

LONDON ASSEMBLY

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM, Chair of the Transport Committee

London Assembly
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
London SE1 2AA

Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP
Secretary of State for Transport

18 July 2018

Dear Secretary of State,

Govia Thameslink Railway

The May timetable changes have caused disruption and inconvenience for hundreds of thousands of passengers across London and beyond. The level of service has been totally unacceptable, and is still far below what passengers were promised. This has been a failure of the whole rail industry – including your department – and must not be allowed to happen again. The London Assembly Transport Committee has taken evidence from rail experts, Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) and Network Rail, and I am writing to you to share our findings. We note the investigation to be carried out by Stephen Glaister; he is copied into this letter and we hope you both consider the issues we raise. We also note that the Mayor has written to you recently on this topic.

The May timetable changes were hugely complex, involving a large number of organisations and a variety of interdependencies. Setting up an Industry Readiness Board to manage this huge process may have been a good idea in theory, but it clearly failed in practice. Crucially, there was no single controlling mind who was willing or able to put the process on hold. The complexity of the rail industry structure is, in itself, part of the problem here and you need to consider whether changes need to be made at a structural level. Furthermore, while the industry's "can-do" culture is essential for getting things done and overcoming problems, it brings its own risks. Working on the basis that a solution will always be found can be dangerous; people need to be able to say "no, this just will not work". The chaos that unfolded after 20 May is proof that not enough people in the rail industry were willing to speak up in that kind of culture.

At our committee meeting on 25 June, Nick Brown (GTR Chief Operating Officer) told us that some "very late presenting problems" had caused the disruption. We do not share this assessment. Many of the problems were visible many months before May, and it should have been clear to the Industry Readiness Board that the timetable changes needed to be scaled back or delayed.

- The timetables should have been set 12-20 weeks before the change but some were still being approved just a few days before 20 May. It seems patently obvious that there must have been a point at which GTR and other operators simply wouldn't have enough time to prepare their train diagrams and work schedules, and then to roster their drivers.

- It should have been obvious that GTR would not have enough trained drivers for the routes on the new timetable. There are many factors at play here which all seem to have been ignored. GTR has not had enough drivers since your department first awarded it the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise, and it has struggled since then.
- The new Siemens 700 trains were delivered late, partly due to technical issues but also because your department was unable to agree a financing deal for two years – a failing confirmed by the National Audit Office.
- The rail industry's reliance on rest-day working for training is another factor that slowed down the pipeline of drivers for GTR services, and one that needs to be urgently addressed; we cannot think of another industry where workers have to carry out so much training outside their normal working hours. We heard that it could take six to nine months to learn a completely new route on that basis, which – combined with the other factors at play – seems bound to cause problems for operators.
- Going further back, we note the delay in the decision to switch from a 2-phase to a 4-phase timetable change. We heard that the Industry Readiness Board raised this in June 2017 but Ministers did not take the decision until the end of October, eating into the time available for the industry to prepare.

All of these factors were known to the industry, yet, somehow, nobody was able to reach the conclusion that the May timetable changes just could not work. We do not understand how so many warning signs were ignored by so many people. The composition of the Industry Readiness Board needs to be seriously looked at – perhaps some external voices on the board would have provided some useful challenge to the industry group. We were also surprised to learn that TfL was not part of that board, despite the high degree of interdependence of transport services in London and the effect that the timetable failure had on TfL's own network.

We hope that the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) inquiry will get to the bottom of these issues and ensure that passengers are not subjected to the same disruption again. It is vital that the inquiry considers the skills and capacity within your department, and whether it is capable of managing the rail industry effectively. We have huge respect for Stephen Glaister, but we question your decision to ask him to chair the inquiry in view of the fact that the ORR was an integral part of the Industry Readiness Board which failed to prevent this situation. It is important that the inquiry is seen to be independent, and we are concerned that the public will see it as little more than an industry whitewash.

We are pleased to see that the timetable change planned for December has been halted. After our committee meeting on 25 June we had concluded this was the best course of action and would hopefully allow the rail industry to focus on resolving the immediate problems. We are also pleased to hear that a compensation package for passengers will be announced shortly. However, we do not understand why it has taken almost two months to get to this point. Your department needs to establish a much quicker process to set up compensation packages for any future episodes of major, prolonged disruption.

Passenger confidence in the rail industry has been shaken by this episode. The rail industry is complex and fragmented, and many parts of it have been at fault. But you, as Secretary of State,

need to take responsibility for the failings of the industry here, and take steps to make sure it does not happen again.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caroline Pidgeon', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE
Chair, Transport Committee

Cc Sadiq Khan
Cc Stephen Glaister CBE