manchester is frequently terminated at Stalybridge leaving passengers intending to travel to Manchester stranded 7 miles from Manchester until the next Manchester service arrives. The next service to arrive is often overcrowded, and occasionally so overcrowded that passengers cannot board the service.

(c) The advertised stop at Slaithwaite, on east bound services returning from Manchester, is cancelled leaving passengers stranded at Manchester with an hour to wait for the next stopping service. In the worst cases where two or three consecutive services have been cancelled passengers have been left without a service for three or four hours.

(d) There have been similar problems with cancellations to and from Leeds on the eastbound Hull service, but the problem has not been as acute as the Westbound Manchester service.

(e) The lack of reliability and punctuality of both TPEs services and Arriva Northern’s service between Stalybridge and Victoria has made journeys involving connections at Stalybridge a lottery. This has been made worse by the withdrawal of half the off-peak trains between Stalybridge and Victoria under Arriva Northern’s emergency timetable. These withdrawn trains are not due to be reinstated until September 2018.

21. There are 21 trains timetabled to leave Slaithwaite each weekday for Manchester Piccadilly. Data collected since 20 May up to 21 August shows that:

(a) All 21 services have suffered cancellations or delays since 20 May.

(b) 7 out of the 21 services, or a third of all services, have been cancelled for 10% or more of the time; with the worst three services being the 11.07 (16% of all services cancelled); the 14.07 (26% cancelled) and 20.07 (18% cancelled).
(c) Where services have run, and have not been cancelled, 14 out of the 21 services have had 40% or more of trains arriving more than 5 minutes late

Source recenttraintimes.co.uk

22. The small number of Arriva Northern trains, notwithstanding Northern’s well-publicised staffing issues, have been much less unreliable than TPEs services.

23. The delays and cancellations to services since 20 May have caused considerable difficulty to passengers wishing to travel to work in Manchester, Huddersfield and Leeds. Anecdotally it now seems that the TPE services have become so unreliable that passengers are abandoning the service and choosing to drive into either Leeds or Manchester, judging that although the drive will be longer at least they will be certain to arrive at work on time.

24. The delays and cancellations have also impacted on family life and on local businesses.

25. The timetable changes represent the biggest change since the 1980s. They derive from what we see as an attempt to provide a more frequent service between Manchester and Leeds without providing the infrastructure to make that practicable. Given the scale of the changes, it was important both to get the service right (in terms of punctuality and reliability) and to provide accurate information. Neither has been achieved. Even with these, it would represent a deterioration in service in many important respects.

26. Before the timetable change, we expressed concerns about capacity, frequency (especially at peak times) and reliability. All these concerns have been realised.

27. We do not feel qualified to comment on the reasons for specific disruptions, save to observe that TPEs diagrams show turn-rounds of 7 minutes at Piccadilly, which provide no resilience at all on train services which have to pass along heavily used lines with multiple pinch points.

28. However, we would like to comment on how TPEs way of adapting to disruption affects passengers at our stations disproportionately. We understand that TPE have a recovery plan agreed with Network Rail which prioritises avoiding minor delays (of say 15’) to passengers travelling between Manchester and Leeds, whilst treating passengers at Slaithwaite and Marsden as lowest priority, for whom two and even three hour delays are deemed acceptable.

29. We are uncertain as to whether, in preparing the recovery plan, any consideration has been given to the impact on passengers. We have requested from TPE a copy of the recovery plan agreed between themselves and Network Rail. This request has not been acted upon. We await a response to our FOI request made to Network Rail for a copy of the recovery plan.

30. TPE have, however, provided the following comments with regard to their recovery plan. “The service recovery plan is a set of guidelines that we try to implement. The service recovery plan in place is a set of guidelines that stipulate that unless in extreme circumstances, no more than two services are cancelled in succession, stop orders are implemented when more than two services are cancelled in succession and/or bus replacement services are ordered.”
31. The impact on passengers of successive cancellations of an hourly service is much greater than on cancellations of a service that operates 4 or more times per hour. Judging by the way the recovery plan has been implemented, the recovery plan takes no account of this.

32. Where an advertised service to or from Slaithwaite or Marsden is cancelled the next scheduled through service using the same route could be made the subject of a temporary “stop order”, thereby minimising any delay to passengers as a result of the cancellation. This procedure, although promised by TPE at consultation stage before the new service was introduced, has been used rarely since 20 May; perhaps at most 15 times in all as against 500 cancellations in the same period. TPE appear to be reluctant to use this mechanism as they are so focussed on delivering fast services between Leeds and Manchester.

33. It seems that TPE’s main focus in running services between Leeds and Manchester is on achieving faster journey times between Leeds and Manchester, at all costs. Stopping services servicing Slaithwaite and Marsden and other small stations in between Leeds and Manchester are being sacrificed and cancelled to achieve this.

34. Over the past six years, concerns have been expressed locally that the DfT wanted to reduce our service to make way for more expresses. Apart from some reductions in peak frequency, this was not reflected in the franchise specification, but the practical effect of TPE’s prioritisation of expresses in this recovery plan has been that our service has been significantly reduced.

35. At a meeting with TPE managers on 2nd July, we urged TPE to communicate with the passengers at the stations affected, to identify what TPE will do to provide a more reliable service, and what they will do to rebuild passenger trust and confidence in their service. Six weeks into the new timetable, it should not have been for a rail users’ group to suggest to TPE a course of action which should have been obvious in week one.

36. Despite representations made by (a) Rail user groups to Leo Goodwin managing director at TPE; (b) The West Yorkshire Combined Authority Transport Committee to Transport for the North; and (c) Thelma Walker, MP for the Colne Valley constituency, to TPE and to Chris Grayling, Secretary of State for Transport; it seems that neither TPE, nor the government, wish to acknowledge the problems described, or to do anything to fix them.

37. One feature of trying to make representations about these problems is that there seems to be no one within TPE, or within government, who will either (a) acknowledge the problems as being real problems that affect the lives of real people, or (b) accepts it is their responsibility to fix the problems or (c) accepts responsibility for the failure to put the problems right.

38. Many of the problems described for passengers at Slaithwaite and Marsden are also experienced by passengers from other stopping services on the same line at stations at Greenfield and Mossley.
39. We are astonished that our route is only deemed to qualify for the lowest level of compensation, even though the scale of disruption is huge and remains as bad as on day one.

40. We trust that the information above is of assistance to your findings, but should you require further information, a representative of SMART would always be able to travel to London to discuss the detail of TPE’s failings with respect to our line, if that was thought to be helpful as a contribution to resolving the long ongoing issues. Alternatively, any Committee member would be welcome to visit us.

**Recommendations for Action**

41. TPE and government should be made to focus on the experience of passengers using the stopping services at Slaithwaite (and other stations on the same line); acknowledge that the failure of these services has a significant and damaging effect on peoples working patterns and home lives; and rectify them.

42. TPE should communicate to passengers what actions they are taking or will take to restore a coherent service and what actions they will take to restore passenger trust and confidence.

43. Where an advertised service to or from Slaithwaite or Marsden is cancelled the next scheduled through service using the same route should be made the subject of a temporary stop order, sufficient to maintain a frequency which is roughly hourly.

44. Services which stop at both Slaithwaite and Marsden which were abolished by the 20 May changes should be reinstated at the earliest practicable date.

45. Compensation to passengers on this route should be provided commensurate with the scale of disruption experienced.

*August 2018*