

Ask Metro

19 December 2017

Topic: Christmas Timetable and 2018 Fares

Attending:

Huw Lewis, Customer Service Director

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Why do all the customer service staff that are on the barriers not patrol the station? Yesterday there was two staff on Gateshead yet kids playing on the escalator.

Thanks for the feedback, which we'll pass on to the customer service manager responsible. Staff should combine duties at the gate line with patrols of the station.

The daily break down of trains is inevitably happening due to the fleet being well past its life expectancy... can the new trains not be introduced faster??

New trains have to be designed and built specially for Metro because the power they use (1,500vDC) and size and weight restrictions. This will take until 2021 but Nexus is investing extra in fleet maintenance for the old trains and will keep doing so until then.

Are there any plans to expand the network in the future?

We're always looking to expand and to do so we need Government or other funding (Europe paid for all or part of the extensions to Airport and Sunderland) based on a business case demonstrating the positive impact on the economy. This is not easy but now we are well on with modernising infrastructure and have funding for new trains we can focus on possible new routes.

Are there any plans for people on benefits to receive discounted fares? It is unfair that students get all the perks.

Yes. We provide free travel for people attending interviews and starting new jobs, through funding to Jobcentres who hand out the tickets. We also provide Gold Card travel to those eligible by age or through disability.

Why do your inspectors think they're in the military?

Our inspectors do a sometimes difficult job making sure everyone pays their way. If you have a specific complaint- please contact our customer services section with the details.

Why wasn't a tender document ready for when funding was announced?

It was almost complete and was just waiting for the final details we could only include when we knew how the funding would be granted by Government. It will be issued in January now this can be finalised.

I remember when a 1 month 3 zone pass was 55 pound and now it's just over 70. How much will this be going up by?

It's going up from £71.20 to £73.70 on 2 January, or about 13p a day if you only use it on weekdays.

Instead of improving cosmetic things like train stations etc. Why don't you just improve the actual issues, like trains and lines?

More than 80% of the £350m we are investing between 2010 and 2021 is going on track, power lines and other vital infrastructure. Money spent on stations is mainly to improve access for disabled people, and we have bid for and won extra funds on top of the £350m for bigger projects like Central Station and South Shields' new interchange.

When will you give us free travel for all the delays and the ticket machines swiping our money?

We have considered a free travel day or similar, we but it would cut into revenue and have to be paid for in the long run through fares, as we don't make a profit from Metro.

Any plans to extend lines up to Blyth area?

We support Northumberland County Council's plans for the 'N2N' rail route from Ashington and Blyth into Newcastle. We'd love to see this freight line opened to rail traffic and an interchange with Metro at Northumberland Park.

Why is there no Wi-Fi? Might as well have Wi-Fi for the awful service.

We've tried several times with commercial suppliers to get Wi-Fi onto the train fleet but haven't been able to get a project off the ground. We're still working with the market on ways to do this.

Why did you think this was a good idea?

We've answered lots of questions covering a wide range of issues, and got some useful feedback on the service we provide. The sessions was intended to answer questions on when Metro is running over Christmas and fares changes in the new year – but its clear what a wide and passionate interest people have in what we do, which is great to see.

Why is the 6.52 Pallion to Airport late everyday?

Metro shares the track between South Hylton and Pelaw with several other passenger and freight operators, including Virgin, Northern and Grand Central so it may be the case that this particular service is being held up by a common cause, which we need to work with Network Rail to find an answer for.

Streetcars/trams are a possibility for the future but there are no definite plans. Newcastle City Council has talked about a bridge to Metrocentre so why shouldn't that be rail/tram as well as road if it ever happened?

Yes – we are looking at options for a more direct Sunderland-Metrocentre route in the future but its very early days.

How can you justify putting ticket prices up when the service isn't up to standard?

No-one likes a fare rise, but while some tickets are going up some are getting cheaper and some frozen. Single and Daysaver passengers don't have to pay a penny more in 2018 if they get a free Pop Pay As You Go card. We make no profit from Metro but at the same time we have to meet the cost, from a combination of fares and a national Government grant. Service standards have improved in the last year and we are working hard to make sure that continues.

I would like to see a Metro extension towards Blyth & Newbiggin by the Sea. Possibly split off the track after Whitley Bay??!

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When are you going to put trains on through the middle of the night to the airport during the summer season. You are playing in to the Taxi drivers hands for passengers and those who work at the airport like my self.

Thanks for the suggestion, but we have no plans to do this at present because we think demand would be too low to justify the cost – but it is one we will keep under review as we know airport staff work some difficult shifts, and some flights leave early. We're building a new facility in South Shields which will mean we can run trains earlier from there to Airport, which will make some difference.

Will the metro be coming to Washington?

We are looking at a number of options for potential new routes. We think there is a very strong case to open an old railway line called the Leamside Line to be shared between Metro and national rail services. It goes through Teal Farm, Usworth and Fatfield towards Durham. To do this we need agreement from Network Rail which owns it and more than £300m funding, but this is the sort of thing we can look at more closely now we know we have won a new fleet.

Any chance of pushing back the time pensioners can travel? Trying to get a seat on a morning as a passenger with reduced mobility is impossible so I have to stand because they are entitled to sit?

Sorry, but this is unlikely. Gold Card customers can travel from 9:30am weekdays, which is the same start time as the free bus pass on buses, as set down by Government. It makes sense for both to be the same time. Have you seen our 'I need a seat' badge which can be worn by people with reduced mobility, to encourage other passengers to let them sit down? It may help.

Your ticket machines are not fit for purpose. They always reject notes and coins. Will you be sorting this? I've missed metros because of this issue as no one answers the help point to report this! At other times, some machines only accept debit cards meaning there is a queue for the only remaining in-service ticket machine again resulting in missing a metro!

We know ticket machines have not been as reliable as they could be, although we have improved them with software updates over the last year and customer satisfaction is much higher as a result. Half our customers now use debit/credit cards when buying tickets, and two thirds of them pay by contactless, which is the quickest way to pay at a machine. You could try this or switch to Pop Pay As You Go – the smart card is free online or at Travelshops with a £10 top-up, and we are freezing single and Daysaver fares bought on Pop in 2018.

When events are on in Newcastle such as at the Arena why can a later metro to Sunderland not be added? They are always full and sometimes can be touch and go if you can catch it if events overrun.

We provide later trains when there are really big events on but we can't justify the cost for every show at the Arena. Unfortunately we are also limited on how late we can run due to engineering and maintenance work that takes place at night.

Why is the heating on the trains either off or horrifically hot that I could bake a batch of Cookies?

Yes, you've got a point and we're sorry about this. The heating is not very sophisticated on the old trains – it gets set in the morning and then on a sunny winter day like yesterday the trains end up roasting by early afternoon. This is one of the many ways new trains will signal a big improvement for passengers.

Are we annual pass holders going receive a discount or rebate given amount times delayed or cancelled on a morning resulting in needing to go by car

Yes. You can claim a full refund whenever your journey is delayed by more than 15 minutes; see our website for how to apply.

Will network one tickets rise?

Network One tickets are sold by a separate company – a joint business between the bus companies and Nexus. It decides on ticket changes for April, so if they do go up you find out around then.

When will there be a reliable service?

Right now we have days when 95% of trains are on time and days when it is nowhere near that. We know this annoys passengers and we want to be getting above 90% every day. The average has got steadily better in the last year, and Nexus has put new money into the depot to improve maintenance. We'll keep doing that to push standards up in the next few years.

Will the metro ever come to County Durham?

It might well do – We think there's a strong case to re-open the Leamside Line which goes from Pelaw via Washington and Fence Houses to Belmont as a combined Metro and national rail line, like the one through Sunderland. This would need external funding for the £300m + cost.

The money that you received from government wasn't as much as you wanted. Will you be able to replace the current metro cars like-for-like, and will you be able to rebuild the depot? If not, would you consider a build-own-operate scheme by the train builders for the depot?

The £337m we won in grant funding from Government was as much as we wanted. It represents 93% of our estimated costs for a new fleet and depot, which is high by Government standards (normally they don't go above 90% with grants). We are looking for suppliers to build and maintain a fleet which would match the capacity we have today, but we would own the vehicles.

Why do you feel the need to have 5 inspectors on a train checking for tickets when that money could be used to warrant a couple of security officers on your late night trains? I'm sure its something the public want and from past experience seeing lone females travelling late it would be a great safe aspect for customers. Thank you.

Thanks for the suggestion. We've just brought in a new security manager who is going to be reviewing all aspects of what we do so you can travel with confidence. We'll forward this suggestion to him.

How come I have bought a week ticket that now apparently I have been robbed a day travel as my ticket runs out 25th December which no trains are running?

We've never operated on Christmas Day and we have advertised this, so sorry if you were planning to travel that day. Very few, if any trains run on Christmas Day in the UK so its worth checking in advance before you make journey plans.

Any chance of making the Metro more cycle friendly?

Yes – watch this space in the New Year. We plan to extend the current trial allowing bikes to be carried off peak between Jesmond and Callerton. Details in January.

Can I ask will there be anymore metro stations being built. ... Pelaw to Fellgate? There is a massive gap is there room for a station between those 2 stations.

We do include looking at possible sites for new stations in our future plans. It depends on there being enough new housing or business sites planned in an area, and developers being ready to meet the cost of building so the taxpayer does not get the whole bill.

They must have knew years and years ago the fleet was failing and getting old ,why wasn't the profits put towards new trains then Instead of waiting for a government hand out ? It has not stopped you increasing the fares over the years, where has all this extra money gone? What would of happened ,if you never "won the Government hand out "of £337 million? Most companies spend profits on the very thing that keeps the company in business .Buses are constantly being

updated .with new one on the roads, why has the metro trains been Allowed to deteriorate, so they are not fit for purpose?

We simply believe it would be wrong for the money our passengers pay in fares to fund a new fleet, which is what you are suggesting. Nowhere else in the country do train operators have to buy new fleets themselves through fares, so why should this be acceptable for people in the North East? Metro is not run for profit, which is why it has the lowest rail fares in the country, and is often cheaper than buses. If we had not fought hard to win Government funding then we would have needed big fare rises to meet the cost.

When is your next Q&A session? I'd like to know what brainbox was behind these new ticket machines?

The response to this session has been overwhelming, so we'll look to set one up early in the New Year. Thanks.

I do feel for all those nexus staff but nexus must understand the anger that customers go through. I've lived all over Europe but from Newcastle this has got to be the worst system in Europe. I think you would be better off shutting it down. And for price increase in January well some government body should step in and say no as you are not delivering an average good service. Shame on you Nexus.

Metro fares are the cheapest rail fares in the UK and price rises have been below those for the rest of the industry for the past five years. While service standards could be better they are comparable with the other UK operators. The Government continually reviews our performance.

I pay £530 for an annual pass and never get a seat on my return trip to work all week. Fellgate at 7.12 to Haymarket and return at 16 .30. Why no extra carriages at peak times?

I'm sorry to hear that – we use all the trains we have with the current timetable but we'll feed this back to our planners to see if anything can be done.