

By email

Ms Lilian Greenwood
Chair, Transport Select Committee
House of Commons
Westminster
London
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15 June 2018

Dear Ms Greenwood

Transport Select Committee inquiry on rail timetable changes

London TravelWatch is the official body set up by Parliament to provide a voice for London's travelling public, including the users of all forms of public transport. Our role is to:

- Speak up for transport users in discussions with policy-makers and the media;
- Consult with the transport industry, its regulators and funders on matters affecting users;
- Investigate complaints users have been unable to resolve with service providers, and;
- Monitor trends in service quality.

We cover all rail services within the London Railway area, an area defined by Parliament as including all London's five airports, including Gatwick, Luton and Stansted as well as Heathrow and London City.

Our aim is to press in all that we do for a better travel experience all those living, working or visiting London and its surrounding region.

London TravelWatch welcomes your committee's decision to hold an inquiry into timetable changes that occurred on the National Rail network on 20 May 2018. The change on this date has affected a large number of passengers for the worse as a result of a number of poor planning decisions by the industry collectively. We would welcome the opportunity to speak to your Committee to put our perspective on this and to help establish the facts that led to this failure for passengers.

As an organisation we have been involved with the Thameslink project since its inception in the 1990s, and as such have made numerous contributions and challenges on the final operability of the service. Most recently we have been observer members of the GTR/Network Rail alliance board and have seen at first hand much of the decision-making around the implementation of the 20 May 2018 timetable. This applies both to the negative sides of the process and to the positive outcomes that have not achieved the public acceptance that otherwise they might have received.

The timetable change is not just simply about changes to individual train times, but also about industry processes and incentives, changes to the infrastructure such as signalling and new tracks, changes to the method of operation of signalling and station management, the use of

rolling stock and the interaction between the multitude of train operators that operate on the network. A further major change to rail timetables of similar magnitude to the May timetable change is planned for 9 December 2018. We think on the evidence of poor implementation of the May timetable change there is a case for delaying this until January 2019 to ensure passengers are not unduly disadvantaged.

Industry processes and incentives

Each franchised train operator has its own timetable specification laid down by the Department for Transport (DfT) or concession holder such as Transport for London (TfL), which will have an impact on their financial performance. In addition private freight, passenger charter and open access passenger operators also have their own timetable requirements to meet their financial obligations to shareholders. All of these operators follow the same Network Rail processes and timescales to get their timetables agreed, with Network Rail deciding whether or not their requirements can be met. This normally works where the changes proposed are incremental and iterative and of a volume that Network Rail has the capability to absorb. In the case of the 20 May 2018 timetable the sheer volume of change meant that Network Rail did not agree timetables in sufficient time for operators to agree staff and vehicle rosters, because a large number of changes were 'rejected' on account of conflicts with other train operators' requirements. This is largely due to incompatible franchise specifications from the DfT. In the case of Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) there was significant conflict with the timetable specifications for East Midlands Trains (EMT) and Virgin Trains East Coast (VTEC) for the use of lines in and out of St.Pancras and Kings Cross. The result of this was the withdrawal of peak hour stops in EMT services at Luton and Bedford, and the need for EMT to lease additional trains because the new timetable made their rolling stock workings much less efficient, as a result of longer journey and turn around times at St.Pancras. This situation in which Network Rail has to effectively 'arbitrate' between competing and often conflicting franchising specifications set by DfT results in additional operational costs and poor outcomes for passengers.

Recommendation 1: DfT needs to be better equipped to decide its own timetable priorities and able to take expert advice on the practicalities of franchises, before any arbitration process with Network Rail has begun.

Changes to infrastructure

The Thameslink programme should lead to better services and more journey opportunities for passengers overall. The improvements are dependent on Network Rail delivering the infrastructure on time and in a state that could be used in the interim for training drivers that will use the route, signallers who will control the route and maintenance staff who will maintain it. In the case of GTR the two pieces of track that were necessary for the timetable to operate were the canal tunnels between St.Pancras and Finsbury Park, and the Metropolitan Curve between London Bridge and London Blackfriars. In addition, siding and depot capacity also needed to be increased (in the correct and convenient locations). Many of the latter arrangements were not properly in place prior to the introduction of the timetable. The Canal Tunnels and Metropolitan Curve were made available to GTR in late January 2018 for training purposes, but only after GTR pressed Network Rail to bring forward their availability from the previous agreed date of April 2018 to allow driver training to start, signallers to become familiar with the regulation of

services on that route and passenger trains to be diverted when suitably trained drivers became available (this was a recommendation of the Gibb review).

The training requirement highlights a previous concern of ours: namely that the rail industry is too dependent on the practice of Rest Day Working. GTR have only been able to route train drivers by asking them to voluntarily do this on days that would normally be classed as rest days from their normal rosters, and therefore would be classed as overtime. Drivers are not obliged to work their rest days in this way, and so the availability of staff will vary. Previously, when drivers have opted not to work rest days as part of an industrial dispute or unofficial action, this has often resulted in large numbers of train cancellations and service suspensions.

It should be noted that although the canal tunnels were built during the reconstruction of St.Pancras as part of the HS1 programme, they were not fitted out with track and signalling until 2016/17, and as we understand it when work did commence it was found that much more remedial work needed to be done on these to make them fit for use than was previously anticipated – this included drainage work and other basic elements of their construction.

Recommendation 2: Network Rail must bring new infrastructure into use in a timely way to allow for the need to train drivers, signallers and maintenance staff to operate it, and if and when such works are completed late there must be a clear and documented decision-making process, involving all parties, as to whether subsequent activities should also be delayed.

Changes to the method of operation of signalling and station management

In 2014 the poor performance of the GTR franchise led us to undertake a survey of reliability of services to and from the Thameslink central area. We found that a large proportion of peak hour trains at that time were arriving late at the entry points to the central area i.e. where eventually trains would be handed over to automatic operation. The reasons for this lateness we found to be poor regulation by signallers, lax station operating practices by station staff, station dwell times that did not take account of modern passenger usage patterns, and insufficient journey time allowances over sections of route. Initially, the industry was quite resistant to these findings but through persistence on our part eventually there was recognition that these elements of train operation needed to be tackled if the Thameslink programme was to succeed. This led GTR to undertake to rethink their processes for managing station stops, and to completely recalibrate station to station times and incorporate these in the new timetable that was heavily consulted on in public over many months. Apart from the issue of sufficient route-trained drivers we have reason, and train planners in both Network Rail and train operating companies also say this, to believe that the timetable as such is structurally sound. A number of operators and services which previously have had poorer reliability and punctuality (Southeastern, Southern Metro services and the East London Line of London Overground), have seen a significant improvement in these measures as a result of the May 20 changes.

Recommendation 3: That given the benefits that will accrue to passengers from the additional capacity, and better reliability afforded by the new timetable, it is not appropriate to revert to a previous timetable.

December 2018 timetable change

The next major timetable change is planned for 9 December 2018, involving around 50,000 trains nationwide, compared to 40,000 on 20 May and so the impact will be much more widely felt if there are problems with its implementation. This will take place during the busiest period for passenger travel during the year. In some recent cases, operators and Network Rail have delayed new timetables until the following January to allow for the completion of engineering works and driver and staff training. This has the added advantage that a change in January is done at the point in the year when passenger numbers are at their lowest, and so gives more opportunity for any change to be put right if necessary.

Recommendation 4: In the wake of recent evidence, unless the industry can provide robust assurances that it will be ready for December 2018, the timetable change is delayed for implementation until January 2019.

If you have any queries on the content of this letter please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Arthur Leathley
Chair, London TravelWatch