



Department for Transport

From the Secretary of State
Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP

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Dear Colleague,

When we met last week, I promised to send you an update about the continuing problems on the Southern rail network. I am well aware of the level of distress and inconvenience that this is causing to many of your constituents, and that the situation needs to be resolved as quickly as possible.

When I took over my current role in mid-July, I said that this issue was right at the top of my priority list, and it remains so. At the same time I did not want to pretend that I had instant solutions to the problems, so instead I have been working to make sure that we get this right.

The most immediate and difficult issue is the industrial action that has blighted the network for several months. The argument is over the arrival on this network of a fleet of new twelve coach trains which will operate primarily on the Brighton main line. These are state of the art new trains, costing a total of £2 billion, and they are due to be introduced in stages across the next few months. Some of the newer existing trains will then be transferred to other parts of the network, meaning that many passengers on Southern will experience new or relatively new trains, and the older ones – which have reliability problems – will be phased out.

Like most modern trains, the newer ones are designed to be operated by the drivers alone, and use automated systems and CCTV to allow them to operate the doors on arrival or departure from a station. Indeed, a great number operate this way already on this network. However it does mean that the traditional role of the guard is changing. There will continue to be a second member of staff on the trains that currently have one. Some of the people who have been contacting me have been suggesting that the driver will be the only person on their trains. That is not the case. The current guards will remain on the trains, but in a slightly different role, helping passengers.

No one is losing their jobs or having their pay cut, and indeed my own view is that this network needs virtually all of its current staffing levels as roles become increasingly passenger facing. However there is no need to have the guard pressing the button that opens and closes the doors as the train stops at stations. If we were to place buttons across the network, it would cost some millions of pounds to return them to their factory and retrofit systems that allow the guard this role.

It is worth saying that more than half the trains operating in the UK already use such an approach. The unions argue that they are not safe – even though they have been working this way since the days of British Rail, and today we have the safest railway in Europe carrying thousands of additional passengers each year. The independent Rail Safety and Standards Board has said that Driver Only Operation is perfectly safe, and around two thirds of the train currently in operation on the GTR network are already operated in this way.

So I am clear that the strikes, and the unofficial action when heavy pressure from national union leaders has prompted large numbers of members of staff to call in sick at the last minute, causing delays and cancellations, is wholly unnecessary. I very much regret the fact that the unions are doing this, and indeed are now threatening industrial action elsewhere on the network where new trains are being built. This is all about modern trains and modern ways of working, not making people redundant or reducing the number of people available to help passengers.

The issue of the strikes is not the only one facing the Southern network, though. Strike days are one thing – but the railway should be working much better than it is the rest of the time. Having looked carefully at the issue over the past six weeks, I think that the relationship between the train operator, and Network Rail, which runs the tracks, is not working at all well, and needs to change. My own constituency is served by both South West Trains and Southern, and it's clear that SWT is much better run than Southern. One big reason for this is that the SWT routes are controlled by a joint team that oversees both the trains and the tracks. If something goes wrong, they work together to sort it rather than blaming each other.

This is the way I want the Southern network to be run going forward. So I have appointed Chris Gibb, the man who used to be Chief Operating Officer of Virgin Trains, and is now a non-executive director of Network Rail, and is regarded as one of the most experienced figures in the industry, to sort out how best to do something similar on Southern. To be clear, while he is reporting to me, he will be paid for by Southern. I met him last week for a first update and he is already working actively on how to make this railway run better.

There has also been a change of leadership within Network Rail's operation on the Southern route. It is clear to me that a significant proportion of the problems are being caused by regular failure of the systems on the route – such as signal and junction failures, for example. There has been some bad luck, such as the collapsed sewer that disrupted services over the summer, but too many things are going wrong.

This is what the money I announced a couple of weeks ago is being spent on. I want things that have a tendency to go wrong to be fixed before they do, and I want a better and quicker response when things do break down. The money is being spent on things like replacing a couple of problematic pieces of track

where there are regular failures and setting up more rapid response teams to deal with issues when they arise. Despite misleading claims by union leaders in the papers, none of this money is going to the train operating company GTR, which operates Southern. It is coming from Network Rail budgets and is being spent by Network Rail on their operations.

The measures taken by GTR in the past few weeks to improve the situation are beginning to bear some fruit – with the restoration of a significant number of the services which were withdrawn earlier in the summer. I know some routes are still suffering badly, though, and I am hopeful that they will see improvements shortly as well.

Finally, my prime concern in all of this is the passengers. I know what a really difficult time many of your constituents have had because of these problems. There are many lessons to be learned, but my main priority is helping sort them out for the long term. I cannot promise that there will be no more strikes – but I will do everything I can to get to a point where there is a decent service on other days.

I have not forgotten the issue of compensation for passengers. Paul Maynard and I have already indicated that we will lift the rail industry's exemption from the Consumer Rights Act, to bring it into line with other businesses. I will set out more plans shortly.

I am genuinely sorry that your constituents have faced so much disruption. I think we have made some progress, but I am well aware how much more needs to be done. I hope the unions will lift their totally unnecessary industrial action to make it easier to get this railway back to normal.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'C' followed by a horizontal line.

RT HON CHRIS GRAYLING MP

Secretary of State for Transport