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David Sidebottom  
Director  
Transport Focus  
7<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester M1 2WD

26 April 2023

Dear David

Thank you for your letter dated 20 April 2023 raising concerns about the experience of customers using our services. We welcome the opportunity to explain further the issues we have experienced in recent weeks, and we very much regret the disruption customers are facing while using many of our services at the present time.

We appreciate the impact that cancelled, and significantly delayed services can have on our customers' journeys and the communities we serve, and the current level of disruption is not acceptable. We want all our customers and stakeholders to be fully reassured that we are doing everything we can to minimise disruption and recover our services to a more reliable level of performance.

As you mention in your letter, the issues we are currently facing on the network are primarily being driven by the lack of availability of our Class 175 trains following three connected incidents earlier in the year. These trains are maintained for us by CAF at their Chester depot. The safety of our customers and colleagues is our highest priority, which is why we acted to temporarily withdraw these trains from service for investigation and to carry out enhanced maintenance.

We initially anticipated this withdrawal would only be brief and that we would be able to quickly return trains to service and restore our full timetable. Unfortunately, while this maintenance regime was being undertaken, it was discovered that the extent of the work the trains required was much greater than previously believed. Put simply, most of the fleet have suffered from cracks in a part of the cooling system. This has required the sourcing and importing of brand-new and specialist components for the radiators, and specialist support to fit these components, to return trains to service.



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While we have made every effort to bring trains into service for cover for the prolonged absence of many of our Class 175s – including sourcing parts internationally, introducing four additional Class 197s to service, utilising our other fleets more intensively, and introducing the first of our Class 230s on the Borderlands Line – we are still some way short of the number of trains we need to run a full service. We appreciate the frustration and inconvenience the resulting disruption causes for our customers, and we are working tirelessly to resolve this as soon as possible, although we would anticipate that services will be running with reduced capacity for several more weeks while the remainder of the Class 175 fleet is repaired.

Prior to the withdrawal, we had 17 Class 175s, six Class 197s and six Class 170s in service. Due to a long-planned cascade to East Midlands, the Class 170s have begun to leave us at what has turned out to be a most unfortunate time. However, we have been able to retain some trains for a little longer by working with EMR and we thank them for their flexibility. At the time of writing, we have 10 Class 175s, three Class 170s and 10 Class 197s available for service. This leaves us six trains short of the early March position. However, many of our other fleets have had to be used far more intensively than usual and are beginning to require extra maintenance. For example, the Class 150 fleet is currently running double its usual mileage. We are hopeful that the fleet position will stabilise at around the time of the May timetable change.

Most services that were removed from the timetable following the initial withdrawal of the Class 175s have now been restored, including a minimum service on every route. Due to the initially short timescale on which we believed the Class 175s could return to service, we decided the appropriate course of action would be to adjust timetables on a short-term basis. This has allowed us to be more agile in bringing back services than if we had taken an approach of withdrawing services for a set period of several weeks. While we completely understand customers' frustrations at seeing short notice changes to the timetable, we have been able to run more services across more routes compared to the blanket approach.

Our train planning and fleet teams continue to work closely together to develop as accurate a weekly timetable as possible while giving enough notice for customers to plan journeys with confidence. This is a balancing act, as giving increased notice would mean a less accurate projection of how many trains are able to run, but we have been taking steps to improve the flow of information internally to ensure the best level of accuracy possible.



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We also recognise we need to be better at ensuring our channels give our customers better quality information in a timelier manner. Our social media team work closely with our Communications teams and our Control Centre teams to ensure that information given to passengers is up to date, accurate and as detailed as possible. We always strive for complete accuracy, and we are always honest with customers about the causes of disruption. Representatives of each team meet several times weekly to plan our communications strategy and feedback on any customer issues. We are taking an honest and transparent approach with our social media communications following feedback from customers and stakeholders, and examples of this can be seen below.

We recently increased the size of our Customer Relations team, and we are in the process of upskilling members of other customer-facing departments to help support with complaint handling during remarkably busy periods. We are also planning to increase resource within the complaint handling team soon, which will significantly improve our complaint handling times. We have also initiated a new short-term scheme, 'Project Zero', which draws upon the support of experienced colleagues to help significantly reduce the backlog of complaints and enquiries on a short-term basis so that our customers receive high-quality responses in a much shorter timeframe.

We have a robust quality check system in place for new starters, and existing members of the team are consistently quality checked and benchmarked against our internal standards. Whilst we aim for a consistent approach to customers, advisors are instructed to treat each case on its merits and additional costs will always be considered based on the circumstances of each case.

We monitor our customers' experience continually and discuss it at senior level to make interventions and improvements. We have several customer panels looking at various aspects of our service, and undertake extensive research amongst our customer base, complementing the work Transport Focus do by providing a larger sample size and allowing us to be more targeted in our interventions. We also conduct mystery shopper exercises on our rail services and will be conducting a similar exercise on our rail replacement operation to ensure we are checking and learning, specifically on that experience. This has fed into a task and finish group specifically studying our rail replacement services, with representation from all corners of the business looking at how we can improve the customer experience at this crucial time where replacement buses will be extensively used across the network.



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We have already taken lessons from this and implemented them into the programme for the ongoing engineering work across the Core Valley Lines (CVL) network as part of the commissioning of overhead line electrification and the introduction of new signalling equipment. This includes the Treherbert Line Transformation, with passenger services suspended from 29 April until early 2024 to allow for extensive infrastructure work.

We are conducting an extensive campaign to raise awareness with colleagues, stakeholders, and customers, including providing a new railcard which offers a discount for residents and regular customers travelling along the route as a way of compensating for the reduced service. The coming months will see extensive work across the CVL as we develop the infrastructure that will provide a faster, more frequent service as part of the South Wales Metro, and we will ensure that customers are kept up to date with all the planned closure periods.

Once again, thank you for your letter highlighting these concerns. We agree that we have more work to do to ensure we provide our customers with a more reliable service and better information about disruption. While the current ongoing issues with the Class 175 fleet are a major factor, there are clearly lessons we need to learn beyond this as we go through our period of transition from legacy fleet to one operated by new trains. The significant investment we are making to deliver this transformation – the largest in the history of the Wales and Borders network since its creation – will lead to a much better service for customers in the future, but we will continue to do everything we can to minimise the issues faced by customers on our services in the short term. I would be more than happy to discuss this in more detail if this is something that you wish to do.

Yours sincerely

Jan Chaudhry-van der Velde

Examples of recent social media communications:

[https://twitter.com/transport\\_wales/status/1648628150476185602](https://twitter.com/transport_wales/status/1648628150476185602)

[https://twitter.com/transport\\_wales/status/1649424406463012866](https://twitter.com/transport_wales/status/1649424406463012866)

[https://twitter.com/transport\\_wales/status/1649343988250427392](https://twitter.com/transport_wales/status/1649343988250427392)