

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

REINSTATEMENT OF HALF-HOURLY RAIL SERVICE



Report Reference C-21-19
Meeting Date 1st November 2021
Agenda Item 8
Prepared by Town Clerk

1.0 BACKGROUND

Before the coronavirus pandemic an additional half hourly rail service operated from Knutsford Railway Station in the morning and afternoon. The service was withdrawn during the changes to services caused by the pandemic but has not been reinstated when normal scheduling resumed.

The Knutsford Guardian has reported on problems faced by Knutsford schoolchildren travelling to Altrincham.¹ The report highlighted the children are struggling with exhaustion due to the loss of the 0804 service which requires them to instead use the 0733 service to attend school on time. The issue also affects those working in Manchester.

The Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership has raised the issue with Northern, the rail operator, which has advised:

Like many businesses Northern has been, and continues to be, affected by the impact of COVID and for several periods over the past 18 months we have been operating an emergency timetable.

We and much of the rest of the industry, continues to recover from COVID and the continuing challenges which this presents. Perhaps the most significant impact was the delay to our training programme which was paused for five months due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

We are making good progress in recovering this programme, but the ongoing training requirement and sustained rate of COVID infections in the North West continues to affect the number of services we can operate. Despite this, we are confident we have the services in place to meet the demands of our customers.

We have planned our current timetable looking carefully at how many people are likely to travel and balanced that against making sure we can deliver a reliable and stable service. An hourly service, all day, between Chester and Manchester Piccadilly via Northwich was restored from 17 May 2021 but it is not possible to operate any additional services at the current time.

We have a training backlog which still needs to be cleared and it is of concern that our train crew absence rates are higher than at the same time as last year.

¹ 19th September <https://www.knutsfordguardian.co.uk/news/19587802.mum-calls-early-train-reinstated-knutsford-altrincham/>

The Mid Cheshire Line services a wide variety of schools and businesses throughout its length between Chester and Manchester meaning what may be an ideally timed departure/arrival for customers at one station along the route may not be the case at another.

We fully understand the vital role we play in providing rail services for the communities that are at the heart of everything we do and are determined to make a positive impact – through our services – for those who live in, work in, and visit the north of England."

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Council resolves to write to the Secretary of State for Transport urging reinstatement of the peak time half hourly rail service and that the council further urges that the express half hourly service throughout the day and hourly service on Sundays be put back in to the SLA for the franchise.