

31 August 2018



Dear Sirs

### **Rail timetable changes inquiry**

#### ***Written evidence submitted by APTU (The Association of Public Transport Users)***

1. APTU (The Association of Public Transport Users) is the rail user group for passengers between West Hampstead Thameslink and Harlington inclusive on the Govia Thameslink Railway (“GTR”) franchise (Thameslink brand). We are recognised by GTR as a stakeholder. Our response has been informed by prior feedback from our members on the issues that matter to them ~ and comments on a draft of this submission.

### **Summary**

2. The following are key points:
  - We have restricted our comments on the process for developing the May 2018 timetable to matters that we had a direct involvement in.
  - The timetable process did not allow time for consultation on the implemented timetable, which was significantly different to that proposed in earlier consultations.
  - We believe there was a culture of secrecy and unwillingness to pass on ‘bad news’ in a timely manner.
  - The designed timetable could not be operated reliably from day 1.
  - We see little desire to address the worst of the detriments imposed by the 20 May timetable – and the reductions thereto applied from 15 July.
  - A decision to defer the timetable change would probably have resulted in net passenger benefit.
  - The industry initially made an additional compensation offer that was not aligned with how passengers buy tickets.
  - The problems have probably been a significant cost to taxpayers.

3. In overall terms, the Rail Industry needs to take two types of action:
  - Adopt an improved process for timetable design and adoption that ensures that potential problems are identified early on, in time for the consultation process to be undertaken against a timetable that there is high confidence in; and early enough that there is time for further significant change to be made.
  - To revisit many of the decisions made in the latter stages of the compilation of the May 2018 Thameslink timetable to give proper consideration to the shortcomings in the delivered timetable to identify and action the needed improvements.

### **This response**

4. Our comments below are limited to matters we experienced directly, and we have not repeated or expanded upon articles etc prepared by others, as we have sought to avoid 'hear say', only referring to it when it is useful to give context to more direct impacts and interactions.
5. If comments have not already been received from the following, we believe it would benefit the Committee if comments were actively sought from:
  - Railfuture (Ian Brown)
  - Modern Railways (Roger Ford)
  - Londonreconnections.com ('Pedantic of Purley').
6. We also draw your attention to the submission by St Albans & District Council which describes the detrimental impact of the service shortcomings on the local community.

### **The timetable development process**

7. The timetable offered from 20 May was the result of a major re-think by GTR as to how deliverable the timetable plan was in place at the start of the franchise in 2014. This resulted in a number of significant changes for the core design, including the introduction of a Luton – Rainham service.
8. The consultation process for the timetable change commenced well ahead of May 2018 – for instance we have a response we submitted dated 8 December 2016 on file.

9. It seems to us that the original concept of consulting on broad themes and then following this up with more specific topics and an outline timetable was the correct one. However, in retrospect, there was still too much uncertainty at the time of the consultations, particularly the ones involving draft timetables, as matters that showed they could not be implemented in full only became apparent (or at least were only explained to stakeholders) well after the consultation ended.
10. It was not until 14 November 2017 that we were updated (as were other stakeholders at a meeting near St Pancras) that the new timetable would be phased in. Modern Railways reports that GTR recommended this to the DfT in April 2017. For Midland Mainline users of services between Bedford and St Pancras, the direct impact of this change was small, but for users of services on the East Coast Mainline this was a very substantial detrimental change.
11. It was not until 8 December that we were informed about the incompatibilities between the proposed East Midlands Trains and GTR timetables on the Midland Mainline, and EMT's consequent decision not to call at Bedford and Luton in peak hours (in the direction of peak traffic flow). It is not clear when this became a realistic requirement, but as described below, there was a positive decision not to engage with those outside the industry for some time. This decision did have significant adverse impacts for Thameslink users and it was not possible to have any form of consultation on the options, to investigate mitigating actions or similar due to lack of time before the timetable was due to be in operation.
12. The main adverse impacts of the EMT change were:
  - Increased crowding on Thameslink services as around 2,150 passengers (per peak) had to switch from EMT to Thameslink.
  - A significant loss of service at Flitwick, Leagrave and Harpenden as 6 Thameslink trains per peak service ceased to call at these stations to minimise journey times to Luton and Bedford.
  - A very uneven pattern of services at the above stations during the rush hour as 2 services per hour were removed, but the times of others could not be changed. For instance, service intervals from London Bridge to Harpenden from 17:51 on a weekday are 3 minutes, 17

minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes\*, 10 minutes (at present, the service marked ‘\*’ is temporarily cancelled, leaving a 30 minute gap).

- Slower journeys on less comfortable rolling stock for Bedford and Luton users (even with the stops removed, Thameslink services take longer).

13. We have been unable to determine definitively who made what decisions when as regards these changes, but understand the final outcome to be a variation in the Franchise agreement to require there to be 6 trains per peak running Bedford to/from St Pancras in 47 minutes or less.

14. The collective impact of the above is:

- The planned service from 20 May was substantially different to that consulted on.
- Changes were publicised so late that there was time neither for a meaningful consultation, nor any mitigation.

### **Culture of secrecy / unwillingness to pass on bad news**

15. We complained about the late breaking news described above (paragraphs 10 and 11) and were told, most specifically as regards the EMT changes, that Thameslink had been instructed not to engage with us before the time of the meeting. Whilst the news to be passed on was unwelcome, we believe it would have been much better to engage earlier with stakeholders and talk about ‘possibilities’ rather than wait until news was confirmed as detrimental.

- We have read elsewhere of comments about the entire timetabling process not facing up to difficulties in delivery and the above is consistent with this.

16. This culture was further evidenced by GTR declining at short notice to appear at our Annual members meeting with them on 19 June, even though it shortly followed a session before the Transport Committee, so relevant information was already in the public domain so capable of being re-iterated.

### **The designed timetable could not be operated**

17. It has proved impossible to operate the timetable planned for 20 May; after a period when there were very significant numbers of cancellations

(many at very short notice), a new 'official' timetable was released with reduced service levels to improve performance and certainty (the 15 July changes).

18. Right up until the week of 6 May we were told the timetable was basically achievable, albeit with a very small number of cancellations expected whilst the transfer to the new timetable was completed. There was no suggestion of the scale of problems that have subsequently occurred – we were told of late completion of various pre-requisites for the timetable, but these were explained as being less than ideal and would 'prevent great performance'.
19. Possibly because resources were focussed immediately beforehand on addressing late breaking news on the planned timetable, GTR seemed to be particularly unable to cope with operating the timetable. Key symptoms included:
  - An inability to tell passengers reliably in advance which trains were running or their stopping patterns, which were often subject to late change. Passengers needed to take 'pot luck' and turn up at the station and see what would operate.
  - A high rate of cancellations or, in some cases, stops being removed with no prior notice (often referred to as 'skip stopping').
  - An inability to manage the service in any meaningful fashion, resulting in long gaps (1 hour or more) in the actual service.
  - This in part seemed to be because decisions were being made 'on the fly'. They were then being badly communicated to drivers and the resulting confusion and announcements mid journey served to further annoy passengers and add to delays (for instance the time taken whilst the passengers on the train disembark and those on the platform get on).
  - Overcrowding on platforms, where there were long gaps, with very upset passengers, arising from cancellations and general poor quality of information; often platform staff were no better informed.
  - A particular challenge arose because St Albans has become an interchange station for passengers changing between fast trains. The unreliability of the service meant passengers to stations such as Harpenden would get a Thameslink Express service (not calling at their

own station) and change at St Albans – making some progress being seen a distinct benefit. The station is not designed for the interchange of lots of passengers, as it has a single footbridge, already busy with those alighting there..

20. The current, reduced, timetable is still not as reliable as that operating before 20 May; whilst many of the problems described above have now been addressed and the cancellation rate much reduced, and service management improved, any service failure continues to have significant impact in view of the longer gaps between services in the current revised timetable – for instance at the weekend, a single cancellation results in a 1 hour gap (the normal interval being 15 minutes).

### **There is little desire to address passenger impact**

21. We are now seeing little effort by the rail industry to engage in actions that might allow the timetable to be improved. For instance:

- East Midlands trains seem unwilling to engage in discussions as to how peak hour services might quickly return to Luton and Bedford.
- Thameslink seem to be focused on Performance, as expressed in the PPM measure, rather than passenger impact. For instance a slightly lower PPM with a more frequent planned service will lead, on a net basis, to fewer long gaps in services. To minimise passenger impact services would be returned to the timetable as quickly as possible.
- There seems to be no willingness to revisit the Thameslink Express service concept (which has led to significant service diminution at Flitwick, Leagrave and Harpenden) ~ despite these services being relatively lightly loaded north of St Albans (which just further annoys travellers from stations like Harpenden).
- The current timetable in place from 15 July has resulted in a significant culling of services, most obvious in off-peak and weekend services. Whilst the loss of peak services over the summer was unwanted, the reduce traffic levels arising from passenger holidays at least partially mitigated this. This is not the case for weekend and off-peak services – the former have being reduced by around 50%.
- We keep getting told that change is impossible because of the extra measures Network Rail are putting in place to control the December

timetable change. Whilst we do understand that extra measures are needed to better control large timetable changes, they just seem to be used as an excuse to do nothing.

**A decision to defer the timetable change would probably have resulted in net passenger benefit.**

22. It is far from clear to us that the new timetable has provided a net benefit from passengers. Whilst it has created new direct journey opportunities (eg Brighton to Cambridge, and for our stations, a return to London Bridge) and increased some service frequencies, the need to both impose timetabled service reductions (such as the loss of services from Harpenden caused by the introduction of Thameslink Express services) and the exceptionally poor delivery in recent months counter balances this significantly.
23. Considering this from the perspective of the typical Midland Mainline Thameslink traveller, our view is that there is a significant net loss of service usability at present; many capacity benefits are yet to arrive, performance has been disastrous, and one of the main benefits – services via London Bridge, was already being provided via shadow running.
24. This is reinforced by the rock bottom customer perception of GTR. Public meetings arranged and chaired by Bim Afolami, MP for Hitchin and Harpenden on 4 and 5 July evidenced packed meeting halls and outright fury from aggrieved commuters. Passengers, many of whom work in large organisations in London, who undertake challenging projects do not understand why (to them) a simple timetable change cannot be planned, trained for, tested (even by simulation) and then implemented with a high degree of achievement against target.
25. We are not in a position to judge the net loss / benefit to passengers in other areas of the GTR franchise; we suspect however that users on the Great Northern would also assess it as a net loss.
26. We are also not in a position to meaningfully assess the impact on GTR and its staff, but it is clear to us that that staff have become very demoralised – both from the poor service itself and GTR's seeming inability to explain services actually running to them. Having said that, some staff have definitely demonstrated great proactivity and willingness; for instance

this definitely applies to one of the platform staff at my local station (Harpenden).

27. We recognise that any decision to defer the timetable change would probably have had to be a nationwide decision and also would have had to have been made a long time before 20 May. Nevertheless, with the benefit of hindsight, this very painful and difficult decision might have been the right one.
28. I note that today Crossrail have announced the deferral of the start of cross London services by around 9 months; this does show that the industry can make these decisions, albeit, possibly only after the Thameslink (and Northern) experience.

### **The initial additional compensation offer showed a lack of understanding**

29. The rail industry did eventually come up with an initial offer of additional compensation offer for passengers (broadly, a refund of around 4 weeks travel for season ticket holders), but showed that it did not pay sufficient attention to passenger impact. It told us that the offer was limited to season ticket holders as they were those that 'needed' to travel. A season ticket only offers significant benefit to a traveller who uses the trains 10 times a week, Monday to Friday peak hours. For any other travel pattern, such as part time working (eg 3 days week), a season ticket is either more expensive or broadly neutral – there are many such people who work or study who also 'need' to travel.
30. We and many others, including some MPs, lobbied for this to change pointing out that Season ticket holders are not the only passengers with a 'need to travel' and that this was unfair. Questions were raised as to whether this breached the Equality Act.
31. We were informed earlier this week that the additional compensation offer has been extended to day ticket users who travelled 3 or more days per week. We welcome this extension.

### **There has been significant cost to the taxpayer**

32. In addition to the additional compensation costs (which we understand have shared funding from the Department for Transport, Network Rail [de

facto a tax payer cost] and Govia [their cost]), tax payers have also funded Delay Repay costs and will have seen a revenue reduction as people chose not to travel. For instance a member commenting on a draft of this document observed she is regularly driving from Leagrave to Flitwick, rather than taking the train.

## Conclusion

We are happy to update the Transport Committee in person if wanted - or to speak to / engage in further dialogue with your Researchers.

Yours faithfully

*Neil Middleton*

Neil Middleton  
Chairman  
APTU