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Dear Dan

ORR Inquiry into May 2018 timetable disruption

Thank you for your letter dated 22 June 2018 seeking evidence from Transport Focus to inform the Glaister Inquiry. I have already provided input to the 'impact on passengers' strand of the Inquiry through a letter to Marcus Clements dated 11 July. This second letter concentrates on how the disruption came about and how it might be avoided in future.

An initial observation. It is a frustrating irony for passengers that not postponing the May changes when it became clear that the timetable production process would have to be curtailed, resulted in both the post-20 May disruption and deferral of improvements planned for December 2018. And there has been a second double whammy for passengers. Suspension of Informed Traveller T-12 relating to publication of accurate timetables during engineering work was implemented to free up train planners to complete development of the May 2018 timetables – which still did not happen in time to prevent failure. The fall out from which is the need to re-plan the December 2018 timetable without various intended improvements, requiring additional train planning resource which will knock back reinstatement of T-12 until May 2019. Bluntly, the industry must never get into this mess again.

Slow realisation that not all the driver 'turns' could be covered

This seems to have been a problem at Northern and Govia Thameslink Railway; both explained to the Transport Select Committee that it was only in the final days before 20 May that it was truly understood how many driver 'turns' could not be covered. Transport Focus was assured at a meeting on 4 May that there would be only minor, short-lived problems on GTR. While we don't doubt that late realisation happened, a key question for the Inquiry is whether it *needed* to have happened. Given that Northern was already struggling with driver availability before 20 May, how it was felt this would suddenly improve given the uplift in services is baffling. Both companies have emphasised that they were employing sufficient drivers on 20 May. If that is true, our intuitive feeling is that had the companies made more conservative assumptions about their ability to complete sufficient driver training by 20 May and to deploy drivers efficiently, or if they had better understood the risks associated with their assumptions, it would have been clear much sooner that the new timetable could not be operated reliably. We find it difficult to believe that, if the risks to delivery had been properly understood and managed the true picture wouldn't have emerged faster. We note that, even after optimisation of train and crew diagrams from 15 July, GTR will still have 211 trains each day missing from the intended 20 May timetable.



We encourage the Inquiry to consider the extent to which:

- the assertions that the right number of drivers were on the payroll on 20 May are justified
- the assumptions made about the rate of traction and route knowledge learning were reasonable
- the assumptions made about efficient deployment of drivers were reasonable
- the risks associated with those assumptions were understood and reasonable mitigations identified
- there was effective governance around monitoring those risks and assurance around implementation of mitigations
- Network Rail understood the training implications when it delayed the Blackpool electrification commissioning by three weeks, meaning a large number of drivers would not have used the route in the preceding six months.

Squeezing the mobilisation period

Notwithstanding the points made above, it is clear that the 'mobilisation period' between the train companies receiving the final base timetable and its introduction was squeezed so much that there was insufficient time to complete the activities required. Specifically, development of resource-efficient train and crew diagrams and the associated rostering discussions with trades unions, together with staff training to operate different types of rolling stock and new routes. It is now clear that the timetable development process starts 40 weeks before the date of introduction for a reason and, in particular, that considerable critical activity happens in the final months. Transport Focus has asked a number of industry players whether trying to make such a large number of timetable changes in one go was bound to fail. The responses suggest that the scale of change was less significant than the failure to adhere to agreed timescales for timetable development. Although we suspect a key learning from this crisis will be 'depart from the agreed process at your peril', we have a nagging suspicion that the train companies could have done more before receipt of the fully validated May timetable. Could resource planning have been done on a 'reasonably likely outcome' basis before the timetable was received? How different in practice was the eventual GTR May timetable from long-standing assumptions?

We encourage the Inquiry to examine the extent to which:

- the fact so many trains were being altered all at once was a factor in what went wrong
- the risks associated with squeezing the mobilisation period were identified and articulated to decision-makers at the point timetable development for Northern and Govia Thameslink Railway diverged from the timeline in the agreed industry process
- any mitigations were reasonably likely to address the risks identified and that there was appropriate oversight of progress in implementing the mitigations
- Network Rail, at Route, Infrastructure Projects and System Operator level understood what train companies need to do between receipt of a timetable 'offer' and its introduction, and how long those things take
- train companies did all the driver training and resource planning they could reasonably have done while they were waiting for Network Rail to provide the final timetable.

'Go, no go' on timetable changes

One of the frustrating insights from the industry's evidence to the Transport Select Committee was that Northern seemingly *did* have sufficient doubts that 20 May was achievable, given timing of the decision to revise the Bolton electrification commissioning date, to have sought a delay. But other parts of the industry rejected the request because it would have delayed things they wished to achieve in May. While it may have been compounded by failure to implement adequate mitigations, one interpretation of events is that from that point onward the post-20 May crisis on Northern was inevitable. Passengers will find it extraordinary that the industry ploughed on knowing that it was likely to fail.



In our research passengers often express frustration that nobody seems to be in charge on the railway. Clearly, one of the issues was that the System Operator – closest to being ‘in charge’ when it comes to the timetable – did not feel able to press the stop button in the absence of industry consensus that it was the right thing to do. The industry must be able to stop in future when it knows it is walking towards the cliff edge.

We encourage the Inquiry to consider what changes are required to give the System Operator authority to stop implementation of timetable changes when there is significant, demonstrable risk of failure, or allow the changes to proceed only if appropriate mitigations are identified and governance put in place to oversee their implementation.

Slow implementation of a stable timetable on GTR

In our ‘passenger impact’ letter we referred to the time it has taken for GTR to implement a stable timetable on the Thameslink and Great Northern routes while remaining issues preventing implementation of the full May timetable are resolved. We note that Northern achieved this more quickly, potentially aided by the planned closure of Liverpool Lime Street station and the resulting reduced requirement for drivers. Since 20 May GTR has been cancelling a large number of trains in advance (P Coding), but also cancelling a significant number of additional trains on the day. The result has been a lottery for passengers; reliable journey planning has been impossible. Re-writing all the train crew diagrams to optimise efficiency clearly takes time, however we find it hard to believe that an emergency timetable could not have been introduced while this was going on. We accept that fewer trains would have been advertised, but at least passengers could have relied on those which were shown.

We encourage the Inquiry to consider what GTR could have done differently between 20 May and 14 July to offer passengers a stable, predictable service, advertised in advance through all information systems.

Train planning resources: robbing Peter to pay Paul

Passenger will continue to face uncertainty about the entire Great Britain timetable until May 2019 because T-12 has been suspended. It should not be forgotten, reference ORR’s existing investigation following Transport Focus’s November [report](#)¹, that parts of the industry were not achieving T-12 even before this crisis. Continued suspension of T-12 will particularly affect those travelling late at night, at weekends and over bank holidays. Both the initial suspension and now its extension to May 2019 have been caused largely by diverting train planning resources from Short Term Planning (engineering-related alterations to the base timetable) to help out with Long Term Planning (creation of the base timetable). This must not become the norm – both are important to passengers and one should not be robbed to plug holes in the other.

We encourage the Inquiry to consider whether the System Operator is adequately resourced, in terms of staff and systems, to ensure that it is not necessary in future to let T-12 slip to plug gaps in development of base timetables.

I hope these points are helpful to the Inquiry. We would of course be happy to expand on them and those in our ‘passenger impact’ letter.

Yours sincerely

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Head of Strategy

¹ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/advance-notice-rail-engineering-works-correspondence/>