

Dear Member

Service Disruption

You have no doubt suffered from the recent high level of cancellations on the Thameslink route. The FCC position is set out in their press release:

“At the present time, while we continue to train drivers for our new trains, we rely on drivers to work an element of overtime and rest days. A combination of factors has meant we have not had adequate driver availability and this had led to a significant number of cancellations.

We are monitoring this situation very closely and have been carefully planning what services our train drivers work to give our customers the best possible service, minimising disruption.

We are also committed to keeping people informed and have put up station posters and sent out text alerts to warn our customers of the changes. We can only apologise and ask people to continue checking our website for the latest information - www.firstcapitalconnect.co.uk.”

My understanding is:

- **You can claim under delay repay if your journey is delayed by more than 30 minutes.**
- Reliance on overtime and/or rest days is a fairly standard industry practice. There is no contractual requirement on drivers to make themselves available on these days, but they usually prefer it since it increases their earnings. On Thameslink, more use than average has been made of rest day working to train drivers on 377s.
- There is more background on RailNews (see <http://tiny.cc/hKCnp>). This states that the problem is linked to a pay dispute and talks about a “ban”.
- FCC have said to us “we are not in dispute with the trade union (ASLEF)”. My understanding is that it is each driver’s choice and many more than normal are choosing not to work for now; “Ban” is too formal a word.
- It is unclear when it will be resolved; I have heard informally that there will be a meeting with the union later this week. This cannot, in itself, increase the low level of rest day working, but could result in driver’s changing their view on rest day working.
- In the mean time, the cancellations are included in FCC’s Public Performance Measure, often with a “double whammy” – the cancellation is a hit and if other trains run late because of additional stops or many passengers, then there is a second hit.
- I’ve discussed early publicity as to which trains are to be cancelled and FCC tell me this is difficult to impossible. I have sympathy with this view:

- The overnight train planning shift is the main team responsible for determining the following day’s service pattern and this work is only completed in the early hours
- The earlier they make the decisions on cancellations, the more there will be – it becomes too painful if they have to implement two rounds of cancellation in the same day.
- Some cancellations (or reinstatements) are very late notice – there can be problems with no FCC driver to take over Sevenoaks services when they arrive at Blackfriars; on the benefit side, you may have received the text about cancellations last Friday – these did not take place because very late in the day FCC got permission to use the East Midlands platforms at St Pancras. This reduces the number of drivers required substantially and so the services run (each train that turns round at St Pancras low level requires two drivers – one to drive it to the cross overs just beyond the old Kings Cross station and the other to bring the train back to St Pancras low level.

The issue is starting to get a lot of attention in the Media – see for instance the BBC (<http://tiny.cc/Qgzbc>) and the Herts Advertiser (<http://tiny.cc/V00uc> - this is also the lead story on the paper itself).

You may also have seen that FCC have announced that there will be no services on Great Northern routes on Sunday (BBC link above, and, at the time of writing the FCC web site: <http://tiny.cc/7vQnE>). Based on what happened at London Midland, who could not run services on Sundays earlier this year, I think this will considerably increase the pressure on FCC to resolve the issue.

Checking on train cancellations etc

Other than National Rail / Live Departure Boards / Journey Check / FCC web sites and phone numbers publicised on these web sites, the following are the options I know of to discover if your train has been cancelled or delayed:

1. Twitter - <http://twitter.com/FirstCC> - I would be interested in feedback from any of the other 897 followers (I have just signed up ...). Twitter will apparently send messages to your mobile phone at your mobile provider’s standard rate.
2. National Rail’s SMS alert service. **This costs 25p a message**, they are only sent when there are problems. My experimenting with this suggests you are better off establishing an account (<https://ojp.nationalrail.co.uk/en/p/member/home>)

and then registering for specific alerts (via the Journey Planner - <http://ojp.nationalrail.co.uk/>).

3. FCC's SMS disruption service. This is currently only available to existing subscribers. I will write to FCC on behalf of APTU asking them to reinstate this service for new subscribers. Many large organisations block Twitter and thus this broadcast system may be the only option.

Kings Cross Northern Underground ticket hall

This is scheduled to open on 29 November. Access will be to turn left out of the FCC platforms at St Pancras, walk past the train indicators and down the escalator (the one that was open very briefly when FCC services were temporarily terminating at the high level platforms now used by Javelin services from Kent).

More details are at

<http://www.firstcapitalconnect.co.uk/Main.php?iCmsPageId=497> and <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/kings-cross>. The following connection times are quoted:

- Piccadilly line: 5 mins 40 secs (currently 8 mins)
- Victoria line : 7 mins (currently 8 mins)
- Northern line: 5 mins 50 secs (currently 9 mins 30 secs).

The Northern Ticket Hall will also be step free – to the Piccadilly and Victoria Lines immediately and the Northern Line from mid 2010.

Although the connection times will never be as good as they were in the days of Kings Cross Thameslink, they will represent a considerable improvement.

Helisloough / Rail Freight Depot at Park Street (aka 'North Orbital SRFI') / FCC

Following the emails sent in September, we did write to the Planning Inspectorate to object, very much focusing on:

1. That our comments were only regarding the Council's objection 6 - rail capacity (and associated with this, construction disruption).
2. Stating the view that the current Network Rail capacity study for the MML was essential. input to the inquiry and that it should wait for this document if needed.
3. That there are good reason to be wait (see the letter).
4. That if it was proven that sufficient capacity existed on the MML, we would not object.

The letter has been uploaded to the web site and is available here:

http://www.btinternet.com/~nlks/aptu/pdfs/aptu_planning_inspectorate_Radlettsrfi.pdf.

Other material

There are other matters to report, including:

1. Introduction of announcements at West Hampstead after 10pm in the event of disruption
2. Timetable changes in December (minimal, except for a reduction in services calling at London Bridge in the peak, due to increased demand from other operators to meet Franchise commitments
3. Feedback from the recent Stakeholder presentation.

.. however, I will defer these to the next newsletter, which I hope to get out by the end of the weekend, since I would like to send the cancellations update tonight.

Regards

Neil

Neil Middleton
5 November 2009