

The Misleading Case for the Closure of Woodlands Road Manchester Metrolink Station

Woodlands Road is “little used”;” least used on the Network”;” least used on the Bury line” claims by Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM)

- The passenger survey commissioned by TfGM on Thursday 26th November 2009 shows 967 passengers used the Station between 7 am and 7 pm. This equates to over quarter of a million passengers were using the Station in a year.
- This level of usage was consistent with the level of usage found in the surveys conducted by the Save our Station Committee (SoSC) on the Monday 14th and Tuesday 15th March 2011.
- This level of usage is consistent with the 1300 plus who signed the petition for the retention of Woodlands Road.
- At the times of both surveys the passenger demand at Woodlands Road was suppressed by the lack of capacity on Metrolink at weekday morning peak times which significantly impacted Woodlands Road – it being the last Station on the line before Central Manchester meant the trams reaching Woodlands Road were consistently full so potential passengers used alternative transport.
- The North Manchester Metrolink Stations – CIF Full Business Case; and the Woodlands Road Metrolink Stop – Closure Appraisal Report both state “The existing Woodlands Road stop on the Bury line is the least used Metrolink stop on the system, earning just over £200,000 per annum (around 1% of the total) in revenue.” However, given that there at the time of writing these Reports there were 37 stations on Metrolink this means the average income of each is only 2.7%. If we take the heavily used city centre stations out of the equation this average is reduced further and a figure of 1% therefore would not be significantly less than that for a number of Metrolink stations.
- No attempt has been made to investigate increasing the patronage of Woodlands Road before contemplating closure as required by the 2005 Railways Act. The peak time suppressed demand issue referred to above would have been partly alleviated by the introduction of more double trams but this only occurred after the service at Woodlands road was reduced including no services at peak times. Other means of increasing patronage suggested by SoSC, yet ignored, include weatherproofing the pathway from Hazelbottom Road and introducing a level crossing between the platforms so reducing walk times for passengers.

TfGM “directs” Woodlands Road Passengers to Abraham Moss, and suggests that it is a reasonable alternative to Woodlands Road.

- The passenger survey commissioned by TfGM on Thursday 26th November 2009 suggests that of the people they questioned (35% of those using the station between 7 am and 7am) 48% would have an increase their walk times to Abraham Moss compared to Woodlands Road, 21% would have no change in their walk times and 31% a decrease.
- However, as acknowledged in the Survey Report, many refused to answer questions because they were aware TfGM were planning the closure. It could be conjectured therefore they were hostile to the closure and did not want to assist TfGM in its plans, however mistakenly.
- The TfGM commissioned survey suggests passengers rational decision on choice of stop depends on 3 factors – walk time to/from stop; wait time at stop and in vehicle times. This is far too simplistic generally and specifically in the case of Woodlands Road/Abraham Moss. Amongst other factors is fear of crime in the narrow mugger friendly alley on the approach to Abraham Moss.
- The passenger survey conducted by SoSC on the 14th and 15th March 2011 found that over half those alighting at Woodlands Road walked away from the direction of Abraham Moss.
- TfGM and DfT have consistently stated that the distance between Woodlands Road and Abraham Moss stations as 250 metres with a walk time of 3 minutes despite it being repeatedly pointed out to them that the distance is 360 metres with a walk time of 4.5 minutes. DfT in a letter dated 23 May 2013 to the local MP, Mr G Stringer, now accept this (although they say the distance is 340 metres) but prior to this DfT and TfGM consistently referred to 250 metres even in the context of walk times.
- For the many Woodlands Road Passengers who are elderly and/or disabled the extra walk is of particular significance but when this is pointed out to TfGM they ignore the walk time and refer to the access arrangements at Abraham Moss. However, even if we ignore the walk times these are not significantly superior to the Woodland Road access. TfGM`s justification for Abraham Moss Station was that Woodlands Road did not offer reasonable access to the Abraham Moss Centre adjacent to the Abraham Moss Station. They now say the Abraham Moss Station is a reasonable alternative to the Woodlands Road Station. Note, the elderly and

disabled constitute a high percentage of the residents within the Woodlands Road catchment area.

“The Government understands that there are existing bus routes from Cheetham Hill Rd and Hazelbottom Rd near Woodlands Road station implying these offer suitable public transport alternatives to Woodlands Road Station. These run into Manchester city centre with journey times varying from 10 to 16 minutes.”

- Whilst this may be correct it does not take into account the frequency of these bus services, the walking distance to them, the characteristics of that walk and whether they offer the direct journey opportunities that Woodlands Road Metrolink Station did.
- DfT in the 23 May letter, referred to above did address the frequency of these services, however it failed to mention the half-hourly frequency of services along Hazelbottom Road only applied Monday to Saturday up to 6 pm, and that there is no service before 9 am at weekends.
- The nearest bus services to those ex Woodlands Road users on the west side of the Metrolink line are those along Cheetham Hill Road. The DfT letter claims that “TfGM have informed me that taking a 500m radius around Woodlands Road there is no residence within that catchment area that is 500m from a bus stop”. This is largely incorrect as many of these residences are more than 500 metres from the Cheetham Hill Road bus stops and significantly further from Hazelbottom Road and for this reason and because the bus services concerned do not cross the city centre they do not offer anything comparable to the Metrolink service that was offered from Woodland Road. We say largely because technically, there is a bus stop service with stops slightly closer than 500 metres but the service concerned, the 151, is a neighbourhood half hourly daytime service that does not serve the City Centre.
- The nearest bus services to those ex Woodlands Road users on the east side of the Metrolink line are along Hazelbottom Road and these do not involve walking distance more than 500 metres, Cheetham Hill services are significantly further away than 500 metres and involve an uphill walk unsuitable for the elderly and disabled. However, the services along Hazelbottom Road (the 156 Monday to Saturday until 6 pm and the 165 at other times) are as indicated above only have an half hour frequency up to 6 pm Monday to Saturday and thereafter and on Sundays the frequency is hourly. Also, they only go to the North side of the City Centre

and therefore offer vastly inferior direct public transport services to those offered by a Woodlands Road Metrolink Service.

TfGM and DfT since Abraham Moss opened have made negative to Woodlands Road comparisons between passenger numbers and conditions at Woodlands Road when a full service was offered and passenger numbers at Abraham Moss.

- Insofar as ex Woodlands Road passengers are concerned for whom Abraham Moss is not a credible alternative and who therefore have no access to Metrolink or those who use Abraham Moss despite it being more inconvenient, these comparisons are largely irrelevant and obviously they are only being made to justify the closing of Woodlands Road and the opening of Abraham Moss.
- A 17 August 2011 letter from TfGM to DfT Capital Programme & Delivery claims that since Abraham Moss opened passenger numbers at Woodlands Road are down by more than 75%. However, *naturally, they would be since TFGM stopped services at Woodlands Road for 75% of the time including peak time, one week after Abraham Moss opened.*
- TfGM are claiming that 106,000 passengers used Woodlands Road in the last year it had a full service and 143,000 used Abraham Moss in its first year of operation. The discrepancy between this figure for Woodlands Road and the figure resulting from the passenger surveys referred to previously is remarkable. The Chair of TfGM in a letter of 3 Jan 2013 to those opposing the closure says it is “in terms of ticket sales from and arrivals at the stop”. However, regular users of Woodlands Road during the relevant period are not aware of any survey from which the arrivals number can be so accurately deduced and even if there was such a survey surely there would be a similar number for departures rather than relying on ticket sales? Furthermore reliance cannot be placed on ticket sales figures for accurately calculating passenger numbers as the article “Stations Count” in the July 2012 article in the Modern Railways journal illustrates. The significant number using senior citizen bus passes are no doubt a factor in this.
- During, the period for which the Abraham Moss figures are cited Metrolink significantly increased the number of double trams on the Bury Line. This no doubt has meant that Abraham Moss, unlike Woodlands Road, has not has its peak time passenger demand suppressed because of overcrowding as it became the last station on the line before central Manchester since the cessation of peak

hour services at Woodlands Road. The comparison between the passenger numbers at the two stations should take this into account.

- The numbers for Abraham Moss will also include many who would have preferred to use Woodlands Road but at the time they were travelling no service was offered there.
- The 2009 Passenger survey conducted on behalf of TfGM states “Woodlands Road is typical and comparable to other stations outside central Manchester”. Any negative comparisons between Woodlands Road and Abraham Moss Stations concerning its equipment, level of maintenance etc are purely a result of TfGM abandoning, for a number of years, any investment in Woodlands Road whereas Abraham Moss is a new station. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that this is a result of a deliberate starve and close policy by TfGM. Nevertheless, many Metrolink customers still find Woodlands Road acceptable.
- Despite, claims to the contrary by TfGM, the number of constituent entities that comprise the Abraham Moss Centre have been reduced.

The TfGM case for the closure of Woodlands Road in terms of value for money relies heavily on their alleged “30 second “ delay to through passengers should Woodlands Road remain open, with the Appraisal Report suggesting for example some Metrolink passengers resorting to cars.

- However, Metrolink does not, like for example the Sheffield Supertram, publish a timetable, only the times of first and last trams and a service frequency.
- Even when there are none of the frequent disruptions, trams do not adhere to the published frequency. For example during the passenger survey conducted by SoSC on the 15th March 2011, at Woodlands Road, within the same hour the intervals between northbound trams varied between 3 and 18 minutes and southbound trams varied between 1 and 15 minutes.
- When Metrolink has one of its frequent service disruptions these variations are even more severe.
- Many stations on the network and particularly on the Bury line do not have television monitors so given this and the absence of a time table and unpredictable service frequency how can 30 seconds be significant?
- Many trams currently do not make a crew stop, which when they do often significantly exceeds 30 seconds, at Queens Road so

making it a passenger stop will mean these trams will have their journey times increased by more than 30 seconds. Also other stations are being contemplated on the Bury line so why is 30 seconds stopping at Woodlands Road significant?

TfGM consider that having stops at Woodlands Road and Abraham Moss is not a sensible spacing of stations.

- However, if TfGM were customer orientated, where there is passenger demand should prevail over the nicety of regular station spacing even though this may be more operationally convenient.
- The tramline distance between Woodlands Road and Abraham Moss is not unreasonable compared with other tram systems worldwide. The fact that the Bury line was originally heavy rail with station spacing commensurate with that should not impact on what is now treated as a tramway in terms of its other characteristics including safety.
- The spacing between Woodlands Road and Abraham Moss is approximately equal to the spacing between Harbour City and Broadway on the Eccles line, therefore why the former should be an issue has not been explained. Note, DfT questioned TfGM on this on the 27 April 2011 and do not appear to have received an answer.

TfGM at various times have made comments supporting their Woodlands Road closure case on such issues as crime, safety and station ambience.

- TfGM have made statements that implied that Woodlands Road Station was a crime hotspot. Local residents generally consider that the level of crime at Woodlands Road was not significantly worse than the high level throughout most of North Manchester but the mugger friendly approach to the Abraham Moss Centre, which is now used as the approach to the Abraham Moss Centre, was and is a particular hotspot to be avoided. TfGM denied there had been any incidents at Abraham Moss Station during the first few months of it's opening but when confronted with evidence obtained using Freedom of Information from Greater Manchester Police (GMP) that there had been 4. They added there had been 5 at Woodlands Road during the same period. This does not suggest crime was a justifiable reason to be included in the case for the closure of Woodlands Road.

- TfGM cited that people, particularly children, getting on the line was a reason for closing Woodlands Road. Whether this was a problem specific only to Woodlands Road is debatable but given that the alleged “replacement”, Abraham Moss has an ungated level crossing allowing direct access to the track, using safety as one reason for closing Woodlands Road is perverse.
- Those advocating the closure of Woodlands Road have also made disparaging remarks about the “ambience” of Woodlands Road. However, given its elevated position with significant views the ambience of Woodlands Road is in contrast with some of the dingy stations on the Metrolink network. Any negative aspects of Woodlands Road that would come under the heading of ambience are purely due to the lack of care and maintenance from the Metrolink operator over the last 4 years.

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