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Dear Lord Adonis

Rail services in London during the bad weather in January 2010

I am writing, on behalf of the London Assembly Transport Committee, about the disruption to rail services in London during the bad weather in early January 2010.

In light of comments we have received from rail passengers and responses provided by relevant train operating companies, we believe there are a number of issues that should be considered to help ensure a future snowfall does not result in such severe disruption again. We hope that this submission will be considered as part of reviews we understand are now taking place into the rail industry's response to the bad weather, including the review being undertaken by its National Task Force. This response has been prepared in consultation with Members and will be formally agreed at our meeting on 2 March 2010.

Background information

This letter follows our previous work into the impact of snowfall on London's transport network in February 2009 and our report *Slipping Up? Impact of the extreme weather on London transport* (March 2009). In this report, we summarised how London Boroughs, Transport for London (TfL) and the emergency services had responded to the bad weather on 1 and 2 February 2009 and highlighted a number of areas that should be improved if London was to face a similar situation again.

In light of this past work, we were obviously keen to ensure that the capital's transport system operated well during the bad weather in December 2009 and January 2010. In most instances it did and it was pleasing to see the bus network and London Underground largely running as normal. However, it was disappointing that, by contrast, some national rail services into and out of London were significantly disrupted. Many rail passengers experienced considerable problems.

We wrote to Southeastern about the level of disruption to its rail services on Wednesday 6, Thursday 7 and Friday 8 January 2010, highlighting a number of issues that passengers had raised and seeking a detailed explanation. Following further disruption, particularly in relation to First Capital Connect's Thameslink service, we wrote to all train operating companies serving London. We asked for details of the changes to their services during the period Monday 4 January – Thursday 14 January 2010 and the arrangements put in place to minimise the impact of the snow and keep their passengers informed. The issues raised in the remainder of this letter draw on the responses train operating companies have provided. Copies of all these responses are enclosed for ease of reference.

We recognise that extreme weather conditions will inevitably lead to some disruption. Our concern is that best practice in dealing with and responding to such events must be consistently applied across the rail network. Given the economic loss from all the transport disruption in January has been estimated at £600 million per day, this is clearly an issue of regional and national importance.

Our issues for further consideration

Planning rail services in advance of bad weather

We are concerned that, although much of London was affected by similar snowfall on 6, 7 and 8 January 2010, Southeastern planned a significant reduction in services on these days compared with other train operating companies. Southeastern's revised timetable on these dates appeared to represent a reduction in its planned services of more than 50 per cent. Such a significant reduction implemented at very short notice adversely affected many people. Passengers have highlighted the lack of trains, particularly in the morning rush hour and in the evening when Southeastern stopped running services after 8pm. They have also commented that the infrequency of services meant any trains running were often too full to board.

Whilst Southeastern has told us a significantly revised timetable was necessary because of a risk that its trains would become stranded if ice formed on the electrical conductor rail (the third rail), we note neighbouring train operating companies using the third rail system did not plan such extensive service reductions. Southern scheduled its full metro service on these days. It also introduced a revised timetable for its services to the Sussex coast but this amounted to less than a 20 per cent reduction in its normal planned services. South West Trains largely planned its usual services apart from on 6 January 2010 when it ran its snowplan timetable. It told us this timetable, which provides for around two-thirds of normal trains, is only used as a last resort. London Overground, which also uses the third rail system, planned just a small number of cancellations, amounting to no more than 6 trains (or one percent of its services) per day.

Southeastern's approach also compares unfavourably to most other train operating companies in London: c2c operated its published timetable throughout the period of bad weather; National Express East Anglia planned to operate its normal service; and Chiltern Railways adopted an approach of generally running the normal timetable with the planned cancellation of a small number of services. London Midland also made no changes to its planned services. It told us it did not see a reason to pre-plan any reduction in the level of train service at any time during this period. It endeavoured to ensure that every train completed its journey, even if that meant that on occasion the train was extremely late. Its aim throughout was to get people to and from work.

When a train operating company such as Southeastern plans significant reductions in services in advance of bad weather, this raises questions. Many passengers have queried if this was motivated by a desire to meet performance targets relating to punctuality and reliability and thus avoiding a need to pay compensation if performance falls below target. By providing a reduced service, Southeastern's performance is measured against a lower output; if it runs fewer services this means fewer opportunities for delays. Indeed Southeastern has told us that by anticipating the period of bad weather it was able to publish and deliver a more reliable timetable than some other operators. It incurred fewer delayed minutes during this period than Southern and South West Trains. Yet, whilst reliability is undoubtedly important, it is also necessary to ensure a sufficient number of services operate in the first place. Both Southern and South West Trains attempted to run more of their usual services. We are impressed by train operating companies who seek to run their normal services during bad weather and who only plan to cancel services as a last resort.

We believe the balance between providing a reliable timetable and maximising rail services during bad weather should be examined as part of the review by the National Task Force. The potential influence of perverse incentives created by existing performance targets for train operating companies should be considered in this context.

Compensation for rail passengers if services are altered because of bad weather

Many customers have complained about a possible lack of compensation when train operating companies pre-plan a reduction in services during bad weather. Southeastern has told us that passengers who purchased daily and weekly tickets and then could not travel on 6, 7 and 8 January 2010 could claim a refund and that any passengers whose journeys were delayed by 30 minutes or more were eligible for compensation under its Passenger Charter. As highlighted above, however, Southeastern's passengers were not necessarily inconvenienced by delays during the bad weather in January but by a lack of service. During this period, other operators may have been required to provide more compensation despite offering a better service.

We believe that when a significant reduction in rail services is planned in advance of bad weather all passengers including season ticket holders should be entitled to compensation. The compensation available should be linked to an agreed industry-wide standard for providing rail services in bad weather and widely publicised.

Taking decisions on the provision of rail services during bad weather

We are concerned that, during the recent bad weather, it was not always clear whether train operating companies or Network Rail, as the body responsible for railway infrastructure, determined the services provided. Southeastern, Southern and National Express East Anglia have all reported that decisions about planned services were taken in conjunction with Network Rail yet Southeastern then implemented a different approach to these companies. When rail services are likely to be affected by bad weather, we want to be clear that other organisations, particularly the Department for Transport, are commenting on the proposals for service provision. This could help to ensure there is a consistency of approach and all the possible options are being explored. In our report on the disruption in February 2009, we highlighted the potential role of the Mayor in challenging senior officials at TfL to ensure everything possible was being done in response to unusual situations.

We suggest that, where there is likelihood of rail services being affected by bad weather, it is made clear that train operating companies and Network Rail are consulting other bodies such as the Department for Transport about their proposals for the services to be operated. This could help to reassure passengers that efforts are being made to achieve a consistent approach across the whole rail network.

Adequate contingency arrangements for rail services during bad weather

We believe that the different responses provided by train operating companies to the recent bad weather raise questions about their individual contingency plans. This includes their arrangements for reducing the formation of ice, the location of rolling stock, and assisting staff to get to work.

Some passengers have complained that Southeastern's contingency plan appeared to be based on changing all its services when snow fell rather than planning to try to provide at least some services in areas where there was less snow. Passengers have questioned the extent to which Southeastern ran "ghost trains" overnight to stop ice from forming on tracks. Also, where it located trains overnight to make it easy to run services in the morning. Southeastern told us it ran 'ghost' trains but had experienced problems with many trains stabled overnight in Kent where the snowfall was heavy. South West Trains reported similar difficulties with trains stabled in Surrey and Hampshire. It also said

it had a problem with staff finding it difficult to get to work. First Great Western reported that one of the biggest issues it encountered was staff unable to get to work in and around the Reading area, following road closures and the cancellation of the local bus service.

Given that some train operating companies were able to provide better services than others during the recent bad weather, there may be value in sharing contingency plans. National Express East Anglia told us it did everything possible to keep trains moving including employing de-icers at depots and stations. Chiltern Railways reported that it had teams to de-ice/baby sit points and where trains were unable to call at certain stations because of frozen points, it arranged special stops at nearby stations to compensate. London Midland told us it had employed additional staff at points of need such as train crew locations. It also provided standby taxis to enable staff trapped at home by the snow to get into work.

In addition to ensuring individual train operating companies have effective contingency plans, we note a need to review the mitigation measures implemented by Network Rail during bad weather. London Overground reported that at times Network Rail was unable to guarantee the de-icing of the third rail on sections of the network. It suggested that, in future, there was a need to ensure Network Rail carried out de-icing on the third rail as soon as low temperatures were forecast. London Overground is also considering the deployment of a specific de-icing train over the entire route where power is supplied through a third rail.

We suggest that the National Task Force should as part of its review examine the individual train operating companies' and Network Rail's contingency plans to ensure they are all preparing to do as much as they can to mitigate the impact of bad weather.

Improvements to the trains and tracks to help them perform better in bad weather

We welcome the fact that a number of train operating companies have made modifications to their trains since February 2009 to help ensure improved performance during snow and icy conditions. Southern told us that it had introduced an enhanced ice-mode to its trains' traction, which undoubtedly reduced the amount of disruption to its services in January. National Express East Anglia reported that it had undertaken a fleet modification to minimise the impact of snow on the electric motors of some of its trains. South West Trains reported fitting new blanking sheets and additional filters to prevent snow ingress.

However, we are concerned that not all operators have yet made such modifications to their trains. First Capital Connect reported that it ran an emergency timetable on some days in early January largely because of train technological failures. Although after February 2009 it had identified a need to replace traction motors on its trains to improve their performance, this programme of works had been postponed. It reported that, if these works had taken place, the bad weather in January would have had less impact on its service. However, we note its services had already been badly disrupted for some months because of train driver shortages. Southeastern also reported that it had not yet implemented a software upgrade on its trains because the manufacturer had experienced unexpected difficulties.

In addition to modifying trains, we recognise a need to address the problems with the third rail. South West Trains told us the key to significant further improvements in the railway's ability to operate in snow and ice would only come if the third rail issues were resolved. It reported that it had, with Southern and Southeastern, asked the National Task Force for a technical review of third rail technology. Southeastern also reported that Network Rail is now considering whether there is a case

for extending the provision of conductor rail heating which, although extremely expensive, could have a significant beneficial effect.

We believe First Capital Connect and Southeastern should make it a priority to modify their trains to enhance their performance during bad weather. We also support plans for a review of the third rail technology to see how it might be made to work better during bad weather.

Ensuring passengers are kept fully informed about rail services during bad weather

We are concerned that during the recent bad weather rail passengers were not kept fully informed of what was happening via train operating companies' websites, information provided at stations and reports in the media. Whilst, in the first instance, every effort should be made to reduce service disruption during bad weather, it is also necessary to ensure there are adequate arrangements in place to notify passengers when disruption is unavoidable.

Many passengers have complained that Southeastern provided little service information on its website on 6, 7 and 8 January 2010. In some cases, it only showed departure times from the first station and did not list departure times for intermediate stations on its routes. It also ceased to offer an on-line customer feedback option. Southeastern has told us that, following its experiences in February 2009, it sought to reduce the potential for its web site to become unavailable during times of heavy demand by providing a text only page with summary service information and a link to further information on the National Rail Enquiries web site. However, it was now considering further refinements to improve its website in light of the recent bad weather. South West Trains and Southern also reported difficulties in ensuring up-to-the minute service information was displayed on their websites in early January and were now exploring ways to improve this.

Many passengers have also complained about a lack of sufficient information at stations. Southeastern passengers reported that no printed timetable information was provided. Instead they received a handout providing details of a telephone number to call and a website to look at for further information. Platform displays were also not always showing correct information, which was a significant issue when a station was not staffed. Southeastern has acknowledged there were problems. It told us there were occasions when the information displays failed to keep up with the rapidly changing situation. Southern also reported on a need to learn lessons about providing real-time information to passengers during periods of disruption. It is now in the process of ordering blackberry devices and additional radios to provide station and train staff with even better up-to-the minute information for passengers. We welcome this step and any other actions that train operating companies can take to improve information provided at train stations.

We recognise that the media has a role to play in reporting any rail service disruption. Southeastern has reported that it issued press releases and undertook broadcast radio and TV interviews to help ensure passengers knew about changes to its services. However, many customers have complained that they did not see such reports in the media. London Midland has raised this as an issue. It reported that despite telling TV, radio and other media that it was operating normal services in early January, it found news channels were largely running a "do not travel" message. It told us that this was an issue which the rail industry needed to look at collectively as many passengers were influenced by such news messages and chose not to travel.

We suggest that the National Task Force should as part of its review consider a requirement for train operating companies to have sufficient technological capacity to provide their full websites with real time service information during periods of bad weather. It should also explore the options for improving the rail service information provided at stations and through the media at such times.

Providing rail passengers with confidence that lessons are being learned

We welcome indications from many train operating companies that they are now seeking to learn lessons from the service disruption during the recent bad weather. Many rail passengers were adversely affected and they will want to know that measures are being taken to reduce the likelihood of such disruption again. The rail industry can help to convince passengers that this is happening by publishing the findings from any individual reviews. In particular, Southeastern should publish details from its joint review with Network Rail since its services were so significantly reduced in early January.

We suggest that wherever possible passengers should have an opportunity to contribute their views and experiences to help ensure the problems they encountered are fully addressed. Given that the National Task Force is looking at ways in which rail service provision can be improved during bad weather and how the industry looks after its customers during periods of disruption, it seems vital that it has input from passengers, perhaps via representatives of passenger organisations.

We would like the findings from any reviews into the rail industry's response to the recent bad weather to be published so passengers can see what lessons have been learned. We also welcome passengers being given the opportunity to contribute directly to these reviews.

Following the disruption in February 2009 and again in January 2010 passengers need to know that all is being done to avoid further occasions when rail services in London are so severely disrupted because of bad weather. There is a pressing need to ensure train operating companies and Network Rail are working to minimise the need to change rail services significantly because of snow. Where disruption is unavoidable, they should be making every effort to keep passengers fully informed of what is happening. I hope the issues we raise in this letter may help to ensure this happens.

I trust the information we have gathered and summarised in this letter proves useful for your Department's ongoing reviews, as well as those being conducted by the rail industry, and we look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Caroline Pidgeon AM
Chair of the Transport Committee

Enc.

Cc: All train operating companies serving the London area and Network Rail