

30 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.

### **Summary**

2. The following are key points:
  - a. We have restricted our comments on the process for developing the May 2018 timetable to matters that we had a direct involvement in.
  - b. The timetable process did not allow time for consultation on the implemented timetable, which was significantly different to that proposed in earlier consultations.
  - c. We believe there was a culture of secrecy and unwillingness to pass on ‘bad news’ in a timely manner.
  - d. The designed timetable could not be operated reliably from day 1.
  - e. 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.
  - f. The industry initially made an additional compensation offer that is not aligned with how passengers buy tickets.
3. In overall terms, the Rail Industry needs to take two types of action:
  - a. 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.

- b. To revisit many of the decisions made in the latter stages of the compilation of the May 2019 Thameslink timetable to give proper consideration to the shortcomings in the delivered timetable to identify 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:
  - a. Railfuture (Ian Brown)
  - b. Modern Railways (Roger Ford)
  - c. 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 in place at the start of the franchise was. 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) after the consultation.

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 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 decision not to call at Bedford and Luton in peak hours (in the direction of peak traffic flow). It is not clear that 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 were:
  - a. Increased crowding on Thameslink services as around 2,150 passengers (per peak) had to switch from EMT to Thameslink.
  - b. 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.
  - c. Slower journeys on less comfortable rolling stock for Bedford and Luton users (even with the stops removed ('b' above) 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:

- a. The planned service from 20 May was substantially different to that consulted on.
- b. 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.

- a. 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.

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

16. It has proved impossible to operate the timetable planned for 20 May; indeed since then some services have been removed from the timetable temporarily to improve performance (the 15 July changes).

17. 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.

18. 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:

- a. An inability to tell passengers which trains were running. Passengers needed to take 'pot luck' and turn up at the station and see what would operate.

- b. A high rate of cancellations.
  - c. An inability to manage the service in any meaningful fashion, resulting in long gaps (1 hour or more) in the actual service.
19. The operated, reduced, timetable is still not as reliable as that operating before 20 May; whilst problem 'a' above has 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 planned timetable.

### **The compensation offer shows a lack of understanding**

20. The rail industry did eventually come up with an additional compensation offer for passengers (broadly, a refund of around 4 weeks travel for season ticket holders), but showed that it is not paying 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 people who work or study who also 'need' to travel.
21. We have continued to lobby for a change to policy, in particular highlighting that the current approach may breach Equality legislation, as the portions by sex, age etc is thought to vary for season tickets vs day tickets due to varying portions of part time working.

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

22. We are now seeing little effort by the rail industry to engage in actions that might allow the timetable to be improved. For instance:
- a. East Midlands trains seem unwilling to engage in discussions as to how peak hour services might quickly return
  - b. 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.

- c. 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).
- d. 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 can understand that extra measures are needed to better control large timetable changes, they just seem to be used as an excuse to do nothing.

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

23. 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 people who work or study who also 'need' to travel.
24. 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.
25. 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.

### **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*

Draft

Neil Middleton  
Chairman  
APTU