

Angie Doll  
Govia Thameslink Railway  
Jake Kelly  
Network Rail

Antony Smith & Michael Roberts  
Transport Focus / London TravelWatch

By email

**RE: Sunday 3 December 2023**

Dear Antony and Michael,

Thank you for your letter to us of the 10 November regarding plans for engineering on Sunday 3 December.

Since the date of your letter, you will be aware that the ASLEF trade union has announced strike action on the Thameslink and Great Northern network on the date in question. The rail replacement services were designed to connect to Thameslink services, particularly on the Midland Main Line. Unfortunately, that is now no longer possible, and customers will regrettably, not be able to travel. If, in the unlikely event the strike is called off, we will do what we can to revert to the plan as communicated originally to stakeholders, but we do not expect this to be the case.

We are working through the detail of the changes for the 3 December and will share a wider update with our customers and stakeholders as soon as possible. While under different circumstances, journey planners were updated from early October, meaning many important plans which would have otherwise been disrupted by strike action will already have been rescheduled by customers who will have planned around the engineering work. This was an important initial mitigation for the works which will now have a second purpose given the new circumstances.

While the landscape has fundamentally changed, we felt it is important to address with you why this decision was originally made, and what the 3 December would have looked like for customers in the absence of strike action. To this end, we have enclosed a briefing addressing the points made in your letter.

We consider customers as at the heart of every decision that we make.

This decision ultimately presented a relatively unique set of circumstances, effectively presenting a choice between disrupting customers for a Sunday in isolation or delaying the realisation of the benefits for customers of either scheme and incurring additional costs to public funds in the tens of millions of pounds.

This was a decision of last resort, but on balance we felt that the plan for Sunday 3 December presented the best possible outcome of the options available, particularly from a longer-term perspective, and sought to mitigate the impact on customers as much as possible with the resources available to us.

We would also like to reassure you that while as this experience has shown it is possible for conflicting engineering work to be scheduled, it is an option of absolute last resort.

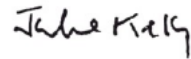


It is not therefore representative of the planned replacement service for forthcoming works on both projects in the New Year, and alongside the wider industry, we are working to strengthen the provision of rail replacement buses. Should you have any further questions following review of the enclosed briefing, please let me know.

Yours sincerely,



Angie Doll  
CEO  
Govia Thameslink Railway



Jake Kelly  
Regional Managing Director, Eastern  
Network Rail



# Briefing: Engineering on 3 December 2023

## Context to initial decision and decision making

As background, access for engineering work is compressed into a small number of weekends by the industry's efforts to protect periods of very high discretionary travel such as the school summer holidays, and weekend events of special significance such as Remembrance Sunday. This means that contextually, the number of suitable weekends for engineering is low. The industry is also recovering from disruption to previous periods of engineering access through strike action which is resulting in a higher level of access requirement to ensure major schemes remain on target for delivery.

In this context, access decisions for the ECDP are made by the Industry Partnership Board Access Subgroup (Access Group) – which meets periodically and has senior representation from all industry partners involved in delivering the East Coast Digital Programme (ECDP), including passenger and freight operators and Network Rail. The purpose of this group is to consider emerging engineering access needs, assess their impact – on both passengers and each organisation's operations – and to challenge appropriateness, seeking to find alternative solutions if required.

Access decisions must be agreed by all parties and a programme of engineering access for ECDP had previously been agreed for the 12-month period inclusive of this December.

However, due to an emerging risk of a key programme milestone slipping to next spring – the ECDP delivery team began discussions to seek additional engineering access in the summer of 2023 for delivery before the end of 2023. One significant factor in that emerging risk was the impact of earlier industrial action on the efficiency of possessions with over 150 hours of productivity having been lost.

The alternative of not delivering additional engineering access involved an estimated cost to public funds of approximately £50-60m.

It would also have delayed the ECDP project, thereby delaying future customer benefits such as improved performance and potential additional train capacity. It would have also delayed wider benefits such as reduced industry maintenance costs and even safer railway operation on the East Coast Main Line – which ultimately benefit both our passengers and the wider industry in the long run.

The Access Group considered several options, prioritising dates with the least possible passenger disruption in the range available, which is always at the heart of our decision-making. However, in relation to the identified date of 3 December, no viable alternative date was identified that had a lower impact on customers. As your letter recognises, this date was already known as featuring works for the Cambridge South station project and re-signalling in the area.

The Access Group, alongside Network Rail Anglia considered postponing the Cambridge South and re-signalling works. However, this project is critical to both Greater Anglia and GTR operations and the impact of postponement would have itself delayed the realisation of the benefits of the schemes to customers and incurred additional cost to public funds.

In summary, Sunday 3 December was selected in the knowledge of other works taking place. The decision was also made, as detailed below, in the knowledge of the limited availability of rail replacement buses on the date. The decision was made to proceed, based on it still presenting by far the best outcome for customers of the options available.

## Passenger impact and availability of rail replacement buses



The most effective mitigation of the customer impact was that journey planner information was updated in early October. This has meant that customers planning discretionary journeys in advance, such as visits to friends and family, will have selected alternative dates. Date specific industry retail such as TOC websites have not sold tickets for travel on 3 December. This will now be a major benefit in the context of additional disruption through ASLEF strike action.

While a Sunday in December does, as you note, see some additional demand given the proximity to Christmas, it remains by far the quietest day in the period with significantly reduced demand relative to a weekday or Saturday.

With regards to rail replacement, sourcing buses is currently challenging given the recent changes in the bus industry, which has seen fewer operators and drivers available to cover this type of work for the railway. Coupled with this, the situation for the 3 December was more complicated than usual due to the size of the geographic footprint.

Additionally, because both possessions are in the same geographical area, we need to use operators from the same pool to cover both sets of work.

As soon as the potential access request was identified earlier in the summer, we started to investigate resourcing rail replacement, based on typical demand on a Sunday in early December, before a decision was made to proceed with the engineering works. This provided both the most possible time to organise a replacement service, and as referenced above would provide the Access Group with accurate information in evaluating whether to proceed.

Unfortunately, having reviewed the supply of buses available through our approved suppliers and the journeys that needed to be covered, it was clear that it would not be possible to cover every station and journey. There simply are not enough vehicles or drivers to cover the geographic footprint.

Our plan was therefore focused on ensuring that what provision was available would be reliable and would provide a cross-route service to alternative train services, recognising that this would mean some stations would not be served. This included taking a common “one operation” approach with LNER and Greater Anglia to maximise the availability of buses.

We took action to increase the available bus pool as much as possible and were successful in some areas. For example, Stagecoach usually provides four vehicles for possessions in the area but were available to provide twelve for 3 December. While a threefold improvement, you will be aware of the capacity limitation of a bus, versus a twelve-carriage train.

With regards to offering enhanced rates for bus operators on 3 December. If we were to do so, we may potentially have secured more vehicles and drivers on this occasion. However, as all bus operators that would be available for rail replacement work are currently in contract for other replacement services, it would be highly likely that additional provision for the ECDP would be diverted from delivering these services and resulting in further passenger disruption elsewhere. More funding does not therefore result in more buses and drivers. There are fundamental constraints on the supply of rail replacement buses.

Equally, we want to avoid creating a precedent where the supply chain focus on the “highest bidder” as the industry would thereby struggle to secure resource early – or at all, in some cases - as bus operators and individual bus drivers considering overtime wait for a higher offer to emerge closer to the date of the works. We therefore do not feel this is in the best interest of the rail industry or our passengers in the long-term.

### **Additional support for customers**

While superseded by ASLEF strike action, in regards to your questions about how we could further support customers for the original plans for Sunday 3 December:



- Journey planners updated two months in advance, giving customers plenty of notice that travel on that date would be impacted.
- We confirmed that ticket acceptance would be in place at Thameslink car parks for permit holders.
- We confirmed that ticket acceptance would be in place for season ticket holders from stations between Stevenage and Potters Bar, who may have travelled to London from Hertford North or other stations on the Hertford Loop.
- We have previously sought ticket acceptance on local bus services however operators run fewer services on a Sunday and therefore do not have capacity for all passengers who would normally travel by our train service on a Sunday. Advertising ticket acceptance in advance would run the risk of overloading them, leading to them withdrawing the acceptance on the day, which would potentially cause further disruption and confusion for customers. The importance of this measure was also reduced due to the T-12 point referenced earlier.
  - We would have been willing to explore this again, as an 'on the day' intervention for our station teams if required, but would not be able to actively promote these services as alternative travel options due to the capacity constraints.
- Offering discounted travel on other days would not be appropriate. We sought to limit the stations and passengers impacted by the route closure and, given that it is one day, and a Sunday, which is typically the quietest day on our network, we do not feel this is an appropriate route to go down on this occasion.

### Next steps

Partly as a result of this experience, we are taking several steps to strengthen the resourcing of rail replacement services. We are continuing to work with colleagues in the bus industry to minimise the instances where a lack of cover impacts our service.

For example, we have detailed advanced planning with our suppliers to share upcoming engineering works as far ahead as possible to help achieve the right level of service. This ensures that the pool of operators is able to forward plan as much as possible for upcoming work.

There is also an ambition to secure more operators as part of the pool to work within and we have recently enlisted a company based in Luton, which will help us resource rail replacement needs in and around the Bedford area for future works.

From an engineering access perspective, supporting this work on 3 December will help to ensure both projects remain on schedule and budget. This is important in terms of realising the benefits, but it will also help to reduce the likelihood of engineering work on the same date in the future.

