Annual Assessment of Network Rail's stakeholder engagement April 2023 to March 2024

4. North West & Central

Summary of performance

Overall, North West & Central (NW&C) provided a reasonable stakeholder engagement self-assessment, with demonstration of continual reflection and improvement, while building on good practices that have been put in place. NW&C provided very limited evidence in respect to engagement with its freight customers, which we would have expected to see more on.

Owing to the fact that other business units were able to demonstrate an increased level of improvement comparatively to NW&C, the region is ranked as the joint-lowest business unit in year 5. There has been a number of recent changes to the regional structure of NW&C, this has impacted timelines for the regions planned stakeholder engagement refresh.

Ownership of stakeholder relationships has been refocused to the region's three route directors and their senior leaders, as a result of changes to the regional operating model. The region's routes have been made accountable and responsible for the delivery of priorities and stakeholder engagement. While we are cognisant of these changes, we will continue to monitor progress against the timelines provided to us by the region.

Performance by principle of stakeholder engagement

Effective

NW&C shared evidence to demonstrate how existing engagement has been effective over the past year. NW&C worked collaboratively with Northern, a train operator, to design a model to strategically assess the cultural maturity of the partnership so opportunities for closer collaboration could be identified. The region also shares customer scorecards with lead operators to improve passenger experience.

These scorecards are discussed at forums and can act as a shared roadmap, focusing all parties on the same key metrics and areas for collaboration.

There is evidence to suggest that NW&C undertook stakeholder engagement that helped to resolve stakeholder issues. However, these issues may have been avoided with more proactive and early engagement, thereby removing the need for this remedial engagement to take place.

Each route within the region is refreshing and redefining their engagement strategies to be fit for the new control period, and we understand that this will reflect the recommendations and guidance from this and previous ORR stakeholder engagement assessments.

“Clearly some progress has been made but the instinct remains to engage with operational stakeholders such as train operating companies and other delivery networks in a reactive way, rather than broader stakeholders in a strategic or proactive way.”

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Inclusive

North West & Central is making efforts to strengthen stakeholder relationships and in September 2023 the North West route held a successful stakeholder conference, attended by stakeholders from TOCs, FOCs, Community Rail, DfT, Rail North Partnership, Transport for Greater Manchester, and Liverpool City Region. Similar events are being planned for other routes after overwhelmingly positive feedback.

The region was able to demonstrate tailored approaches for the format and delivery of engagement dependent on the audience. This included inclusive engagement tailored for specific groups, including the pan-disability group working on the assisted travel lounge and through the production of the Alliance Collaboration Survey. There is an opportunity for NW&C to undertake more proactive engagement and gain benefits, enabling it to inform business decisions.

Transparent

The region has maintained its "You Said, We Did" initiative to demonstrate commitment to continuous improvement. It is clear that there is a strong feedback loop with lead operators through pulse surveys. This approach could be rolled out across other aspects of its engagement with different groups where evidence of this feedback loop is less demonstrable. It is important that the region acknowledges the difference between transparency of its engagement, such as feedback received, actions taken, prioritisation exercises and reflecting on learnings, versus communicating final decisions.

NW&C has also undertaken an exercise to overhaul its stakeholder mapping in response to previous ORR feedback and submissions. This new approach sees each stakeholder allocated to an executive board member. The major split of responsibilities fell to route directors and the Passenger director.

Well-governed

NW&C has been able to demonstrate that its core governance of annual stakeholder activities is effective. The region has refreshed its reporting structure of quarterly business reviews, providing accountability for routes to plan with stakeholder priorities in mind. A clear governance structure in place for each of the lead train operators to enable a continuous process of improvement where necessary. The region is transitioning to a new CP7 framework for its supply chain partners. A supplier event was held in April 2024 to set out this new approach before individual meetings were held.

NW&C has identified areas for improvement where things could be better, including community engagement. We expect to see the updated stakeholder engagement strategies cover these proposed improvements in more detail.

NW&C display reflective language and a strong desire to improve. We can be confident that they have identified areas for improvement and they have a plan on how to address these.

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Good practice from self-assessment submission

Manchester Piccadilly Assisted Travel Lounge (inclusive): The Assisted Travel Lounge and Changing Places facility opened in June 2023 and enhances inclusion for a wide range of passengers, such as sensory space for neurodiverse passengers. The region took a collaborative approach to achieve a cost-effective model for improvements to access. Plans for a similar facility at Liverpool Lime Street are underway, where the successful collaborative model will be replicated.

Senior level ownership (well-governed): NW&C has updated its stakeholder mapping process. The list of stakeholders has been allocated and assigned to an Executive board member. For each route, an executive level post is identified, responsible for managing the customer and stakeholder relationship.

Recommendations

Activity to continue or build on

NW&C should consider adopting its existing embedded processes of sharing feedback with key stakeholders to a wider range of stakeholder groups.

It should also reflect on the timeliness of its engagement, to ensure that planned early stakeholder engagement prevents the need for additional remedial work.

Areas requiring improvement

NW&C has committed to producing and submitting stakeholder engagement strategies to refresh its stakeholder management in line with updated objectives and priorities by the end of Summer 2024. We expect it to deliver these to the committed timescales and share the outputs with ORR.

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