

The Rt Hon Sir Nicholas Soames
MP for Mid Sussex
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

14 June 2016

Dear The Rt Hon Sir Nicholas

Re: Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) Performance & Industrial Action Update

As promised, I am writing to you following GTR's MP meeting at the House of Commons last week to provide an overview of the current situation, a way forward and give you information that you can pass on to your constituents. Inevitably, this letter is lengthy but I wanted to give you the full background to the current situation.

I fully recognise that the last couple of months have been particularly difficult for many of our customers and I greatly regret the inconvenience to them and their families. Passengers have been disrupted by strike action twice and suffered delays and cancellations on a daily basis. I would like to personally apologise to everyone who has been affected by this disruption, and assure you that my team and I regard putting things right as our top priority.

As you know, the Government is investing £6.5 billion on our network as part of the Thameslink Programme. We are introducing new trains, improving facilities at stations and modernising working practices so that our employees are better able to serve passengers. The changes are against the backdrop of a phenomenal rise in passenger numbers in recent years which has put the network under increasing pressure. **We have to make these changes now to ensure that services are able to cope with the continuing rise in passenger numbers.**

As you are also aware these essential infrastructure upgrades to boost capacity have temporarily reduced the capability of the network we operate over. This has resulted in the level of delay increasing when incidents disrupt our services. On some parts of our network the effect of delays is four times worse than was the case before the works started at London Bridge. As the Thameslink Programme delivers upgraded infrastructure over the next couple of years these restrictions will gradually ease. For example, this summer, parts of the new London Bridge station will reopen giving passengers better facilities and less crowded conditions on the station. At the end of this year the fourth approach track at London Bridge will be reinstated. This will improve the flexibility of the network and allow us to reduce delays. However it will not be until the end of 2018 before the network is in its final configuration and will thus be able to support the substantial increase in the number of services which we are planning to operate.

Recognising these challenges, we have implemented a joint improvement plan with Network Rail. The objective is to give passengers the best possible service we can whilst the infrastructure is upgraded. We are making a substantial investment to tackle the causes of delay, improve punctuality and enhance the reliability of services. In the past year approximately 60% of delays have related to issues which Network Rail are responsible for. These issues include track, signalling, power supplies and network operations. As a result Network Rail have implemented a plan to improve route reliability which has involved changing maintenance practices, investing in new equipment and using new technology to identify potential failures before they occur. We have supported this by giving Network Rail more time late at night to work on the railway. Approximately 40% of delays in the past year have been the direct responsibility of GTR including fleet, stations management, train crew and operations. As a result we have strengthened our fleet maintenance and are bringing new trains into service which will boost capacity and ultimately be more reliable than the ones they replace. We are running the biggest ever driver training programme in the UK rail industry. Govia Thameslink Railway currently has 261 drivers in training, 74 of which are going to be employed by Southern once trained. On the Southern network we are qualifying drivers at the rate of two a week. We are also focusing station management teams on further reducing delays at stations. After a very poor autumn period we were starting to see the benefits of this plan coming through in improved performance results. Between December and April we saw the Public Performance Measure (PPM) increase from 75.6% to 83.7%. However in recent weeks this improvement has been substantially set back by industrial action and the associated rise in cancellations.

As you will be aware, this industrial action stems from the changes we're making to improve customer service on trains and at stations, to make employees more visible and of greater assistance to passengers. These changes are commitments in our Franchise Agreement with the Department for Transport. The timing is associated with the introduction of new trains on Gatwick Express and Thameslink over the coming months. We also need to address the desire of many customers for staff to be more visible and better able to help them on their journeys. We had planned to introduce these new trains and associated working practice changes in consultation with the trade unions, but during the autumn the drivers' union ASLEF and the RMT who represent conductors agreed to stand together to oppose any further extension of driver only operation across the whole of the UK rail network. This put our plans for introducing the new Gatwick Express trains in jeopardy because ASLEF said that they regarded the new 12 car trains on this route as representing an extension of driver only operation. **This despite these services having operated for 17 years without a conductor on board.** We have been to the High Court twice and secured injunctions against ASLEF preventing them from encouraging their members not to drive these new trains.

At the same time we sought to discuss working practice changes with the RMT which will see operational control of the doors pass to drivers on trains which are equipped with modern CCTV systems. This method of operation, already in place on more than 60% of services across Govia Thameslink Railway, will free up our on-board staff to provide better service to customers. We plan to make this change on existing Southern services which are CCTV equipped and as we introduce the new Thameslink trains they will also use this method of operation. Some of these Thameslink services will operate to destinations on the Southern network such as Horsham and East Grinstead, so we had to press ahead with addressing this issue now to pave the way for

new services and increased capacity in the future. Regrettably, the RMT have objected to our plans to change the method of operation on Southern as a matter of principle. In the past few months we made a number of attempts to engage them in discussion about making this change. They made it clear that they would not agree to any change of role which involved conductors losing operational control of the doors. **This despite the fact that 60% of GTR already use this method of operation, we have committed that everyone who wants a job will have one, nobody will lose any pay as a result of the changes and at least as many trains which have a second person on board today, will do so in the future.**

The RMT's refusal to enter into meaningful discussions has left us with no choice but to press ahead with implementing the new roles. This process will commence on a progressive basis from 21 August, 2016. We have sought expressions of interest from our employees and 24 Conductors and 69 Revenue Protection Officers have already said that they are willing to transfer to the new on-board supervisor role. In addition 194 conductors have been confirmed in post. These individuals will operate trains not equipped with modern CCTV systems and will retain responsibility for closing the doors. We will be working with the remainder of our Revenue Protection and Conductor workforce who have not yet expressed a preference about their future role to ensure that we have sufficient employees to fulfil our Franchise Commitment of employing 440 on board supervisors, in addition to the conductors who will be remaining in post. Given the progress we are making on implementing these changes I hope that the RMT will now accept that further strike action is pointless and completely unnecessary. However I should make clear that ASLEF, although being forced through the courts to change their stance on Gatwick Express, have told us that they intend to resist the extension of driver only operation across the rest of the network. We have a strategy in place to address this in conjunction with our plans to introduce on board supervisors.

As you know passengers have already been significantly disrupted by two periods of strike action taken by the RMT's conductor members. Immediately following the first day of strike action we saw an unprecedented increase in conductor sickness levels. As a result in May 2016, Southern performance dropped from 83.73 to 75.59%. Following numerous enquiries from passengers and stakeholders about sickness levels amongst our conductor workforce we published information on the levels of sickness we were experiencing. We revealed that in 32 working days before 25 May there were 1066 days of sickness absence taken by conductors. One in six individuals (or 74 conductors) took at least one day off during this period. During this time we saw the average number of services cancelled as a result of conductor unavailability rise to 83 (compared to less than five in the period before the first strike dates). My team are engaging with staff on a daily basis, offering support to conductors who are ill and working to get back to get them back to work as soon as possible. We have a structured managing for attendance procedure in place and every individual who takes time off work is seen by their manager on return to duties. If absence is persistent individuals are warned and the process can ultimately lead to termination of employment.



GATWICK EXPRESS



ThamesLink/

In the past couple of weeks the challenge of delivering services has been further exacerbated by a reduction in the number of our drivers' willing to work overtime at some of our depots. The impact of this is particularly pronounced on certain lines of route. As you are aware, although we are training significant numbers of new drivers, we are still reliant on individuals working overtime to provide cover for colleagues at certain times of the year. As we qualify more drivers this reliance will reduce but for the time being, this is impacting on the number of cancellations that we are facing.

I know that you will want to know how we are going to address these issues. Firstly we are pressing ahead with implementation of the new on-board supervisor role; once implemented this change will mean that when services are disrupted we will not be reliant on a second person being on board before we allow a train to run. Much of the disruption we are experiencing at the moment will be dealt with by this change. Secondly we are pressing ahead with the implementation of our driver training programme. This will reduce our reliance on overtime working and provide the additional capacity we need to train drivers to operate the new trains. Thirdly we are continuing to implement our joint improvement plan with Network Rail which will improve infrastructure and train reliability. Finally we will continue to work with our employees to address sickness and attendance issues and to ensure that we get individuals back to work as quickly as possible.

I cannot give guarantees about when services will return to normal because some of the factors influencing this are not within my direct control, such as potential industrial action. However the combination of the above actions together with the gradual easing of infrastructure constraints will see a progressive improvement in the position in the coming months. I will keep you updated on the progress of our plans. From our regular Meet the Manager sessions, the many letters and emails I receive and from my experience as a daily user of our services I am acutely aware how difficult things are for passengers at present. I give you my personal assurance that we will do everything possible to address the current unacceptable situation. I appreciate that this is a rather long letter but I wanted to set out the full position. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

Charles Horton
Chief Executive Officer
Govia Thameslink Railway