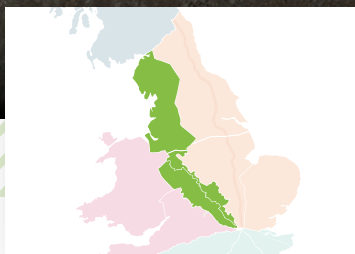




# NORTH WEST & CENTRAL



**Tim Shoveller**  
 managing director,  
 North West & Central  
 15 July 2021

NW&C is the backbone of Britain linking London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. NW&C includes the West Coast main line, one of Europe’s busiest mixed-use railways. We connect workers with jobs, people with loved ones and goods to market. Every week we move more than one million tonnes of food, consumer goods, building materials and fuel. We serve long-distance business travellers, leisure passengers and commuters. The lens through which we view all we do is our service equation.



## Safety

The death of Aden Ashurst at Roade, Northamptonshire, on 8 April, was a tragic start to 2020/21. Aden was working for AmcoGiffen on a job strengthening a railway embankment. He was struck by a train. Investigations continue. We will learn everything we can from this.

In addition, NW&C recorded 111 injuries to colleagues which prevented them working the next day, and 11

instances of track-working teams narrowly missed by trains. To improve track worker safety, we reduced ‘red zone working’, where colleagues work on tracks while trains are running. We also improved level crossing safety and reduced instances of red signals being passed by trains.

Personal accountability for safety is a new measure we’re using to improve colleagues’ behaviour and safety. This year we didn’t meet our target, with speeding a significant contributor. In May we launched an employee anti-speeding campaign including a video featuring colleagues who’d lost loved ones to speeding and messages in pay slips.

In January 2021 we began a safety listening programme. Through facilitated sessions and video interviews, we

gathered views from more than 1,000 colleagues. Our listening exercise drew out key themes including: overly cumbersome processes leading to colleagues feeling they needed to break rules to get work done, and people managers not getting out to see the reality on the ground. We will use this information to build a plan to improve our safety performance, which we hope gives rise to a safety revolution.

Covid-19 resulted in changes to working practices to keep our people safe. Social distancing, risk assessments, enhanced cleaning and use of PPE helped protect our workforce. Our vehicles were designated as single-use or reduced-use with screens fitted to allow social distancing. Thermal cameras and thermometers were deployed alongside Covid-19 testing facilities on our worksites. We've focused on managing fatigue and mental health through regular employee engagement assessments and dialogue, timesheet monitoring, webinars and team conversations.

## Train service delivery

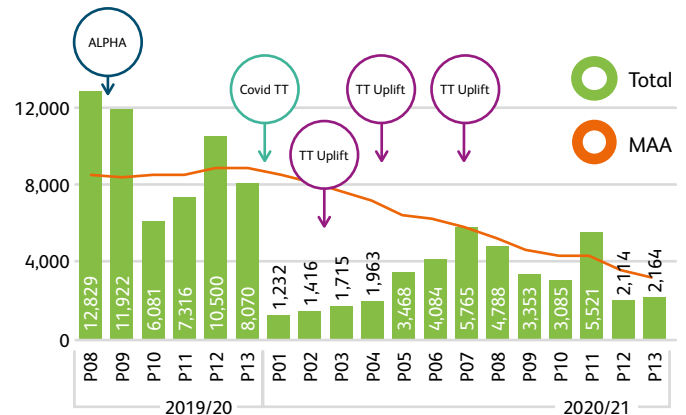
Performance against our key punctuality measures for passenger train service operators (Avanti, West Midlands, Chiltern, Northern, Merseyrail, TransPennine Express) was strong in 2020/21. A key driver of this was low passenger numbers due to Covid-19. A reduced timetable helped recovery from incidents and created more opportunities to carry out maintenance work. Freight traffic was heavily impacted by Covid-19 but picked up robustly after the first lockdown and exceeded our year-end performance targets.

In the years to 2020/21 the railway did not work well for passengers in the North and the West Midlands. Overly complex train timetables spread delay across the network rather than containing it. This coupled with rising (pre-Covid-19) passenger demand and railway asset failures made delays and cancellations commonplace. Passengers suffered.

Project Alpha was activated in November 2019 to remedy poor performance. Areas of focus included improving asset reliability, for example, overhead electric wires and tracks outside our main stations, and mitigating external causes of disruption such as trespass, vandalism and extreme weather.

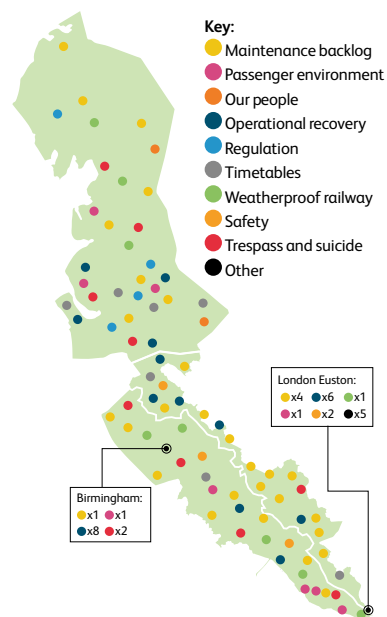
Alpha helped to remove longstanding timetable frailties and improve asset reliability. The graph to the right shows a downward trend in delays caused by Network Rail to train services on NW&C.

North West & Central PPM Failures



\* PPM: public performance measure for punctuality and reliability  
\* MAA: moving annual average

Alpha has grown into a £127m investment programme comprising 125 separate schemes. Two years of delivery lie ahead. The purpose is clear: consistently reliable performance supporting our service equation.



- 125 schemes put forward by our people and our customers have been approved and in delivery.
- £127m of investment to improve performance and passenger and freight experience.
- A two year improvement plan to correct many of the issues we found during the deep dive assessment and listening exercise.
- Schemes that cover the whole region from quick wins to major renewals.
- All schemes are on track with delivery well underway.



We simplified and added resilience to our timetables. We worked with West Midlands Trains to remove over-complex, delay-spreading journeys from their train plan. In January 2021, the Department for Transport (DfT), supported by Network Rail and Transport for the North, ran a formal consultation in and around Manchester on plans for a new May 2022 timetable with more evenly spaced services less prone to knock-on delays. This work seeks to mitigate the impacts of congestion on the busy stretch of railway through central Manchester, including the Castlefield Corridor. In addition, we have set up an industry planning group to inform a restructured timetable and develop a whole-industry solution to congested infrastructure on the West Coast main line.

In January 2020, our regulator the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) announced a review of longstanding poor performance on NW&C. In April 2020, ORR concluded we were, particularly through Project Alpha, taking every practicable step to identify and fix poor performance. In its six-month progress report in December 2020, ORR said NW&C was making “reasonably good progress” against most of its 25 improvement recommendations.

Based on the NRPS (National Rail Passenger Survey) spring 2020 survey, there was an increase in overall passenger satisfaction with journeys. Our target was met. All NW&C-managed stations have seen an increase in overall satisfaction, with the weighted survey result slightly below target.

## Efficiency

Covid-19 severely impacted our financial situation. It reduced income from property, station retail and car parking, and track access changes. It increased costs as we bought additional protective equipment for our people, including increased vehicle hire, fitting Perspex screens, masks, hand sanitiser and enhanced cleaning. This was offset by continued strong train performance aided by reduced passenger numbers and Project Alpha improvements.

With fare revenues severely down due to Covid-19, the rail industry remains reliant on additional Government support. A recruitment freeze was imposed in October. This freeze remains in place for support functions.

Our efficiency targets are ambitious. We have outperformed our target this year for both railway renewals and operating

expenditure. Increased automation has enabled improved identification of additional efficiency benefits for specific projects. In response to the impact of Covid-19 on the wider rail industry, we have included an additional efficiency challenge for the years to 2024.

In autumn 2020 we activated our ‘brilliant basics’ efficiency programme. We asked NW&C colleagues for ideas on what to stop, start and do differently. We’ve since had 250 ideas resulting in 46 projects with a potential combined efficiency saving of between £50m and £75m when fully delivered. Future opportunities include improved rostering for frontline colleagues, which could save between £4m and £10m a year. It would also improve safety by reducing instances of colleagues going on track.

In February NW&C set up the industry’s first railway efficiency board - train companies and Network Rail viewing their costs from a whole-network perspective with the aim of removing waste and re-growing demand for rail.

## Sustainable growth

Asset reliability was ahead of target due to decreased traffic causing less wear and tear on our tracks. Fewer services have also given us more opportunities to access the track to do maintenance. Maintenance and renewal of the network were impacted by adjusted working arrangements to keep our people Covid-19-safe. However, we seized opportunities to accelerate work where possible while passenger volumes were low.

We have instigated our ‘10-point plan’ for engineering excellence to deliver a safe, reliable railway. We continue to strengthen our railway to withstand extreme weather. In summer 2019, extreme heat led to overhead wires sagging and causing widespread delays for passengers. We then improved our overhead wires. When extreme heat hit in August, our railway performed better. Following the Stonehaven derailment, we have accelerated our inspection programme of drainage and railway cuttings to identify our high-risk locations. Heavy rain in autumn and January led to the railway flooding, including at Crewe Basford Hall depot and parts of Cheshire during Storm Christoph.

Our earthworks experts continue to identify and secure landslip risk spots. Over Christmas we completed the rebuild of a strengthened railway embankment at Harbury, Warwickshire. This embankment gave way in January 2015, blocking the Chiltern line for six weeks.

In May 2020 we agreed a plan with our passenger and freight train partners to shut the West Coast main line for two weeks at Kilsby Tunnel, near Daventry, Northamptonshire, to replace tracks and improve drainage at this known flooding hotspot; the job was long overdue. Access to this ordinarily busy stretch of line had previously proved impossible due to train companies wanting to continue running services even at reduced speeds. Getting this work done enabled us to lift longstanding speed restrictions, improving journey times and service reliability for years to come. While the line was shut, we carried out around 250 additional maintenance jobs, including cutting back trackside shrubs and upkeep of overhead electric wires.

The 'Kilsby approach' was used again for our flood-protection work at Crick tunnel in March. By doing the job in one five-day hit, we removed the need for a year of overnight weekend work. This removed a cause of train delays for a third of the cost.

We worked together as an industry to keep passengers moving during our embankment slip repairs at Hillmorton, near Rugby, on the West Coast main line in February. During the work, industry collaboration led to Avanti trains stopping at West Midlands Trains' stations.

Our environmental sustainability index (ESI) showed strong performance this year. This index measures how we're performing in relation to reducing our energy use and carbon emissions, and how much waste we recycle, re-use and divert from landfill. Contributing factors included Covid-19 reducing demand for energy and an increasing amount of renewable energy generated by the National Grid. We have started energy audits to identify future savings.

## Customers and communities

Over the year the average age of our lineside neighbour and station-user complaint resolution was 15 days - well below the national threshold of 29 days. In our new organisational structure, each route has its own community relations team, enabling better and swifter handling of cases. For 2021/22 we've set targets in each route to incentivise good worker behaviour and consistent advance notification of railway work. These are our two biggest levers to reduce avoidable complaints. We produced a worker behaviour film, Neighbours, for track-based colleagues. Our West Coast South route is creating an interactive map, for launch in 2021/22, to enable lineside

neighbours and stakeholders to see what work is happening in their local areas in the coming months and years.

## People

NW&C's new three-route structure went live in September 2020 with the aim of being more accountable to the communities and markets we serve.

Having cancelled and capped performance-related pay, recognising our hardworking people has never been more important. One way we do this is through our monthly Backbone of Britain awards.

We held our first Regional Business Council in September which brought together trade union colleagues from our three collective bargaining groups along with our regional MD and his executive team. Partnership working with our unions is vitally important as we seek to modernise Network Rail so it is fit to meet the needs of colleagues, passengers and freight customers in future.

In January 2021, NW&C launched its diversity and inclusion strategy, including reverse-mentoring for senior leaders and 'Let's talk about race' sessions for all colleagues.

Chris Conway, a relief signaller at Bamber Bridge near Preston, was named an MBE in the Queen's summer honours list for his work helping re-house and comfort homeless people in his native Blackpool.

## Plans for the year ahead

NW&C's focus in the coming year is emerging stronger together as an industry from Covid-19. We'll do this by working together to bring to life our service equation. Meanwhile our work to build a bigger, more reliable railway for the future continues. This includes work on the Midlands Rail Hub regional connectivity scheme, HS2 and East West Rail to reinstate the old Oxford-Cambridge railway. As we do all this, we'll continue to recognise the professionalism and commitment of our people.