

Dear Member

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.. and with apologies for the length of time it has taken to get this out - and now apologies for the length!

### **Meeting with FCC, including compensation**

APTU and the BCA met Neal Lawson, FCC Managing Director, Larry Heyman and Martin Self from Network Rail on 13 January. The presentation pack we received has been uploaded to the web site - [http://www.aptu.org.uk/pdfs/aptu\\_bca\\_presentation\\_13\\_jan.pdf](http://www.aptu.org.uk/pdfs/aptu_bca_presentation_13_jan.pdf).

We held a frank discussion with them regarding recent service disruptions. There are, I think a number of key messages:

1. At the end of the meeting we said that we were strongly of the view that FCC should offer some form of compensation to recognise both the extensive disruption and the communications problems that we all suffered from. We did recognise that the most recent disruptions were not of the duration of the problems around Christmas 2009 and we also accepted FCC’s view that an offer which reduced FCC’s revenue was a non starter, as in the current climate this would be unacceptable to the Department for Transport (FCC are in ‘revenue support’, which means that 80% of a revenue shortfall is paid by the tax payer).
  - a. FCC were generally sympathetic on this, and agreed to take the issue away and consider it. We have subsequently been told about the two free tickets offer for annual season ticket holders (see below).
2. That the 4 trains per hour service that was provided at peak times at various times before Christmas is unacceptable, as capacity is far exceeded by demand and travellers get left behind. This can be particularly acute at stations south of St Albans.

- a. We made the point that some travellers (and this usually applies to me) can vary their journey time to avoid the worst of it, but many have to be in the office for a set time and so have no choice but to travel at the peak.
  - b. Although there are often alternatives offered (eg bus St Albans <> Hatfield and validity on the GN route), these are not viable for many travellers (eg use other stations and do not have a car - or do have a car but feel aggrieved because they do not normally drive to the station).
  - c. There have been rumours that there is a capacity limitation at St Pancras Low Level which limits the service to 4 trains per hour. Both Network Rail and FCC confirmed that this was not the case and the view is that 6 trains per hour could be comfortably handled. During the day FCC cannot normally use the high level platforms at St Pancras as they are all required for the East Midlands Trains service. During the first round of bad weather, EMT ran a reduced service, so FCC could use the spare capacity.
  - d. We said that we thought 6 trains per hour (2 unit each, 12 units in total) should be the target minimum service level - naturally, we would like more (as would FCC). From December, when the first few 12 car services will operate, it would theoretically be possible to operate 12 car trains, but I think we will have to regard the appearance of 12 cars on the train you want to catch as a bonus - class 319s cannot operate as 3 \* 4 car units in public service, and it would not be sensible to assume that there would be sufficient 377s at Bedford to give any form of guarantee / promise.
3. FCC said that the approach to contingency timetables is to be revisited - the current approach of splitting the service into north and south services does not allow for efficient utilisation of available rolling stock and this reduces the frequency of services they can operate. We welcomed this review, and will follow this up with FCC as needed.
  4. During periods of bad weather, particularly snow, the normal response is to switch to a pair of two track railways - EMT on the fast lines, FCC on the slow. The aim of this is to reduce the risk of point problems halting the service. Specifically:
    - a. During the first period of bad weather a decision was taken not to use a set of points immediately north of Bedford Station so no EMT southbound service could stop at Bedford (there is no platform on the London bound fast line at Bedford). This has the unfortunate effect that noticeable numbers of Bedford passengers who would have taken these services were forced to take FCC trains, reducing capacity towards London. Network Rail have agreed that keep this point operational is to be a high priority in the future
    - b. Point heater reliability has improved, but this is only partially effective in very heavy snow - the heaters warm up the rails, but the snow in between the rails is not melted and starts, over time, to jam the points.
    - c. There is a programme to install monitoring equipment on points which will give a better indication of when they are about to fail (apparently a key sign is the length of time they take to switch directions). This will make it easier to plan the service.
  5. Class 319 doors are still problematic; an outcome of last year's recovery plan was the acquisition of extra strong de-icer. Unfortunately, this proved ineffective in practice, as the snow / ice was so hard compressed, the icing fluid was not reaching where it needed to be. FCC are now considering the installation of trace heaters in the doors.

- a. It is clear that door problems are a considerable problem during very cold weather; FCC reported problems of doors freezing shut between just a pair of stations; it appears to me that until FCC find a reliable solution to this, there will be problems with unit availability during periods of extreme cold/snow.
6. We again commented on the communication problems during disruptions and did receive recognition that there is still room for considerable improvement. We will continue to press on this issue.
7. We raised the question as to why City Thameslink was closed for an entire day. This occurred because an application of anti-slip paint went badly wrong. After the first layer was applied, it was supposed to be no worse than before, however it actually turned out, when combined with water from melting snow to be very, very slippery. As it covered the entire platform edge, it could not be dealt with (by sanding it down) until after close of service. We are told that the plan for applying the paint did consider this possibility and the paint supplier provided specific assurance on slipperiness that proved incorrect.

In summary, this was a productive meeting, and FCC do appear to be committed to making the necessary improvements. We will follow up, concentrating in particular on:

1. Communication during major disruptions
2. Improving the minimum service level during the contingency timetable for bad weather
3. Door reliability in snow.

### **Complimentary tickets offer**

Further to the item above, FCC have decided to offer annual season ticket holders two complimentary off peak tickets to any destination of your choice. If you bought your ticket through the web site, these will be sent to you automatically; otherwise you need to register. This can be completed at <http://www.firstcapitalconnect.co.uk/complimentary-tickets/>. I am conscious there is nothing for the holders of 12 monthly tickets. If this applies to you, please let me know and I will ask FCC to see if they can issue the tickets on an 'ex-gratia' basis.

### **All line Sunday blockades – Advance warning**

FCC have told us about 4 Sundays when there will be no service to / from St Pancras. No doubt there will be a bus alternative, and season tickets may also be valid on GN services (we have asked - there will be no East Midlands services south of Luton). The dates / times are as follows:

- Sunday 1 May 03:00 to 04:00 Monday 2 May - Blocked between London St Pancras and St Albans. FCC to operate 3 trains per hour ('tph') between Bedford and St Albans.
- Sunday 29 May 03:00 to 04:00 Monday 30 May - Blocked between London St. Pancras and Luton until 14:30, then blocked between London St. Pancras and Harpenden. FCC to operate 4 tph between Bedford and Harpenden.
- Sunday 26 June 03:00 to 14:30 - Blocked between London St. Pancras and Harpenden. FCC to operate 4 tph between Bedford and Harpenden.
- Sunday 17 July 03:00 to 14:30 - Blocked between London St. Pancras and Harpenden. FCC to operate 4 tph between Bedford and Harpenden.

## [Trainedays.co.uk](http://www.trainedays.co.uk)

You may be interested in this website - <http://www.trainedays.co.uk/> which is an independent web site which catalogues delays by FCC and other operators. This might be a help if you don't submit your Delay Repay claims quickly and want reminding of dates with problems.

It certainly helped to discover that it was the 14<sup>th</sup> January that I had a particularly bad journey home.

One health warning is that the site asks for a lot of personal data when registering (I should emphasise that newspaper articles suggest it is entirely legitimate - I mention it simply because I do not like any site that asks for excessive data - even though they promise not to share it).

Feedback, good or bad would be appreciated.

## Graffiti

Like me you may have noticed an increase in Graffiti on trains, particularly class 319s recently. We asked FCC for their comments on this and their reply is here:

Over the past six months we have seen an increase in vandalism to our units berthed south of the Thames, mainly on Southeastern trains locations. This increase is not just confined to our fleet but also to that of Southeastern and Southern. We are working with both of our industry partners, Network Rail and the British Transport Police, to make the sites we berth at more secure. The BTP have stepped up covert surveillance and recently we have had successful prosecutions of four vandals in the Kent area who between them caused over £1 million worth of damage to the railway in the past year.

We plan to get units back to depots for repair as soon as possible after the damage has been reported but sometimes the train plan and stock availability does not allow us to do this as soon as we would like. In addition the recent extremely cold weather had a very detrimental effect on the effectiveness of the chemicals we use to remove the graffiti. The chemical is citric based and extreme cold inerts the chemical reaction needed to remove paint. This could give the impression that the number of graffiti attacks had increased.

If the graffiti is offensive or the windows are covered, the train is removed immediately and the damage rectified. If not we plan to remove at the first possible opportunity. We aim to remove the graffiti without the need for either cancelling or short forming trains.

To date this financial year we have spent over £220K on replacing damaged vinyl caused by graffiti on the Class 319 fleet alone.

## Out of use toilets on class 319s

In response to a member question, FCC had this to say on this subject at the start of the month:

As of now there are nine Class 319s on which toilets remain locked and out of use. All should be back in full working order by the end of next week [NM = 13 February].

The problems arose during the cold weather. Water in the pipes and water storage tanks froze, expanded and subsequently caused ruptures and leaks when the thaw arrived. This is the first time this has happened since these trains were introduced in the late 1980s and replacement plumbing had to be specially procured. The water tanks are in the roof of the trains, are difficult to access and the necessary work cannot be done during normal day-to-day maintenance. Rather than take trains out of service, which would have caused short formed trains or cancellations, it was decided to do the work when major exams were scheduled.

As the water tank supplies water both for toilet flushing and for hand washing, anti-freeze cannot be used. The insulation on the affected trains has been enhanced to minimise the risk of a recurrence.

## Luton update

Two matters of note to report:

1. The footbridge from the station towards the town centre (Arndale Shopping Centre) closed on 10 February and has been replaced by a ground level path. More information at the Luton Borough Council website (<http://goo.gl/XURW9>) and on the FCC web site (<http://goo.gl/jXY2y>); in particular there is a map at <http://goo.gl/c10gu>. Of note is that the walk between the town centre and the railway station will be considerably longer.
2. The new multi-story Car Park at the station is now open, for more information, please read the Network Rail / FCC Press Release at [www.aptu.org.uk/pdfs/luton\\_multistorey\\_January2011.pdf](http://www.aptu.org.uk/pdfs/luton_multistorey_January2011.pdf).

## January fares rises

Unless you are travelling on an annual ticket, you will already be experiencing the pain of this. FCC told us that their fares rose by an average of 5.5%, compared with a national average of 6.2%. Some of the 0.7% differential will be higher than average increases allowed for South Eastern Trains because of Javelin services to Kent along High Speed One. FCC told us:

1. That, as a general principle, the pain of the increase was spread evenly.
2. That leisure fares, which are not regulated, would not be increased by excessive amounts as they wished to encourage travel.

If you are aware of any particular fare increase that has not followed these principles, do let me know.

Car Park tariffs have risen by 8.5% on average, including the 2.12% impact of the increase in the VAT rate to 20%. They commented in a briefing "FCC's investment in improved facilities and security will continue. This has resulted in a 50% fall in reported crime at our car parks in the last year."

An article on the BBC News website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11818904>) contains additional background to the fare rises from a National perspective, including a breakdown of costs:

- 48p in every £1 goes to Network Rail
- 17p on staff
- 17p on miscellaneous costs including train maintenance, administration, contractors
- 11p on leasing trains
- 4p on fuel/energy
- 3p to train company profit

## Moorgate and Barbican fares

Our friends at Bedford Commuter's Association have been on the case on this and report:

The BCA met with Richard Fuller MP and Nadine Dorries MP at Portcullis House, Westminster on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2010. At this meeting concern was raised about the fares increase to Moorgate and Barbican as a result of the DfT ceasing to subsidise the 'underground element' between Farringdon and Moorgate from March 2011 (the FCC "Thameslink" line having closed in March 2009). As a result of this the Chairman wrote to both MPs. Consequently Richard Fuller tabled a question to the Transport Minister as follows:

"To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will continue his departments' subsidy for Thameslink users who are required to use Transport for London services to reach Moorgate station"

Theresa Villiers, Minister of State (Rail & Aviation) Transport, replied:

“Following the closure of the Farringdon to Moorgate branch on 22 March 2009 as part of the Thameslink Programme, through fares to Moorgate were protected for 2 years from this date. This commitment therefore ends on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011”

In the current cost cutting climate, I cannot see a change from this stance!

### **Do you get your season ticket from a company other than FCC?**

If like me you can take advantage of an employer's season ticket loan scheme, and they issue you with a ticket rather than a cheque then there is a good likelihood that your season ticket is issued by another TOC or other third party (quite possibly South Eastern Trains' Rail Travel Service ["RTS"]).

You have probably also discovered that FCC do not want to re-print your ticket once the magnetic strip has stopped working. I believed this was not in accordance with the National Conditions of Carriage and took this up with FCC. They have said:

1. That FCC should re-print tickets in these circumstances
2. That station staff will be reminded what to do.

When you get to the ticket office you should ask for a "Season Ticket encode exchange". There is also a letter from RTS you can provide - see page 9 of <http://goo.gl/kYAns> (an Adobe PDF document).

### **Options for automated alerts**

Although of less use during major service disruption, there are various automated alerting services that can be used to be notified of problems. The ones that I am aware of are:

1. Email alerts (free) from FCC - this uses the National Rail / Journey Check infrastructure. Register at <https://www.journeycheck.com/firstcapitalconnect/registration>.
2. SMS text alerts (chargeable) from Network Rail - register at <https://ojp.nationalrail.co.uk/en/p/registration/register>.
3. Via Twitter (free) from FCC. Register on Twitter, then visit <http://www.twitter.com/FirstCC> (Twitter is free, messages can be delivered to mobiles, which might be chargeable [depends on your plan]).

A full list of options is available at <http://www.firstcapitalconnect.co.uk/plan-your-journey/travel-tools/>.

### **Smart cards on FCC**

I have recently asked about extensions in the use of Smart Cards on FCC and was told that there are no current plans. Reading between the lines I think change is unlikely before Franchise renewal, and only then if it is requirement of the specification. Of course, perhaps our mobile phone will be our ticket ..... (although there is the fundamental problem of how to prevent cloning of tickets).

(note: this is separate to the availability of Oyster on FCC routes in Greater London).

## Oyster at St Pancras High Level platforms

Following lobbying by APTU and others, there are now Oyster Readers on the upper level at St Pancras

## Thameslink Project timing – post Olympics

Looking beyond the pre Olympics deliverables such as the first few 12 carriage trains and the completion of Blackfriars, I thought these comments on timing from Roger Ford of Modern Railways might be of interest:

### Thameslink and Crossrail update

There is no doubt that rail received a generous settlement in the October Comprehensive Spending Review. One piece of qualified good news was that Thameslink is to go ahead to the original scope. However, the construction programme for Key Output 2, the remodelling of London Bridge to allow the 24 trains/h service through the central core, already a year late, will slip back another two years to December 2018.

### Trains

Meanwhile Bombardier and Siemens, the shortlisted bidders for the new Thameslink fleet, have been told that selection of the preferred bidder is now expected by 31 March 2011, with financial close following not later than October 31.

This gives us a datum for the cascade of First Capital Connect's existing Thameslink Class 319 units. Release of the Class 319s central to the electrification schemes authorised in the 25 November statement. Southern's franchise commitment to introduce 10 car trains with the December 2013 timetable also depends on the return of its 23 Class 377 EMUs currently sub-leased to FCC.

### Delivery

And the omens for the Northwest and Southern are not good. Contractually, two 8-car and eight 12-car new Thameslink units are required to be available for service 40 months after financial close. Assuming the DfT Rail timetable is met, these 10 units would be delivered by the end of February 2015, timing subsequently confirmed by Transport Secretary Philip Hammond in a Parliamentary debate.

Significantly, when asked on 13 December when she expected the first cascaded rolling stock from Thameslink services to be in use by rail operating companies in Greater Manchester, Transport Minister Theresa Villiers pointedly answered a different question.

## London and South East Rail Utilisation Strategy ("RUS")

A "RUS" is Network Rail's statement of strategic intent for investment for expected growth. The draft London & South East RUS has recently been published - <http://goo.gl/j9UxJ>. Comments are due by 18 March 2011. Given that one of the key starting assumptions is that the Thameslink Programme proceeds "as is", its impact on us is less than on many areas.

One relevant topic is the destination of stopping services south of the river. The RUS comments that, for operational reasons, Wimbledon loop services need to terminate at the Blackfriars bay platforms - by implication, stopping services on Thameslink North will run to Sevenoaks (or nearby).

If this particularly impacts you - to your benefit or detriment, please let us know as this will help us with our response.

## Passenger Focus Newsletters

Passenger Focus is the national independent watchdog set up by the Government. Their latest newsletters which includes comments on possible improvements at Luton station and the ticket gates at St Albans is available at <http://goo.gl/mdoLa>.

## Channel 4 Dispatches Program

Channel 4's Dispatches program is making a program called "Train Journeys from Hell" - they are after mobile phone and video footage. More at <http://goo.gl/OfNdC>.

## TicketMunky.co.uk & Mytrainticket.co.uk

I thought I would mention these sites (which I have not tried) as they offer 'freebies' (and charges, if you make the wrong choices);

- Ticketmunky concentrates on Season Tickets and a rewards scheme offering up to 5% by value in holiday vouchers. There is a 2.5% charge for credit card use (debit cards are nil charge). A word of warning: I do not know whether the net holiday cost is value for money - there may be other ways to achieve a better discount. Their URL is <http://www.ticketmunky.com>.
- Mytrainticket.co.uk offers Airmiles with purchases over £10.00. There are also avoidable fees on this site - Credit Card - 2.25% (use a debit card avoids this) and for posting tickets - £1.50 (ticket on departure or advance collection from a ticket machine avoids this). If you want tickets posted to you, or to use a credit card, then I suggest you use another site - eg FCC do not charge a credit card fee, nor a normal post delivery charge. Their URL is <http://www.mytrainticket.co.uk/>.

If there are other sites which allow you in some circumstances to avoid all fees and offer a "freebie" on top, do let me know and I will mention them in a future newsletter.

Regards

*Neil*

Neil Middleton

13 February 2011