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Railway timetable crisis

When I wrote to you on 17 May I talked about the ongoing pressure Transport Focus is putting on the rail industry to address deficiencies in publishing accurate timetables so passengers can plan their journeys. As you know, since then the railway timetable crisis has worsened significantly, with passengers using Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), Great Northern and Thameslink routes and Northern services having to put up with an unacceptable level of delays and cancellations.

Northern have instituted a formal temporary timetable, intended to give passengers certainty while they sort out the driver training issues. We will be monitoring how this works, including surveying experiences of those using the replacement buses on the Windermere branch. Early signs are that Northern's service is stabilising. On the Great Northern and Thameslink routes, GTR have not introduced a formal temporary timetable. Passengers therefore have no certainty about which trains will and won't run. I wrote yesterday to GTR calling on the company to introduce a temporary timetable that can be relied on. Being honest about the service that can be operated reliably is vital to helping passengers struggle through this crisis.

Compensation to passengers must be generous and recognise that day in, day out delays and uncertainly impacts on people's lives and well-being. This situation is different from an isolated delay experienced once-in-a-while. Delay Repay entitlement should be against the intended 20 May timetable, not the slimmed down one. GTR have already agreed to this, and we are pressing Northern to do the same. But the industry must do more for particular groups of passengers. This should include those travelling to and from Blackpool, Bolton and Windermere on Northern, and those parts of the GTR network that have borne the brunt of the unpredictable cancellations.

We understand that Northern is about to announce its compensation package. We would welcome season ticket passengers receiving a refund equivalent to four weeks' travel. But it is also important to go beyond that and recognise the long-term hardship that passengers on the Blackpool, Bolton and Windermere lines have faced. The compensation package needs to be continually reviewed in future weeks – some passengers may continue to experience an unacceptable service for some weeks to come.

Train companies must work hard to encourage take up of whatever compensation they offer. My colleagues raised these points when they met Jo Johnson in Manchester yesterday and we will continue to press the train companies concerned.

Where the current situation has a particular impact on passengers, ticket restrictions should be further relaxed in the short term and clearly communicated to passengers. One specific example is the Gatwick Express where holders of Southern and Thameslink only tickets should be allowed to use Gatwick Express trains until the situation improves.

Stability and fair compensation are the top priorities. After that, passengers want to see a robust plan to reinstate the missing elements of the intended timetable. We strongly encourage the reinstatement of trains be phased in, rather than done all at once. This must not fail again.

Transport Focus has invited GTR, Northern and Network Rail to speak to our Board next week – these meetings are held in public. Also, we are inviting passengers who belong to our Transport User Panel to let us know about their experiences. Our staff will continue to be on the ground observing as well. We will use this insight to press the industry to make improvements where it can in the short term, while maintaining focus in the priority areas of stability and compensation. I will keep your officials fully apprised and we will no doubt discuss the situation when we meet on 4 July.

We will co-operate fully with the Glaister inquiry with a view to understanding how the IT, procedural, capacity and capability issues surrounding timetabling can be made to work better in the long term. We are also conscious of the looming December 2018 timetable changes. We have proposals to discuss with you on how the passenger input to these processes could be boosted.

To conclude, we believe the priorities are:

- Stability: a timetable that runs reliably
- Generous compensation for those passengers affected
- Relaxing ticket restrictions to help passengers get where they need to go
- A robust plan to deliver the full intended May 2018 timetable.

Regards

Anthony Smith
Chief executive

