

What Nexus is doing about the constant train issues

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Metro services have been beset by a series of problems in the last few weeks as autumn turns to winter and the weather starts to get colder and damper.

Delays, failed trains and signalling problems have caused delays for passengers across Tyne and Wear – and that's before you take into account the 'normal' delays caused by 'low rail adhesion' – or leaves on the line, as it's more commonly known.

Huw Lewis, customer services director for Nexus, which runs the system, agreed to answer our questions about the recent problems, and how the company is hoping to tackle them.

1. WHY HAS THE METRO HAD SO MANY INTERRUPTIONS TO SERVICE IN THE LAST FEW WEEKS? FAILED TRAINS, TECHNICAL PROBLEMS AND LOW RAIL ADHESION SEEM TO BE BECOMING COMMONPLACE.

I'm sorry there has been a number of rush-hour disruptions to Metro, and there is not one single cause. We have seen a power fault at Gosforth, a failed train at Fellgate and two signal failures between Bede and Chichester.

There have also been issues beyond our control at the busiest times of day, including a woman falling onto the track at South Gosforth, and an ambulance called to a train at Gateshead Stadium.

This has come at a time when crushed fallen leaves makes the rails slip-



pery and slows down trains – what we know as low rail adhesion – means that journeys often take a few minutes longer anyway. This has meant a very frustrating few weeks for Metro passengers, but I want to assure you our overwhelming focus is on improving performance quickly.

2. ARE SOME PARTS OF THE SYSTEM MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO THESE SORTS OF PROBLEMS THAN OTHERS, EG THE LINE TO SOUTH TYNESIDE. IF SO, WHY IS THIS?

There have been two signal failures between Bede and Chichester in the last fortnight, both of them connected to work building the new South Shields Interchange where contractors are relaying the track and rewiring signals.

We've investigated both (they had different causes) to stop a repeat. Apart from this and in general no part of the system has lower reliability than anywhere else.

3. DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DANGER OF LOSING CUSTOMERS' CONFIDENCE IN THE SYSTEM? AFTER

ALL, DIDN'T PASSENGER NUMBERS DROP LAST YEAR? ARE YOU HEADING FOR A FURTHER REDUCTION IN NUMBERS THIS YEAR?

Metro plays a vital role in people's everyday lives – getting you to work, school or days out.

We continue to carry about 120,000 journeys every day and we monitor customer satisfaction very closely. Metro passenger numbers fell last year, along with public transport use in cities across the country, including London and Manchester, because of wider economic factors like falling consumer confidence. We've seen a small rise in passenger numbers since the summer, but it is too early to say if that will be maintained.

4. WHY ARE FALLING LEAVES SUCH A PROBLEM IN THE AUTUMN, AND WHAT IS NEXUS (OR NETWORK RAIL) DOING ABOUT THEM?

Train drivers face the same issue motorists have in winter when roads become icy.

They need to go slower to avoid skidding because the rails are slippery, and it is hard to accelerate away from stations. This is caused by leaves being crushed by hot metal wheels into a hard Teflon-like crust on the top of the rail. We send out two

special treatment trains (one each side of the Tyne) twice daily to clean the rails and send maintenance staff to the worst locations to put sand on the tracks; we also train drivers to cope with the conditions.

We are spending more each year on cutting back vegetation along our tracks to prevent leaves from falling on them in the first place – more than £1million in the next three years. Network Rail, which manages the line between Pelaw and South Hylton, faces the same challenge and also runs treatment train and cuts back vegetation.

5. HOW MUCH OF THE PROBLEM WITH SERVICE RELIABILITY IS DOWN TO THE AGE OF THE TRACK NETWORK AND THE ROLLING STOCK?

The trains are not as reliable as they used to be after almost 40 years and this has the biggest impact on passengers because there have been more cancellations as a result.

We've just announced an extra £906,000 to be invested in the trains over 18 months, including six more staff taken on at our depot to maintain reliability. We also last week changed the way we test trains before they enter service each day to cut the risk of early-morn-

ing failures, which we know are hard for passengers.

We've spent almost £300million on the track and infrastructure since 2010 and it is in good shape – we see very few problems now caused by track or points faults, flooding or issues with structures. It is ironic that sometimes a major investment project like the new South Shields Interchange leads to a signal failure during construction, but when it comes into use next week the new track laid there will give better performance for decades to come.

6. HOW MANY OF YOUR TRAINS ARE DUE TO BE REPLACED, AND HOW MUCH PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE?

The whole fleet will be replaced in a £362million project which will see the first new trains delivered from the end of 2021.

We are negotiating with five leading manufacturers from around the world to get the best deal, and they are talking about trains ten times more reliable than we have now. New trains will also transform the passenger experience with better accessibility, climate control and digital connectivity.

7. ARE THERE ARE CONTINGENCY PLANS TO PREVENT FURTHER PROBLEMS WITH TRAIN FAILURES/CANCELLATIONS AS THE AUTUMN EXTENDS INTO THE WINTER MONTHS, WHEN THE WEATHER IS EVEN WORSE?

We are now in the most challenging time for low rail adhesion, but we are already well into winter planning.

Metro performed well last winter during storms like the Beast From The East and kept going when roads were impassable and other train services and local public transport had to be suspended. That was no accident, as we have a thorough programme to prepare the trains and infrastructure to cope with severe weather, including things like heated point motors imported specially from Sweden, extra patrols to lay grit, and all-night snow trains to keep tracks and power lines clear.



Huw Lewis.