

## APTU: An update for London TravelWatch

APTU (Association for of Public Transport Users)<sup>1</sup> are one of two multi station Rail User Groups at the south end of the Midland Mainline; we represent the interests of passengers using stations between Harlington and West Hampstead Thameslink inclusive.

There have been well documented and, now, understood problems with Thameslink services in the last 15 months, consequent to the introduction of a new timetable as part of Thameslink Programme delivery. There are a number of key 'lessons to be learnt' from these problems:

1. The importance of allowing enough time for consultation and consequent variation in planned services following passenger feedback. The "need" for East Midlands Trains to not stop at Bedford and Luton in the peak was very much late breaking news. Therefore:
  - There were very limited options to implement the mitigating actions (ie Thameslink Express services for Bedford & Luton).
  - There was no time for new, original, research to properly influence decisions (eg as later determined, that Harpenden has a substantially larger commuter population than Luton).
  - There were other unwanted consequences (eg uneven service intervals – a challenge for those using nurseries and having fixed working times).
2. The importance of service reliability and accurate information to passengers – particularly in the early days after May 2018, it really was 'potluck' as to when to head for the station for the train – and extended gaps, short notice skip stopping were all the norm.

Future large-scale changes need to allow for enough time for consultation and reaction and to emphasise early days reliable service delivery – to the point that deferral of change can be the best option – better a higher likelihood of delivering the current service than a lower likelihood of a better service.

It is fair to agree that since the low of May to July 2018, there has been a substantial improvement. Looking forward, here are some of the key changes and improvements that we want to see:

1. The return of East Midlands Railway (as it will be, by then) services to Bedford and Luton in the peak – at the targeted date of December 2020. We remain fretful about the release of rolling stock to enable this. We also hope that East Midlands Railway may be persuaded to make a handful of stops at Bedford and/or Luton before then.
2. Thameslink making the most of the current Thameslink Express services by more fairly sharing out the second stop between Luton and Harpenden.
3. Ongoing incremental improvement to the timetable – such as faster all stations and semi-fast services (and the semi-fasts running to Luton, rather than St Albans in the evening peak) and more West Hampstead Thameslink stops on peak hour fast services.
4. Further improvements in the response to operational incidents – to late running, train cancellations, and more major problems – eg skip stopping decisions that don't seem to properly consider passenger impact, particularly at short (or no) notice and the leaving of long gaps in the service.
5. Continued improvements in the effectiveness and promptness of information during normal service and disruption so passengers can plan and respond sensibly. Whilst many travellers have

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons for our rather grand name are lost in the mists of time; we are exclusively interested in Thameslink and East Midlands Trains services on the Midland Mainline.

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smart phones and can look online, refer to Twitter etc, it remains important to remember that this does not apply to every traveller.

6. There is effective spending from the Passenger Benefit fund, including ensuring that there is no spending on items that really should be part of GTR's own responsibilities – such as core information provision.
7. The proper adoption of contactless / mobile phone NFC (ie Android Pay etc) to pay for travel. Plans do exist to provide this for west Hertfordshire stations, but this project is typical of the patchy rollout of such services – it will not be available north of Luton Airport.
8. Whilst GTR do offer Pay as You Go travel via the KeyGo Smartcard, this currently has limited functionality – it doesn't support Carnet tickets (see next item), nor does it yet support Railcards – both important features for many regular travellers. There are plans for Railcard coverage and we would like to see earliest possible delivery.
9. Better alignment of ticket discounts for regular travel with current work habits and patterns – an increasingly small portion of commuters travel 5 days a week in peak hours, which is the only option that provides a substantial discount. Smart ticketing features should be exploited to provide carnet like functionality offering discounts to a range of regular travellers – possibly with a discount rate based on recent journey history.
10. That the replacement(s) for the GTR franchise allows Thameslink services to thrive by design:
  - Key decisions can be made closer to the passenger – the current arrangement where many are made by the DfT and driven by national considerations (eg impact on overall DfT budget) is very sub-optimal. This needs to be for both governance and operation.
  - Whether there should be two operators or one for Thameslink services (in particular, should TfL take over Wimbledon Loop [and Orpington and Rainham services?]) and the linked running between Blackfriars and Luton). There are interesting governance challenges, given service interactions and noticeable portions of journeys being away from the Mayor's remit.

Beyond APTU's direct remit, matters of concern to travellers include the availability of bus services at times that are usable by train travellers, including early evenings, and the difficulties of using public transport to travel east – west in Hertfordshire.

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