

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Rail timetable changes](#), HC 1163

Wednesday 5 September 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 September 2018.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lilian Greenwood (Chair); Jack Brereton; Steve Double; Paul Girvan; Huw Merriman; Grahame Morris; Graham Stringer, Daniel Zeichner.

Questions 373 - 444

Witnesses

I: Emily Ketchin, Harpenden Thameslink Commuters; Stephen Brookes MBE, Northern Rail User and Accessibility Campaigner; Alex Hayman, Director and Managing Director, Public Markets, Which?; and Anthony Smith, Chief Executive, Transport Focus.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Harpenden Thameslink Commuters](#)
- [Transport Focus](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Emily Ketchin, Stephen Brookes, Alex Hayman and Anthony Smith.

Q373 **Chair:** Welcome to our panel. Thank you for coming along today. Would you please introduce yourselves for the record of our proceedings?

Alex Hayman: My name is Alex Hayman. I am from Which? and I am director of public markets. I thank the Committee and the Chair very much for inviting us along to present evidence today.

Emily Ketchin: I am Emily Ketchin from the Harpenden Thameslink commuters group.

Anthony Smith: I am Anthony Smith, chief executive of Transport Focus, the independent passenger watchdog.

Stephen Brookes: I am Stephen Brookes, today representing the Northern Disability Reference Panel. I am also the Minister for disabled people's rail sector champion.

Q374 **Chair:** Stephen, I understand that you had a difficult journey today, so thank you for making the effort to be here. Emily, I understand that your daughter started school today, so we also want to thank you. We are really grateful to you for being here to be the voice of Harpenden commuters.

Emily Ketchin: Thank you; it went quite smoothly.

Q375 **Chair:** It is a big day in the life of your family, so we really appreciate that.

As part of our rail timetabling inquiry we want to hear about the impact that the rail timetabling problems have had on passengers. That is our aim for this afternoon. The first question is addressed primarily to Emily and Stephen. We know that the timetabling chaos since May has had profoundly negative effects on passengers: on their working lives, on their family lives, on their finances and even on their mental health. Can you use your personal experience to describe some of those effects, either on yourself or on those you regularly talk to and travel with?

Emily Ketchin: First, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today and to address you about the Harpenden train problems. It is very important for commuters like myself to feel that we have a voice. We very much welcome this inquiry.

Harpenden is a commuter town. It sits in the London commuter belt. A significant number of the population travel into London. According to the ORR, we have 3.3 million entries and exits at the station, so we are talking about a significant number of people.

I set the group up about five months ago as a direct result of the fact that, in the light of the 20 May timetable, Harpenden, even if the 20 May



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timetable was delivered, was losing a third of its key services without consultation. Hopefully, that is an issue we will speak about in due course. Then, of course, we had the 20 May timetable not being delivered.

In my mind, there are a number of impacts. There is the obvious financial impact of extra childcare costs and taxis. We know that people have left their work in London because they feel the commute is not viable. It also has an adverse impact on businesses. The St Albans business improvement district survey showed that 82% of businesses surveyed locally felt that the problems with the trains directly affected their businesses.

There has been a significant health and safety impact, particularly affecting commuters from Harpenden. In light of the changes that have been made to Harpenden trains, we are now forced to change at St Albans, and St Albans is not designed as an interchange station. There is significant confusion. A couple of days after the May timetable was introduced, there was an accident at Harpenden train station, and there were no trains for 30 minutes. There was a platform alteration. People were running to get on to the trains and a gentleman tripped over. He took out another passenger and an ambulance had to be called. There is an obvious health and safety impact.

What is really difficult for me to talk about is the human impact of the timetable, and that is not quantifiable. People are late for work and there are obvious effects on productivity. As a working mum myself, juggling childcare, it is extremely difficult. I am late for picking up children and miss bedtimes. People have been sick on overcrowded trains.

It is very difficult to assess the additional stress. For me, the best illustration of that was my daughter's sports day. I allowed two and a quarter hours to get to my daughter's sports day, for a journey that should have taken me an hour. I turned up at the school in a rush. I fell over in the car park. It was one of those disastrous days that you expect. I got there at 1.27, and sports day started at 1.30. The level of stress I encountered that day is very difficult to convey.

I am not the only one. Just yesterday, we had a disaster at Harpenden. There was a broken-down train in the core at about 6 in the morning. I turned up at the station at 6.30 and I was talking to a local mum about the fact that she had nearly missed her son's school play. She missed the beginning part but had managed to walk in just as he got on stage. It is those moments that I have captured.

I apologise for the length of our submission. In appendix 1, over just three days, we accumulated some of those impact stories to try to get the message across. It is a very difficult time for people, and we must not underestimate the impact the railway has on people who are trying to commute.



Q376 **Chair:** Thanks, Emily. It is worth while having all that information from Harpenden commuters. We welcome hearing people's stories and understanding the impact it has had on their lives.

Stephen Brookes: In my part of the world, we had a real problem. It is not just because of the Northern timetable issues. Coming from Blackpool, as I do, we also had no trains from 9 November until, supposedly, March. The supposedly March went on until April, and then to May. We started a service one day and within two days we had the timetable changes; there were 90% cancellations on that first day.

One of my journeys was to a disability group in Manchester. At the very best, I spend maybe an hour and 10 minutes on that journey. It took me five and a half hours to get from Blackpool to Manchester on that day, simply because trains were arriving, for example, at Preston and the crews did not know the line. The planning for the timetable was compounded by the fact of the electrification. The routeing was not sorted out. The drivers and staff were not trained on the route. We were sat in trains, and the disruption got worse; as a train arrived, so it was cancelled because the crews who were aware were moved on to another train.

For somebody like myself, who has a mobility issue, Preston is declared to be a wonderful station. No, it is not. There are things called stairs, and lifts out of order. At five minutes' notice we had to go from platform 1 to platform 5 to get the one train, of three coaches, which was taking six train loads of people to Manchester.

Q377 **Chair:** What was that experience like?

Stephen Brookes: Dante's inferno is a way of describing it. It was impossible. It was unpleasant. Of course, for disabled people and for older people, the instant changing and the short-notice changes were virtually impossible.

Another issue that we had, which I am very much taking up with the companies themselves, is that Travel Assist or JourneyCare, whatever it is called by the various companies, failed entirely. People were booking journeys but the trains were not there to connect. Of course, once the first train has missed, every other train progressively fails to communicate and interlink. People were left with no option but not to travel.

Blackpool, because of the economic climate and the fact that the town has changed and improved dramatically, has about 18.5 million visitors between April and November. This summer, we have invariably had to do it with a flawed or failed train service. People have got used to it.

Another area I am involved with is Blackpool Transport's accessible bus service. That has been the one redeeming feature—accessible buses running to a strict timetable with trained crews. It is now becoming a national model for rail replacement. We have had 80% of the passengers



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using that service saying, "Will Blackpool Transport please run a regular service from Blackpool to Preston because we do not trust the trains?"

The revised timetable means that there is a 30-minute gap at the peak time in the morning. They run a shuttle from Blackpool to Preston at 7.32, followed by a Manchester train at 7.38. This morning, there were two cancellations—the 7.38 and the 8.38—so we are still in the situation where a revised, reduced timetable is only working 80% of the time anyway.

The big, single and most complex issue was the fact that nobody was communicating. The staff at the stations were getting abuse. I sympathise deeply with the staff at railway stations who were being abused and physically assaulted. They had no knowledge of what was happening on their station. They had no knowledge about the trains. There was two-minute notification of cancellations. That is not the way to run a railway.

Q378 Chair: How are people coping in those circumstances, particularly someone who cannot walk very fast or those with a couple of children? What were people doing? What was it like?

Stephen Brookes: Moving to buses. The Stagecoach service between Blackpool and Preston has increased. In fact, Blackpool Transport was originally going to be doing three months of rail replacement. As of yesterday, we have done 296 days' worth of consecutive rail replacement with 17 accessible vehicles. No wonder we are being told, "This is the way forward. Forget the trains; there is no point to them." We have a wonderful electric system that very few passengers have faith in. That is a real problem.

If anything can come out of what we are trying to do here today, it is to make the companies realise that it is all very well feeding us wonderful stories. We kept getting messages from Network Rail saying that "This is happening" and that there were wonderful new developments and new trains. Well, they are 35-year-old trains. The fact is that we were developing a model of Network Rail saying one thing, Northern saying another and the reality at the station was that nothing was happening.

Q379 Chair: Do you think those people will return to the railway, or is their trust very badly damaged?

Stephen Brookes: Looking at my sector—disabled and older people—invariably there is a very high emotional element, and they say, "I'm not going to use it again." Inevitably, 50% will go back, but there has been considerable long-term damage to the faith of disabled people, older people and families who want to visit a place and know that they can get there. They do not want the holiday they have been on, which has cost them, destroyed, or the journey to the holiday fouled up. The whole physical and mental aspect is very serious. The damage that is done to individuals and families by their having no faith is quite significant.



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You mentioned this morning. I had five separate issues. There was a track problem just north of Preston. There was a signal problem at Wigan. There was a trespasser on the line at Rugby and then there were two bits of track problem at Milton Keynes and Watford. My Virgin train, which is normally good, was 90 minutes late. It is a good job I left plenty of time to get here today. Those kinds of things happen. Long-term total failure should have been taken into account.

The final thing is that the subsequent culture of blame between Network Rail and Northern was nothing less than appalling because it was public. Northern was blaming Network Rail for not supplying the timetabling and not getting the message or the electrification right. Network Rail was saying to Northern, "You didn't train the staff." We don't want to know that. We want a service.

Q380 Graham Stringer: You said that at Preston the staff had not learned the routes or were not trained for the route. Can you expand on that? Are you saying that drivers turned up and realised they did not know the route, or that they drove the route without having been taught the route?

Stephen Brookes: That was explained to me in significant detail. The fact was that the electrification between Preston and Blackpool was not just a case of putting up wires. Three major sections of rail were totally replaced. Kirkham and Wesham station, for example, had a totally new platform, a new track layout, and new speed lifting. There was a new track layout at Poulton and a totally new station at Blackpool, as well as the fact that all the old signals had gone. There were 200 new electric signals.

For drivers, this was a new route to them. I want safety on the trains. I do not want a driver getting on a train and saying, "Where am I now?" We had the issue of the drivers being retrained, but there were only eight drivers ready on the day of reopening. When the new timetable came in, half of those drivers were not there, because they were elsewhere due to shortfalls in other parts of the system.

Q381 Graham Stringer: I just want to be clear. You said that drivers were turning up who were not trained. What happened then? The point I am asking about is this. There were no drivers driving the trains who had not been taught the route.

Stephen Brookes: No. All the drivers who were on the trains had been taught the route, but of course the handing back of the route to Northern Rail was only a few days before the timetable change anyway. The drivers had not been able to get the training in advance because the line was not open. We ended up with a conflicting issue, and in fact a collision of a new set of track, a new set of trains, a new set of drivers and a completely new rail layout. Nothing was ever going to work. Imposing a new timetable, which failed 90% of the time, meant that was inevitable, but nobody had told us. Nobody had warned us. They said that



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everything was wonderful. We just ended up with no service at all. I hope that answers the question.

Q382 **Chair:** Anthony, I can see that you are keen to get in.

Anthony Smith: Yes. Chair, I would like to answer your first question or expand upon the other answers.

Q383 **Chair:** I was going to come to that in a moment. There is one question before I come back to you.

Emily, you alluded to the financial impact and things like being late for childcare. Have you made any assessment yourself? Can you quantify what the financial impact has been over recent months?

Emily Ketchin: There has been a significant financial impact because, frankly, we pay £4,000 a year for a train service that we are not getting. There are a number of extra childcare costs. I have had to put my daughter into breakfast club, which I never had to do before. There are taxis. Those are the kinds of losses that you can quantify, but what commuters want is a reliable service. They want to be able to get into work. That is what we pay for.

In Harpenden, because of where we are geographically, we pay more per mile. It is one of the highest costs of travel per mile to get into London. When a third of your services are being lost, it means that actually the commute is not viable for people. Of course we have the compensation scheme. We are now in September, but we have not seen the compensation scheme. It is very difficult to try to quantify those losses.

Q384 **Chair:** We heard from Stephen about the way things have changed, or not changed, over the summer. How are things in Harpenden since the new timetable came in on 15 July?

Emily Ketchin: The 20 May timetable, as you know, was never actually delivered. We then got an interim, or 15 July, timetable, which saw our services cut even further. That is a concern, because when you are looking at the Thameslink statistics and they talk about 84% of services being run, 84% of what? We have gone from 19 trains down to 12 and then down to 11, and they are running 84% of trains on a given day. Frankly, I do not think that is good enough.

The other issue is that, over the summer months, there has been a very low number of people travelling in because of holidays. Now that the schools are back, we are seeing more real impact. We cannot get on trains and we are standing.

It may help if I quickly explain to you what the cause of the Harpenden problem is. The cause is that East Midlands trains no longer stop at Bedford and Luton. To mitigate that, we now have what are called the Thameslink Express trains. All five of them in the morning, and all five of them in the evening, run in a uniform stopping pattern. They all stop at Bedford, Luton and St Albans, all of which skip Harpenden. What is



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happening is that we are standing there on very crowded platforms, and that is going to increase—we can be under no illusion—over the next two or three weeks. We are seeing no new additional services being reintroduced and we have no commitment for December. We are standing on platforms where those trains are whizzing past. We can see that they are lightly loaded, so the full capacity of the railway is not being properly used.

I was going through the Committee meeting of 9 July 2018, where Mr Gibb, in his capacity as chairman of the railway board, answered one of your questions, Chair. You were talking about the fact that as part of the process some passengers had lost services. His response to you was: “Yes, that is the case for a small minority of passengers.” You then pressed him and asked what he meant by a small minority. He said, “I cannot answer that. I do not have the detail.”

My quick maths this morning, when I saw that quote, is that, as a result of the Thameslink Express trains being introduced, we have fewer train services at Leagrave, Harlington, Flitwick, Luton Airport Parkway and Harpenden. That is 10.5 million passengers per year. That is not, on any view, a small minority.

Q385 Chair: My next question is to Anthony and Alex. What is your assessment of the overall effect of the May timetabling problem on passengers? Do you have any data to quantify some of the personal and financial effects that both Emily and Stephen have referred to?

Anthony Smith: It is worth remembering the scale of the problem that we were dealing with overall. When you add together the number of Thameslink passengers, Great Northern passengers, Northern passengers and, don't forget, TransPennine—who were very much caught up in this but have slightly evaded the limelight—you are probably dealing with about one in five of Britain's passengers potentially affected by this timetable crisis. The scale of the problem, adding together all those individual stories, is big and powerful.

The impact on individual passengers really falls into three parts. We have gathered together thousands of comments through our transport user panel. They fall into three categories, one of which is the individual impact. For the St Albans to St Pancras passenger, Thameslink journeys have become utterly unpredictable. It is nerve-wracking and frustrating. Hazel Grove to Manchester Piccadilly: you are never sure if a train will turn up and it is a lottery whether you get a seat. It is like train roulette. All these stories about the impact on individuals are very powerful. It is very difficult to quantify financially. We will find out eventually through the compensation figures, potentially.

The unpredictability fell into two parts, one of which was that for a number of weeks the timetable was simply not known in advance of the Friday or the weekend before the week of travel. People cannot plan their lives like that. Secondly, even when the timetable was published, on the



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day it was pretty much a lottery as to whether anything was going to turn up or whether the information was correct.

Finally, the third category of people, who were very hard to get hold of, were those who simply gave up travelling. We have members of staff who work from home; they are lucky enough to be able to do that. I think lots of people simply did not travel. They are not going to be eligible for compensation.

The impact is very real. With the Lakes line, we had the absolutely astonishing spectacle of the complete withdrawal of train services in peacetime. It was quite remarkable that we hit that point. The impacts were widespread and deep, and in some cases they are still ongoing.

The irony for Thameslink passengers is that all of our survey scores in the run-up to 20 May indicated that Thameslink was improving quite markedly. Lots of passengers liked the new trains; the timetable had become pretty remarkable, and it had become one of the better operators in London and the south-east. On 20 May that was simply thrown away.

Q386 Chair: How much better do you think it is since the 15 July timetable was introduced? If we look at the ballpark figures around delays and cancellations, is there a risk that we mask some places where things are not very much better at all? For example, at Harpenden, obviously the 15 July timetable did not lead to an improvement in the number of services, albeit there are fewer delays and cancellations. Can you comment on whether there are particular places where it is still really bad but it does not show up in the overall figures?

Anthony Smith: You are dealing with two quite different situations in the north and in the south. The Thameslink timetable has generally bedded in and is performing reasonably, individual days excepted, against what is being planned. As to whether it is serving individual communities well or not, there are some big questions about what happened in the run-up to 20 May. It looks as though the timetable they are trying to run is capable of being run.

For Northern and TransPennine, it is quite a different situation. The jury is still out as to whether the timetable they are trying to run is actually runnable. Performance is still very poor. TransPennine is cancelling lots of airport trains. There is a big question about whether it can actually run to the timetable, or whether there will need to be another major recast. There are individual places, such as Harpenden, which definitely need a fresh look, because the mechanism of the timetable change simply did not take into account the effect of the overall impact on passengers on the route.

Q387 Chair: Alex, what is Which?'s assessment of how things are looking both since 20 May and subsequently?



Alex Hayman: Which? has been campaigning on rail since 2015 with a simple vision, which is a rail system that works for passengers and not for the industry. The May timetable chaos, if I might describe it like that, is an extreme example and goes to show that we are still a long way from achieving that vision.

A lot of what we have heard already we found through collecting hundreds of passenger stories and conducting our own research. If I just take it at the top level, what we saw coming through from people and underpinning all of their feedback, as well as all the individual instances, was a sense of helplessness and loss of control. That contributed to anxiety and stress, with very severe and wide-ranging impact.

We collected a number of stats that helped us to understand the full impact of these things. In terms of the impact on people's work and family life, three in five people reported that this was having a very significant negative impact on their life. Four in 10 said it had an impact on their health, both mental and physical. I think we could build on that. Half of all people reported that it had a negative impact on their finances. Trust in the rail system is at a chronically low level. The system is trusted only above car salesmen at this stage. This sort of crisis underpins why trust is so low and continues to eat away at it.

There is one more thing that should be built on. The impact can be measured on a person-by-person basis, but we should not forget that each of those people has family and colleagues who are also very severely impacted by the disruption that people are subjected to. It is really important that the rail industry starts to look at passengers as the consumers they are and does not keep treating them in the way we have seen reflected through these May timetable challenges.

Chair: Thank you. As part of our inquiry we want to pick up on the impact on people with disabilities.

Q388 **Grahame Morris:** Stephen, you mentioned your experience at Preston in particular and I wanted to ask you about that. You also mentioned that Travel Assist is not working. We have had evidence, and I have heard your testimony, about the chaos, late cancellations and late platform changes. You mentioned the difficulty for even able-bodied people to get from one platform to another at very short notice.

What about people who are disabled with mobility issues, and in wheelchairs or on scooters? I saw "The One Show" programme last week, and I was appalled by Northern's failure to honour the promises they made to assist disabled people. To me, it did not seem to be getting better; it seemed to be getting worse.

Stephen Brookes: I will answer that by saying that, dare one say, this is a longer-term issue. The timetable alterations probably had less impact because so many wheelchair users and people with severe mobility issues stopped using trains.



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I am working with the Rail Delivery Group on various issues on accessibility. Northern and other rail companies are pretty patchy at proper assistance. In my own situation, I have a double fractured spine so I cannot carry heavy cases. My wife has chronic arthritis. We have got very good at travelling light. Last year, we went on a holiday by rail to Cornwall. There were four different train operators and every single point of access failed, simply because there are not enough resources and staff to cope with travel assistance requirements at a busy time.

Having said that, disabled people—all people with a disability, mobility or sensory issue—were absolutely and utterly heavily impacted. Announcements at Preston station and at Birmingham New Street were made at such speed and haste that anybody with hearing issues, which I have for example, could not hear what was being said. There were so few staff around that I could not ask, because there was nobody to ask. At Birmingham New Street, for example, a London Northwestern guy did not know where the Virgin trains were going from because he had not been told; the changes were so quick. It was the same at Preston.

The impact on disabled people of the changes and the short-term notification was absolutely and utterly disastrous. Those are the passengers who I think will be very loth to return to an industry that, as Anthony said, is still in change. We have a revised timetable from the May one, which is not delivering. We are being told by Northern that this will be put right under "Putting the timetable back in order." I have no faith that any change will be for the better, because a timetable has been imposed on Northern that Northern cannot deliver. Their trains have not been up to speed on delivering that service. It is a whole infrastructure system. Northern is just one aspect of the problem.

I had a letter from Jo Johnson that said clearly that "the industry has failed the passengers it serves. A combination of delays, Network Rail infrastructure and reduced planning time means that the new timetables were finalised much too late to permit adequate logistic planning for those changes by the companies." That really says it all.

There was a top-down issue. One of the problems I find in my sector role is that rail companies and stakeholders do not talk to each other. I am old school. I used to be able to pick up a telephone and talk to people, but it seems as though that is no longer possible. People are so busy hiding their own bits of emails—"I've got 500 emails, so I have to answer those first"—that the key things are being missed.

Disability is very low on the agenda. Across the industry what happened in May put us further back down. We are no longer valid. One of the things I am doing is looking at the fact that disabled people have £294 billion a year to spend. We cannot be ignored. If the rail companies per se and the industry are treating us like that, do not be surprised when we turn round and say that enough is enough and we have had enough of them. These timetable changes were the significant breaking-point for us



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and we are saying, "We are not going to continue to work without working with you." We are now part of a consultation process.

At the moment, I am working on setting up different reference groups for all disabilities. The rail industry in its own right has got to the level of "Disability is a wheelchair." No, it is not. There is a whole range of very important issues. In fact, hidden disabilities are probably more impacted. I have been told that I do not look deaf. A waitress in a restaurant said, "You don't look deaf." How does that appear? When you get a stupid comment like that, no wonder rail people get very annoyed when we approach them and seem to look all right, because they have not been told how to deal with the impact.

Short-term changes do not work for us. Turn up and go is a great concept for disabled people, but there is no plan B by the rail companies. Plan A is there but it is flawed, so when there is no plan B and they start imposing, trying to chop and change and making it up as they go along, that is not a way to run a railway. That is what has happened in these last few months. Everybody has been making it up day by day.

Q389 Grahame Morris: Has any particular assistance been offered to people with disabilities? There is a longer-term problem that you are absolutely right to identify and that needs to be addressed, but in our Committee's inquiry we are particularly looking at the impact of the changes. Northern rail is the area that is exercising me particularly. Has any specific assistance been offered to disabled people to try to mitigate the effects?

Stephen Brookes: No more than exists. If you have a problem, you ring Travel Assist and try to do it that way, but that is still based on the fact that travel assistance requires a regular train, a regular connection and a linked service. If the first or second leg does not exist, there is no point in promising something that is not deliverable. There has been no extra help at all. Individual staff at individual stations try their best, but they are trying to help a lot of other people get through disastrous situations. It has been more down to us having to plan our journeys more wisely than maybe we have in the past. If there is one thing that has come out of this positively for disabled people, it is the fact that we have learned not to trust care.

Q390 Grahame Morris: That is a pretty damning indictment. Is there anything that we can do as a Committee to make recommendations in respect of future changes to timetables that would make life easier, particularly for disabled passengers?

Stephen Brookes: My answer to that, as I am trying to do elsewhere as well, would be to get the various rail companies to work with disabled people and to get disabled people involved in planning. Do not just feed information to us and say, "Yes, we have listened to you, but here is what we are going to do." Get us involved at the early stages of making a rail service that is fit for purpose for everybody. Let's face it, if we get it



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right for disabled people, older people and families, we have got it right for everybody.

I believe in equality. As a disabled person, I do not want the trains to run empty just for me. I accept that rail journeys are very important, but if I am included in the planning process, we can advise on what fits us and make them listen a bit more. That is why I am so pleased that some of the companies are starting to listen. Please get in touch with the rail companies and say to them, "You have to work with disabled people to make timetable changes viable, accessible and acceptable to everybody."

Q391 **Chair:** Anthony, have you done any work specifically on the needs of disabled passengers and how they can be better kept informed and supported when there is severe disruption, not just in relation to timetabling but more broadly?

Anthony Smith: As you know, Chair, we gather thousands of passenger comments every year through our national rail passenger survey, when 65,000 passengers give their opinions; 9% or 10% of those passengers say that they have disability or accessibility issues, so there is a huge amount of information coming in. The interesting thing is that the scores that passengers with disability or accessibility issues generally give for the services they are using are not markedly different from everyone else. People like Stephen make it through the system. Their needs are the same. Reliable trains are the best thing that anybody can do to help anybody with disability or accessibility issues. It is the same thing with good information.

Finally and crucially, staff on the ground make the difference. When things do not work properly, you do not generally turn to a computer; you turn to a human being for help. Having trained staff on the ground who are articulate and empowered to help, and go up to people and say, "Can I help?", in a non-threatening and supportive way, is the best thing. In this crisis—in the nervous breakdown we had over these months—staff were under a lot of pressure. I have respect for the staff who worked through some of this and helped all of us through it.

Alex Hayman: What I heard very clearly from Stephen is that there was no engagement from the train companies in the planning process or at any time after that. It is critical for train companies to hear the needs of anybody with disabilities. I do not think we see that kind of engagement at a sufficient level with any of the passengers or commuters across the whole network. That is a key change we need to see. Rail companies need to engage more productively early on, and genuinely have systems to hear the views of commuters and travellers, and at the very least take people through the logic of some of the changes.

We have seen at least one example where that was done well: the Waterloo upgrade last August. What was enabled there was a really good dialogue, so that the train companies could understand the needs of



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consumers. That led to a really clear communications programme. It was not without glitch, but it was quite a smooth process.

It was completely different with the May timetable changes. There needs to be some sort of consultation that goes beyond every time there is disruption. It needs to be an ongoing, genuine dialogue between all passengers and train companies, making passengers more involved and making sure that train companies truly understand what passengers need from the rail services.

Chair: You have pre-empted the next set of our questions, which are on consultation prior to changes.

Q392 **Grahame Morris:** We have covered some of the ground already. Emily, in your opening remarks, you explained some of the problems that have arisen as a result of the timetable changes in May. We are au fait with how Harpenden commuters are disadvantaged by the new timetable and feel that they have not been properly listened to, either by Thameslink or the Department for Transport.

Can you describe what efforts you have made as a group from Harpenden to have your views taken into account? Was there a formal consultation process either with Thameslink or the Department for Transport where you said, "This is not going to work for us"?

Emily Ketchin: The franchise agreement is an agreement between the Department for Transport and Thameslink, and it has a very clear obligation to consult when there is to be "a material adverse change." There can be no debate as to what happened and that there was a material adverse change for Harpenden commuters.

The very reason a franchise agreement has an obligation to consult is to give commuters a voice. It is to make us feel part of the process, which Mr Brookes was talking about earlier. It is to engage with us. That did not happen in relation to the Harpenden cuts. What actually happened is that Thameslink ran a consultation about running more services at Harpenden. As part of their consultation process at the time, they had a timetable that showed eight fast and four slow services—12 services an hour. That is a far cry from the 11 we are getting over a two-hour service now.

That lack of consultation has been conceded, and rightly so, by the Department for Transport as part of a debate that our local MP, Mr Bim Afolami—who I must thank—secured in Parliament. In response to a question put by him, Mr Johnson, the Rail Minister, explained that it was not viable and there was not enough time to consult on the Harpenden train cuts.

My view is that it sets a very dangerous precedent if Ministers can select when franchisees can and cannot consult. The way I read it from a layman's perspective, the obligation to consult is absolute. He also said that there was no viable alternative. There was a viable alternative. The



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Thameslink Express trains should have a different stopping pattern that better matches passenger needs. Instead of five, five, zero, it should have been three Luton, three Harpenden and four St Albans. It is disingenuous to suggest that there was no other viable option. It is really important that the commuters' voice is not taken away and dangerous precedents like that are set.

Q393 Grahame Morris: Have they made any commitment since May and then the July temporary changes to reintroduce a service, as you suggest, with a different stopping pattern? Has there been any commitment to do that?

Emily Ketchin: No, absolutely no commitment. If you look at the FAQ section on Thameslink's website, they are talking about introducing one slow train in the morning peak and strengthening the train from eight carriages to 12. We have absolutely no commitment; yet we know that the May timetable is going to be bid for very soon. My understanding is that the December timetable has already been bid. We are not hopeful of any new or key services being introduced. Giving us one slow train is not going to solve the problem.

Anthony Smith: There are three issues, one of which is the original consultation that Govia Thameslink Railway engaged in. The narrow range of questions they were asking was quite good. It was quite extensive, and they made considerable efforts to go and talk to rail user groups and stakeholder groups. You might not have liked the individual result for individual stations, but the process was pretty good. The problem was that Govia Thameslink Railway was trying to mesh with what East Midlands Trains was trying to do, and nobody took an overall view; hence the mess we ended up in. Things were being dealt with in silos.

With Northern and TransPennine, there is quite a different story. The consultation on the timetable change was much more perfunctory. It was a bit more old school. Once the Bolton electrification works got snared up and delayed, consultation went out of the window and it was just disaster recovery. There were two quite different situations.

Q394 Grahame Morris: In relation to the polling that you did, you told the Committee that a large majority of passengers affected by the timetable did not believe that they had been adequately consulted. Is there a more effective approach to consultation with passengers? We have heard about the loss of trust in the industry and how difficult it will be to restore. How would you recommend that we go about seeking to have an effective consultation process?

Anthony Smith: I suspect that we will not see a timetable change of this scale, both in the north and in the south, in our lifetimes, but there will be a massive number of ongoing changes due to engineering works, and welcome investment coming into the network as well. It is absolutely crucial and important that the Committee focuses on this for lessons for the future.



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The key thing is that the industry deadlines must be stuck to by all the parties. The deadlines started to get watered down and the detail got lost. When you are dealing with a change of this scale, you have to start earlier, quite frankly. The conventional timescales just do not work. This should have started years before, because of the impact on individuals.

The two lessons are, for goodness' sake, start earlier if you are doing a big change on this scale, so that you can flush out all the problems with all the train companies and Network Rail. Secondly, stick to the timescales that the industry has agreed. If they are stuck to, there is a fighting chance that you might actually end up with a decent timetable.

Q395 Grahame Morris: Alex, I would be interested in your views. Is there anything that we can learn from other sectors about how to conduct an effective consultation?

Alex Hayman: There certainly is. I agree with Anthony's comment that it needs to happen earlier. I reiterate the comments I expressed earlier: consultations should not just happen around major changes but should be an ongoing process. They should give passengers a genuine right to challenge train companies. Our research showed that two thirds of passengers felt that they were not adequately consulted. That was a national survey.

There are examples from other sectors—in particular, the water sector, where they have CCGs, customer challenge groups. Water companies are obliged to engage in a meaningful way with those customer challenge groups, for example around price changes, before they take those price changes up to the regulator. That is a system that has shown some success. If it would be helpful, we can provide more detail on that in written format after this meeting.

Chair: We want to think about the future and planning for December 2018 and beyond. Huw will take us forward

Q396 Huw Merriman: Before I do so, Chair, I want to touch on another matter that was in the scribbled note I sent you. The Committee received a submission from a group called the Hastings and Rother Rail Users Alliance. They had a rather different experience, and I want to see whether they just got lucky and were unique in this situation.

They cover the stretch of line that GTR runs between Ashford and Eastbourne, so it is in Kent and East Sussex. Part of that is in my constituency, to declare an interest. Originally, the proposal was to cut back the three two-carriage trains on that line. The rail user groups are really brilliant; they got their teeth into it and decided that they could end up with a fourth, using no additional rolling stock but just being smarter with the timetable. They worked very closely with Phil Hutchinson, the GTR head of strategic planning, and that occurred. In that area, they ended up with an extra service.

They told the Committee about three key aspects that were required to



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make that work. The first was that GTR's timetable was designed jointly with the rail customers, with the rail user group. They were absolutely alive to that and took the suggestion on board, and then made it work.

Secondly, all the rail stakeholders worked to a shared outcome, with Network Rail and indeed even a group of MPs.

Thirdly, and this is the thereafter part, there have been regular performance reviews, which have identified that the trains are still breaking down and there are not enough train drivers. Again, they are having regular meetings.

That is an example where the timetable situation, much though we have heard about the negativity and seen it, in that instance worked positively. Were they unique? If so, why? Have there been other examples where areas did not have such a miserable experience as Harpenden quite clearly did?

Anthony Smith: That is a very good point. In other parts of the Govia Thameslink empire—Southern—things were quite different. That is one of the things that is very curious about this crisis. In a slightly parallel universe, Southern and Gatwick Express passengers had timetable changes, not on the same scale but often running in parallel with Thameslink services. While the service is by no means perfect, it went pretty smoothly and it was much better. The Go-Ahead Group also runs Southeastern and there were timetable changes, but there was not much noise there.

What was different about the core Thameslink and Great Northern issues was the scale of the change. It was so big. There was such a big change and so much was being reintroduced. You are quite right to point out that many rail passengers would have read the headlines and thought, "What are they talking about? It's fine; there's not a big change." For the passengers who were affected, which was quite a big number, the impact was very significant. Your point about engagement with local rail user groups is a very good one. It can make a difference, and those groups should be spoken to and given the space to help craft the solutions.

Q397 **Huw Merriman:** I want to ask an additional question, but you may want to come in on this particular point as well. All of this happened not because of politicians or the rail industry, but because the Hastings and Rother Rail Users Alliance came up with a really smart proposal, which then was listened to. Should the Government do more to help rail user groups get set up? These are residents, and they have great expertise and they make it happen. Is the industry, or parts of it, dismissive of these groups, and do you think they could do more?

Anthony Smith: The industry listens to those groups in some cases. Those groups are best run by people like Emily, who are motivated and want to make a difference. I do not think you can mandate them into existence. The best ones are run by very energetic and capable individuals. Through the franchise process, the Government could give



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encouragement for the setting up and resourcing of these groups, and that can only be useful. A lot of passengers know more about the train service than the train companies.

Stephen Brookes: I totally agree with you that, where the consultative groups and the operators work well together, it is an excellent outcome. In that case, there was also the fact that the existing stock was of a consistent pattern. Where we are, in Blackpool, at times a specific train—the 8.38 to Manchester airport, for example—can be four coaches electric or a two-car 142 Pacer. Trying to balance passenger loading against the kind of stock we have can be an issue.

While we are consulted and get involved, and I am getting more people involved, you also have the imbalance of new trains against very old, dated and inaccessible vehicles. Once we have a consistent fleet, we will be happier, but at the moment the consultative groups are working on a juggling soot scenario. Yes, we want more trains that are accessible, but Pacer trains are not accessible; never mind disabled people, they are not fit for purpose for athletes. You cannot get on them.

The point we have to bear in mind is that the groups are dictated by what is available in a particular area. For us, there are two viables: the timetable needs to be consistent, but the stock available for those timetables also needs to be consistent. We are a million miles away from that in our area.

Huw Merriman: I said that there are two carriages, but some are four, some are diesel, some are electric, some can only do one part of the line, and some can do the others. It sounds quite similar to yours. These ingenious groups around the country can find a solution even in the madness of dual-mode trains.

Q398 **Chair:** I want to follow up with a question for Anthony. Obviously in that case, there was the capacity to take on board the views of the rail users and a willingness to do so.

In relation to the issue at Harpenden, it seems to me that that flows from a political decision. Getting Thameslink through the core service came top. That had a knock-on impact on East Midlands Trains passengers, and to try to mitigate the impact on people from Bedford they then created these fast Thameslink trains, which had a knock-on impact on people at Harpenden, Flitwick and the rest. There was nothing they could have said, no matter how powerful the group, because there was no willingness to reconsider the original cast.

Anthony Smith: There was a tremendous political impetus to realise the benefits of the massive and welcome investment in the Thameslink service. There was a complete new fleet of trains, longer trains, better information and upgraded stations. There was great investment that we all liked. The original plan was to put 24 trains an hour through the central core, which was sensibly reduced to 22. That just drove everything else around it. A bit of common sense was lost in the process,



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as a result of which there were problems and casualties that we are now going to take years to try to mend. That is a very important lesson for the Committee to dwell on.

Q399 **Chair:** Will there be an impetus to move to 24 trains per hour eventually?

Anthony Smith: I am sure there will be eventually, but I think we have had enough of big timetable changes. What all passengers want above everything else is stability and a reliable service, and, where there has been extreme detriment, efforts to put services back.

Q400 **Huw Merriman:** Having taken a bit of time on the last question, I will try to compress the section on moving forward with the plans for the December 2018 timetable. I will ask you all this question, but there are three parts to it.

First, do you support the more cautious approach now being put forward for December 2018? Have you noticed any discernible improvement in the operators' approach to consultation on the next set of changes? Finally, does the new and more cautious approach demonstrate that the industry and Government were just too ambitious when it came to the timetable changes of May?

Anthony Smith: Ambition is a great thing. We should be ambitious as human beings. The great mystery about this whole crisis was personified for us by the three days before 20 May. On 17 May, we had a public meeting. Network Rail and the Rail Delivery Group senior level came to that public meeting. We cross-examined them in public. "Is it going to be all right on Sunday? What's going to happen? It's a big change." We were assured, "It's going to be fine, with some teething problems." The central mystery of this crisis is that everybody seemed to believe it was going to be all right on the day; and it was not, big time.

Q401 **Graham Stringer:** What was the date of that meeting?

Anthony Smith: It was 17 May, three days before the big timetable change. We went away thinking, "Okay, fingers crossed, it is going to be all right," and it was not. That is the central mystery. Why did somebody not blow the whistle and say, "This is really not going to work"? When did they realise? I think ambition is a good thing, but it has to be ambition that is deliverable, otherwise passengers' trust is eroded.

December 2018 is bitter pragmatism in a sense. It is certainly not optimal. Passengers have been promised things and have been paying in advance for things that are now not going to be delivered or are going to be considerably delayed. Nobody wants another situation like last May. We want stability. We want reliability.

The degree of consultation has been patchy because, quite frankly, this has been patched together. We have to get back to an industry that is stable. The industry is meant to publish timetables 12 weeks in advance. We were focusing on that issue last November, and before the industry



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lost that ability some time ago. That is just for standard engineering work changes. The key is to get back to a stable system.

Stephen Brookes: I will read a little bit of the letter I had from Jo Johnson: "The Secretary of State is clear that the way the timetabling was done has to change. It is obvious that Network Rail's current timetabling system simply did not cope with the volume of work it had to complete."

In our area, the December revision is not going to happen, because we are having a more gradual input of timetable change. The consultation group has actually supported that. What we do not want is to go from one black hole into a little bit of daylight and then fall into another black hole because it cannot be delivered. We would rather see something that is deliverable in phases. Right the way through, this has been the point we were making as a consultative group: don't give us something you cannot deliver. We said that to Northern before the electrification and before the work was half completed.

All of us who were involved in the disability groups in the consultation were saying, "We know that you are saying that by March there will be an electric service that is going to be fully accessible and fully timetabled." Network Rail and Northern failed to deliver an opening date. It went back by six weeks. Then it went back by 12 weeks. There was a one-page advert in the *Metro* in the north saying how wonderful the new service was going to be on the day that it failed.

That is the point. Even the Secretary of State said, "We know it failed. We know that Network Rail's planning of that timetable did not work because the companies could not deliver." He said, "I will insist on a gradual approach to timetable revision and not have the significant changes we saw that caused chaos."

The whole scenario of those timetables is not that one company is to blame. The whole infrastructure from top to bottom failed to deliver. It failed to take into account the passengers. That is what bugs me more than anything.

Q402 **Huw Merriman:** That suggests that it was too ambitious, which was one of my three parts. Is there better consultation? Is it the right thing to be more limited for 2018? Have you seen better consultation?

Stephen Brookes: Yes, because they have started listening as opposed to dictating: "Here is a little group; we will tell you what we are doing." No, we are not getting that. We are now being asked, "What do you want from us?" That is basically because they have not known what they could deliver. I will go for that, because it means that they are listening to us and taking us into account.

Okay, in the past there have been some very loud voices in consultation groups. Sometimes that works, but a lot of the time it does not because



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we have ended up with a confrontation aspect in the rail industry. On disability, that has been a very significant issue. Some rail companies are scared witless if they get an email from a disabled person. "What are we going to be sued for today?" That is no way forward. What we all have to do as passengers is to work with the companies and say, "This is what we want you to provide us with as a service supplier. We are paying you our money. You're not doing us any favours."

Emily Ketchin: I find the debate around ambition and caution quite an interesting one. When your ambition is to run 24 trains and you actually run 11, that is not my definition of ambitious. For me, it is not really a debate about ambition or cautiousness; it is about realism. That has at the heart of it commuter interests, and that is the key.

When you look at the new Thameslink timetable, and they talk on their website about replacing trains that run at 6.50 and 7.08 with trains that run at 8.39 and 9.09, that is not a timetable that has passenger interests at its heart. You cannot help but feel, when you look at the 20 May 2018 timetable and its implementation, that it was put together primarily for the convenience of the rail industry, with very little thought given to the people actually using that train service and whose daily lives are impacted by decisions that were made with very little, if any, accountability.

The second part of your question was whether there was any improvement to consultation. We have not seen it at Harpenden. We have no firm commitments for December, bar some very minor ones, which really trouble us. What we want is a realistic timetable that will deliver the service we are paying for.

Alex Hayman: Given that the timetable changes were promising better connectivity, more frequent trains and better ability for people to travel, and that those have already been, through the May issues, under-delivered, no one is going to welcome another overly ambitious plan. It is to be expected that the next timetable changes will be scaled back, but I do not think that passengers welcome an overly cautious approach. We have heard already that the level of trust in the industry is so low. What people want to see is services being delivered and changes being made against their expectations, and a reliable service that they can have confidence in, as opposed to promises on which they are let down at a later date. We have not been tracking how the consultations are going yet, so I cannot comment on that part of the question.

Q403 **Huw Merriman:** Chair, I was going to mention one other point later on, but Mr Smith touched on it so I will ask it now. I have asked this of pretty much all the individuals who have come before us. On a project as large as this, each individual silo institution, when I asked them about project management, had their own project managers. There seemed to be no overall stakeholder sponsor and no overall project manager saying to each of the connected parts, "Right, have you delivered? Sign in blood



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here.”

Is that fair? Have you seen anything like it? With all my days in industry, I would have expected something like that to exist and, therefore, to highlight where it could go wrong, and indeed did.

Anthony Smith: That is a good point. You could spend hours pontificating on how the industry is structured and what could be improved. What struck us throughout all of this was that there is no one person looking at all the franchises, Network Rail’s input and what the Department required through the franchises. You need somebody, and I am not sure who that is or where they are best placed, to take the overall view.

Secondly, you need a timetabling system where somebody feels they have the authority to press the button and say, “No, that is not going to work.” Somebody has to have the authority to press the red button and say to the politicians, the industry and their colleagues, in Network Rail’s case, “This is not going to work. The best thing to do is to call it off.” That overarching voice was missing.

Chair: Great stuff. We are now going to look again at information and assistance during disruption.

Q404 **Graham Stringer:** We have heard that there was chaos and poor communications. Mr Smith, has it been reported to you, or have you had any accounts, that people were feeling themselves physically at risk and not safe?

Anthony Smith: Yes. We were aware of issues at Harpenden and other stations, which we observed and which were brought to our attention. We saw photographs of that, and certainly on occasions the situation looked very scary. We took those matters to the Office of Rail and Road, which as you know is the safety regulator for the rail industry. Their head of safety, Ian Prosser, raised the issues very forcefully with Govia Thameslink Railway. We believe that after that there were some improvements. There were moments when the crowding and the situation that staff were put in was tantamount to bordering on unsafe. That is certainly what it looked like.

Q405 **Graham Stringer:** Were there any actual incidents of people being hurt?

Anthony Smith: I am not aware of people being physically hurt, but colleagues may have other information.

Stephen Brookes: On the disabled side, no. Nobody was hurt. The trouble for disabled people, whatever the disability was, is that we were actually excluded by the rush of non-disabled people. It was more an exclusion issue for us, not physical damage. Nevertheless, the crowding on some trains for people with certain conditions was exceptionally dangerous, as was the overheating, for example, for people with blood pressure and heart conditions. There was a health issue. There was a health risk, but I had no reports from anybody or from any organisation



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that there was actual physical damage, just extreme stress and extreme fear.

Q406 **Graham Stringer:** Emotional and psychological damage.

Stephen Brookes: Yes.

Q407 **Graham Stringer:** I understand that. You said you reported the matter to the regulator. Do you think the regulator has sufficient powers?

Anthony Smith: Yes. The statutory powers that they have and the influence they have in the industry is sufficient to get things changed and improved. In this case, there were improvements made on the ground, so, yes, I think they have sufficient powers.

Q408 **Graham Stringer:** Can you tell us what those improvements were?

Anthony Smith: There were improvements to the monitoring of the situations on the ground. There were improvements to the procedures that were in place to make them slightly reflect the reality more, and more support and more staff on the ground. Those were the improvements we were told about.

Chair: We have one question about the effectiveness of the emergency and interim timetables.

Q409 **Steve Double:** We have covered a lot of the things I was going to ask about the interim and emergency timetables. I want to focus on communication when those emergency timetables were implemented, and how you felt the operators did in getting that information out to passengers. How easy was it for passengers to access the information?

Emily Ketchin: It is absolutely clear that we were not able to make any informed decision about what train was available for us to catch. When the 20 May timetable was supposed to be introduced, we turned up at the station and there would be something different. You would check the app and it would tell you there was a train, but when you got there it would disappear off the board. There was huge confusion. You could not make an informed decision. It was very difficult when you were trying to plan your day. The problem was that the staff were also looking at the app, and then trains would disappear. It is absolutely crystal clear that information was not properly disseminated.

The thing I would like to touch on, and I am hopeful that the Committee will look at it, is that what was clearly happening with Thameslink is that they were removing trains by 10 o'clock the night before. The rationale around that was PPM. I have nothing to do with the rail industry, but obviously I have done an inordinate amount of reading since March this year, unfortunately.

It seems to me quite clear that, under the PPM measure, as long as you cancel a train by 10 o'clock the night before, you do not take it into account for your statistics. I was going online just after 10 o'clock to try



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to work out which train I could get the next day, but even those trains were then not running. The boards were not clear. There was total confusion, which is why we had the two incidents at Harpenden when trains were supposed to be running but were not, and we moved platforms and people were running across.

In the evening, we have a big concern that there is an accident waiting to happen. I absolutely hope I am wrong, but there is an accident waiting to happen at St Albans. St Albans is not designed as an interchange station. It has a central platform with a single-access staircase, which requires people at the front and the middle of the train to walk down a narrow passageway, where the staircase is, to access the single-access staircase. Because of the stopping patterns of the express trains, there is a 30-minute gap in services for Harpenden. Between 18.36 and 19.06, there is no train at all to Harpenden, but there is an express train that runs. A lot of people travelling to Harpenden try to change at St Albans, but it is not an interchange station. It was never designed to be an interchange station. The new bridge, which is very much needed, is not going to be delivered until either 2019 or 2020, as I understand it.

Stephen Brookes: In our area, the fact of two-minute cancellations was not just a one-off or irregular; it was a regular event. The information coming from the noticeboards to the staff and on the apps was totally different. We had several occasions—at Blackpool North, for example—where the staff said, “Oh, that train is cancelled, so go and get the bus” and then they would run up three minutes later and say, “No, actually that one is running but the next one is cancelled.” That is not an exaggeration or just a one-off brought in for effect. It was general. The problem was that they did not know, and their control did not know, and that message was not being passed to staff. Passengers had not a cat in hell’s chance of having any form of meaningful information. Apps were not used because there was no point in using them.

Anthony Smith: The good that could come out of this is that any crisis shows up the cracks in any system very clearly and, quite clearly, the industry’s information systems—the legacy systems they are dealing with, and so on—are simply not up to the job in a fast-moving situation. I hope that one of the Committee’s recommendations is around a radical overhaul of the industry’s information systems. They are still too much driven off signalling systems, rather than a consumer-oriented system, and that leads to all these problems.

We had two phases. Northern actually acted more quickly for various reasons and had its interim timetable in on 4 June. Pre that, it was chaos, as colleagues have said. Great Northern and Thameslink took longer. It was 15 July, so there was a very long period when we had this ongoing crisis, virtually daily, not knowing what was going on. Once they had both settled on those interim timetables, the communication was okay, because the industry got back into its stride again.



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It was a bad period. I have been around for years, and it is the worst I can remember since Hatfield and the crisis of information that followed the very serious accident there a very long time ago.

Alex Hayman: We had hundreds of stories that supported all that you have heard already. Certainly, the lack of consistency between information sources was something that was brought up quite a lot. People were forced, effectively, if they wanted to catch a train, to run across stations, and there were health and safety concerns around that. The other thing that really drove a lot of stress and anxiety was when people got on trains that were supposed to be fast trains and then were stopping trains, which really slowed down their journey; and the other way around, when people found they were on stopping trains that were suddenly redesignated and sailed through their station. Those were all things that we heard.

On top of that, to Huw's point earlier, it is often the case that passenger groups rise up because they are trying to fill the gaps in the lack of consistent information, because they might be a bit further along the line. Passenger groups play a very important role, but, ultimately, that also highlights the deficiencies in how train companies and the industry communicate with passengers in times of crisis. It is a consistent issue that we hear about on an ongoing basis.

Emily Ketchin: I have one more point to make on that topic, which is about the late introduction of Crossrail. We know that Crossrail is now going to be delayed, and that has a material impact on Harpenden and other stations on our line, because of journeys to West Hampstead, which is a really key station, where the Thameslink line links up with the Jubilee line and London Overground.

We have seen a 44% reduction in Harpenden train services stopping at West Hampstead in the morning. There is now a 48-minute critical gap between 6.51 and 7.39, which really impacts on people trying to get to Canary Wharf. The hope and expectation was that, come December, you would be able to go to Farringdon. Now, with trains being decimated and journeys to and from West Hampstead no longer being viable, there is the impact of that delay as well, and I would welcome it if the Committee would look at that.

Q410 **Chair:** We would like to look at compensation. Emily and Stephen, you have given very powerful testimony today about the impact of the 20 May timetable. Given the scale of the effects on passengers, and how long the problems have gone on, do you think that the operators' additional compensation packages of up to the cost of a month's travel are adequate?

Emily Ketchin: The short answer is absolutely not. We are now into September, we have had some of this disruption since May, and we are looking at an increased train fare in January, which is absolutely staggering. Obviously, refunds are welcome, but they do not compensate



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for the time, stress, missed appointments and missed family time, or the fact that people have stopped coming to London in the evening, which the issue at Harpenden has caused. The one thing I welcome is the fact that it has been opened up to not just season ticket holders. That was very important. It was disappointing that it took time, but at least we have got there.

Stephen Brookes: Particularly for certain sectors of disabled people—those who have learning disabilities or basic communication problems—the message that has come out about compensation is so confusing that they think, “I’m not going to bother.” It says, “You may be able to apply, you can do this if you have a season ticket, or, if you have had several journeys but are not a season ticket holder, there’s a different path.” The confusion around compensation, while it has been offered as a word, is absolute. There has been no consistency in the approach to it.

People with learning disabilities who travel are frightened off by the complexity of trying to get compensation for what has been a failure. It needs to be more simple and straightforward: “This is what the package is going to be.” As Emily said, when they offer what they have offered and then say that they are going to put the fares up anyway—okay, that is a political issue I am not going to get into—the whole package has been like saying, “Here’s a little bit of a sweetie for you.”

Frankly, that is what I have felt about it. It has been negative and badly received, and people are just saying, “What’s the point? We’re not going to get anywhere with it. All they’re doing is fobbing us off.”

Q411 **Chair:** Have you yourself applied for delay repay or the additional compensation? What has been your experience?

Stephen Brookes: In that sense, I am slightly worse off than most; because I have a travel pass, I just get the delays and none of the benefits of trying to get it back. As I mentioned, I had a five-hour journey from Blackpool to Manchester. The significance of that was that I could not get to a teaching session at Manchester University, so I had a loss of earnings on that day, and, as a pensioner, that is quite an important element. The fact is that there is no way that that can be recovered. In fact, it made it very difficult; I had to renegotiate some contracts, because the fear from Manchester University was that, if it happened again, I would not be able to get there to teach. That impact is significant.

My experience from the disability organisations I work with has generally been that they feel it is not worth bothering. They might get a little bit of money, but it is too complex, and will they ever get it anyway?

Q412 **Chair:** Emily, have you had any experience yourself of applying for delay repay or compensation?

Emily Ketchin: I am waiting for the magic email that I am supposed to receive. As commuters, we cannot do anything until we get the email



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from Thameslink that will enable us to apply. I have not yet received my magic email; I remain in hope that I will. Only once a period has passed, can I contact them. It is quite a convoluted process.

On delay repay, you have to fill in so many boxes to claim it that it literally takes the entire train journey from London to Harpenden to claim for a journey. It does save your details, but every time you want to claim delay replay, you have to fill in your ticket number; your photo ID number; what train you were supposed to get, although who knows which one it was when you didn't know what was going to be there in the first place; what time that journey was supposed to be; and how long the delay was. Again, that system does not have the commuter in mind.

- Q413 **Chair:** Do you think that people on the same service always get the same compensation? Do you think it is being applied effectively? Also, I read something—I am not sure whether it is accurate—about which timetable you can use to claim delay repay. I am sure that at the start of the process GTR was accepting delay repay claims against the 20 May timetable. Then, when it introduced the interim timetable on 15 July, it suddenly said that people could not claim against what they were promised and could claim only against the new timetable with fewer trains in it. Is that people's experience?

Emily Ketchin: Let me start with your second question first. It is absolutely correct to say that, with the implementation of the 15 July timetable, you can no longer claim for the train journeys that you were supposed to be getting as part of the 20 May timetable, which is vastly unfair for commuters.

Chair: Especially if you bought your season ticket back in January.

Emily Ketchin: Which of course everyone does. That is when you buy your season ticket—in January—expecting to have services. You then see a third of those services go and a further degradation to your service, and you cannot even claim against that timetable.

To answer your first question, there is a lack of transparency around delay repay. It is very difficult. I have read stories about how people on exactly the same train journey have been given different amounts of money because of the algorithms and how the compensation is made. I have not had personal experience of that.

- Q414 **Chair:** Anthony and Alex, both your organisations have argued for more generous or easily accessible compensation packages—precisely the sort of thing that Stephen has been talking about. Do you think that one potential good thing to come out of this debacle is that the Government might be incentivised to take urgent steps to improve the situation for claiming compensation? In particular, do you think that the case is building for automatic passenger compensation for cancellations and serious delays?



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Alex Hayman: This has highlighted something we have been trying to get public for a very long time. The compensation landscape is totally unfit for purpose, and so many barriers are created for people to receive the money that they are owed. In May, we heard through our passenger stories the perception that train companies were deliberately creating those barriers.

At the heart of it, understanding of the compensation system among passengers is very low, and that is because it is incredibly complex and not consistent, and they hear different stories both from train companies and among themselves. The communication from train operating companies to challenge that level of understanding is incredibly poor as well, and there is not enough support on their websites or when you speak to them directly.

The process, as you outlined, Emily, is incredibly burdensome. After suffering from delays and cancellations—I have been experiencing this myself an awful lot as well—the last thing you want to do when you get home, if you cannot do it on the train, because there is not a lot of connectivity, is to spend that time filling in forms. There is a massive burden of responsibility for the passenger to remember the train that you meant to take, even though during the chaos they were always changing and you were running between platforms, and that is incredibly difficult.

We have heard a few stories such as this: “I hate to say it, but I don’t have the energy to claim delay repay. I’m not going to waste more of my valuable time with my family to fill out forms.” Another is: “I’ve not even bothered to claim, as I’d be writing an application every single day.” In extreme cases, we heard examples where during the May crisis people very diligently filled out the forms, and took a lot of their time to fill them out, and found themselves put forward to the fraud department of train companies. Again, that undermines the trust and confidence that people might have that they will be able to claim compensation. Ultimately, what it drives is that only one in three customers who might be eligible for compensation actually goes on to claim compensation. In a market such as this, where there is not a lot of competition, compensation should both provide customers with what they are owed and act as an incentive for train companies to improve their services to passengers.

On your point about auto-compensation, we absolutely think that it is a viable and important remedy to start to break down some of the barriers, and should be introduced as soon as possible. We welcome the Government’s announcement a while back that, by the end of this year, mobile and smart ticketing should be rolled out across the vast majority of the network. That is the opportunity to bring in automatic compensation. People should not have to fight or jump through hoops to get the money they are owed, and automatic compensation would ultimately take away from train companies that responsibility, which they are not taking very seriously in terms of breaking down misconceptions



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and educating people, and, I hope, put the money back in people's bank accounts.

Q415 **Chair:** I have two quick follow-ups. First, it seems to me that there is a disincentive for the train operators to get you to claim compensation. Why would they? If that is right, what are the Government doing to try to make sure that more than a third of the people entitled to claim compensation actually claim it?

Alex Hayman: I understand that there is a disincentive for train companies to hand out money, but this is money that people are owed and have a right to.

Chair: Absolutely.

Alex Hayman: In this market, many people who are travelling do not have the option to vote with their feet and take a different train company or different line, and another means of transport is not always viable. If train companies do not adopt this, we think the Government or regulator should push it through to ensure that all train companies have to offer automatic compensation.

Q416 **Chair:** Given that there is a disincentive, what up to this point have the Government been doing to improve that situation, where so many people do not get the compensation they are entitled to?

Alex Hayman: Not enough. Back in 2015, we submitted a super-complaint to the regulator highlighting the fact that all those barriers exist. Not enough has been done since then. There was a short-lived campaign to help people to understand their rights to compensation. There is not enough pressure on train operating companies either from Government or through their licensing and franchise agreements to drive better compensation, and clearer and easier passenger-focused ways to gain that compensation.

Chair: Anthony, I can see that you are itching to tell me the answer to my questions.

Q417 **Graham Stringer:** Before we come to that, I have a question. Given that it is an unsatisfactory system, are there any train operating companies that do better than others? Is there a pecking order of good to awful?

Alex Hayman: That is a very important question. There are at least two that I can point to—Northern and Virgin—that have implemented, to a degree, an element of automatic compensation. It does not go far enough. Ultimately, people who buy tickets in advance, and directly with those train companies, will get automatically compensated if those journeys are delayed. I can point to those, and, if they can do it, all should be doing it, at least in those circumstances, but it needs to be rolled out more extensively to cover more ticket types, and certainly in line with the roll-out of the mobile and smart ticketing that we are led to believe should be in place by the end of this year.



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Anthony Smith: The compensation package we have with Govia Thameslink Railway is okay and welcome, for season ticket holders and people who travel slightly less frequently.

Q418 **Chair:** Is up to a month's compensation enough?

Anthony Smith: It could be more generous, yes, but it is there. The problem with standardised compensation is that, although it has the advantage that it makes it easier to understand the process, individual circumstances are different. People suffer different things. I am very sorry to hear Stephen say that people are not bothering to claim, because it is really important in a semi-monopoly environment that people do claim. If people get stuck, they should come to us and we will help them. That is why we exist.

The compensation that exists is a step in the right direction. We have done a bit of work with our panellists on how easy it is to claim, and people generally find it okay. Delay repay is a good step forward; let's not throw it away. What we would like to see is delay repay on Northern at 15 minutes, because we have that in the south.

The delay repay process can be improved, but it is quite difficult to move to fully automatic compensation on a metro-style railway, except where it is completely gated and you have smart tickets. For London to Southend, c2c has automatic compensation. What we should all be pushing for, and I hope the Committee can push for it, is more automation, so that it is easier. You have a portal to register all your claims; it is much more straightforward and makes the process simpler.

What we are doing with the Office of Rail and Road is to understand how many people claim. Claim levels are going up. Train companies are getting slightly better at promoting that, and we should have some new research later in the year on the level of claim. What we now need to understand is whether we are seeing, with the 35% or 39% of people who are claiming, the bulk of the monetary value. That is what we need to understand next. Is there a rump of very small claims that people just cannot be bothered to make? We need to understand that.

Moving ahead, a fares freeze must be put in place. It just seems astonishing that passengers on Thameslink, Great Northern, Northern and TransPennine are being asked for higher fares in January. It seems quite astonishing.

Q419 **Chair:** Is your contention that there should be a fares freeze across the board, or just on the franchises that have been particularly hard hit by these changes?

Anthony Smith: At the very least, it should be on the four franchises that have been very hard hit. That is a minimum, just to show some recognition that things went wrong and that they are sorry and trying to put it right. It may be a gesture, but it would be an important one in winning back trust and winning people back to the railway.



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It also throws a light on fares reform. We are engaged in this big activity with the Rail Delivery Group, trying to reform the massive, complex British rail fares system, and I think we will get there. It is really important now that people can access the better value fares, so that they feel they are getting better value for money. If fares are going up again, people need a better sense of value for money.

Q420 Chair: I have two follow-ups. One is around delay repay. In some places it comes in after 15 minutes' delay, and in some places it is still 30. Where are we in terms of the balance in the system between its being 30 or 15, and what is holding up its being 15 minutes everywhere, or is that not the intention? I am trying to remember.

Anthony Smith: It should be the intention, because 15 minutes sounds about right. From the research we have done, passengers indicate that that is about when they would expect a more significant degree of compensation to be paid, but we have differing franchise arrangements.

Q421 Chair: Does it depend on new franchises coming into being?

Anthony Smith: Yes, although the Northern one is relatively new. We have quite a few train companies on delay repay 15, and some are on delay repay 30. There are three train companies that are still on the old passenger's charter—Great Western, Chiltern and one other that I always forget. Those three are still on a very archaic system, which is embedded in the 1990s. It is quite a mixed picture, but the important thing is to push for delay repay 15 across the piece, just to make it clear.

Q422 Chair: When people apply for compensation, do you know how promptly it is being paid?

Anthony Smith: The system is working okay. A lot of people are claiming a lot of money in delay repay compensation. For Thameslink and Great Northern, the system seems to be working okay; for Northern, I am not quite so sure. We have a lot of outstanding complaints about Northern at the moment. Its systems are not there, and it was having trouble with complaints even before 20 May, because it had changed its outsourced provider that dealt with the complaints, which caused real difficulties. I am afraid it is still top of our complaints league, where it should not be.

Q423 Chair: How does automatic compensation work? Alex, you mentioned it in relation to Virgin, and I cannot remember the other company. What about when people buy via an app such as Trainline?

Anthony Smith: Automatic compensation should be spreading, but you have to know where the passenger got on the train and where they got off. It is doable, but you need a system that is either gated at both ends so that you swipe in or swipe out, or where, as in the Virgin example, by and large, if you have booked through its website, it knows who you are and which train you were on.



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Q424 **Chair:** A lot of places are swipe in, swipe out, although not everywhere. Could you implement it for some areas but not others?

Anthony Smith: I think you could, yes. You could start to look at areas that are gated, and, of course, the whole London area is gated, by and large.

Alex Hayman: I would contest a couple of points. There may have been some improvement in the compensation rates, but it started from an incredibly low base, as has been highlighted for a long time. It should not matter whether people are due small, medium or large sums of money. It should be seamless and easy for them to get the money they are owed when they suffer delays. At the rate of franchise renewal, it will not be until 2021 that we have delay repay 15 rolled out for the entire network.

The performance of train companies in managing and paying compensation is not up to scratch, in our opinion, and certainly in the opinion of the people sharing stories with us. It can take up to 20 days to respond to claims, which sees only 50% of people satisfied with the speed of response. One in four people we surveyed had to prompt the rail companies to find out where their compensation was. To me, those kinds of stats say that there is not a high level of satisfaction with compensation and that it needs to change at a much faster rate than it is doing at the moment.

Q425 **Chair:** It is my experience that there are vast differences in performance between train operators, but that is very anecdotal. Sorry.

You have both said that the roll-out of smart ticketing can be an opportunity to introduce automatic compensation. How confident are you that smart ticketing will be rolled out across the network by the end of this year? Is that when it is supposed to be done?

Anthony Smith: It is pretty optimistic, I think, but the Secretary of State has said that there will be a smart option for all ticket purchases by the end of this year. I suspect that will be the case, but how easy they are to use, what the take-up is and what the effectiveness might be could be a moot point. It is moving in the right direction, but you are trying to implement a smart ticketing system on top of a fiendishly complex fares system. Until the underlying issues are dealt with in the fares system, which we are attempting to grapple with, it will be very hard to implement the sort of nationwide smart ticketing that people might recognise.

Q426 **Chair:** Alex, do you have anything to add? There is no sign of it on East Midlands Trains, I have to say.

Alex Hayman: I suspect that Anthony is privy to more insight than we are as to progress on that. It is certainly something that needs to happen; the rail industry needs to catch up with other industries that have moved to mobile and smart ticketing, everything from theatres to



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airlines. It is about time that the rail industry caught up, so we very much hope that the timescale will be met.

Stephen Brookes: I have a codicil on smart ticketing. I use the Virgin website. On smart ticketing, and going back to the issue of different times, structures and claim periods, the fact is that a lot of disabled people and older people do not use apps. I am working with Age UK at the moment, which has come up with the horrifying figure that smartphone use among the over-65s is at only about 39%. If we are not careful, we could create a two-tier ticketing system, which would feed back into problems with refunds and how compensation is made. Smartphones are great, but they can be a real problem for those who cannot or will not adapt to them. We must bear that in mind; it is not a solve-all.

Chair: That is an important point.

Q427 **Huw Merriman:** I am sure I can find a question in this. It relates to the Bill that I have proposed on automatic compensation, not just for trains but for all forms of transport, including aeroplanes. I want to test this with you. Anthony, you talked about claiming, and I am one of those people who does not see why we need to claim any more.

If it is the case that Network Rail pays compensation to train operators for delays, but only a third of the passengers experiencing those delays are bothering to ask for compensation, money is left in the pot. The Bill proposes that that pot has to be ring-fenced by train operators and can be spent only on technology, which would mean that you could tap on or off the train, either with your card, Stephen, or for others with their phone. You would tap off on the train on the way off, and, once you had done that, it would automatically calculate whether you were 15 or 30 minutes late and automatically pay the money into your bank account about 20 minutes later. You would not have to fill in a form at all.

Why wouldn't we do that? Maybe this is the answer: ultimately, train operators pay franchise amounts based on how much they are going to pay out in compensation. If they pay out more, the Treasury gets less. Is that the issue that is holding up my Bill?

Anthony Smith: No, I do not think that it is. It is interesting that you raise airlines, because of course nowhere is more perfect for introducing automatic compensation than air travel. They know which plane you were on and how delayed it was, so why on earth don't you get an automatic pay-out? You still have to apply.

Huw Merriman: Willie Walsh, the chief executive of British Airways, sat in front of our Committee and said, "I am a business, not a charity." That may give you the answer.

Anthony Smith: The fact is that the law says that, if you do not provide a service with reasonable care and skill, you will compensate people, and the airlines are getting away with murder in that respect, quite frankly.



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As soon as we can move to a practical situation whereby you have tap-in and tap-out and you know where the passenger has been, you should have automatic compensation. We are in a messy situation at the moment where you have that in some places but not in others. At the moment, if I claim that I was on a train today from Battle to Hastings and I want my money back, where is the proof? But it is a good aim.

Chair: I am going to move on, although that is a very important point.

Huw Merriman: Which? is aware of this, because they are working with me on the Bill, as is your MP, Emily.

Chair: Our final set of questions is around the Office of Rail and Road investigation and the potential for structural reform. I shall hand over to Jack, who has been waiting impatiently to ask some questions.

Q428 **Jack Brereton:** A number of terms have been used to describe the huge disruption that was caused. Anthony, earlier you used the term "nervous breakdown," which I think a number of others have used to describe the situation. When we heard evidence previously, there certainly did not seem to be anybody taking responsibility. Do you think that there is something fundamentally amiss with the leadership and governance structure of our railways?

Anthony Smith: Yes. This whole crisis has laid it absolutely bare. In a normal situation, the current structures can just about cope with change, but, with the scale of change that we have just been through, you clearly need one person with executive authority over the whole change process, which we did not see. It is absolutely crucial that that is put in. You are quite right.

Who is to blame? To a degree, there is a whole host of parties to blame, from Governments to staff and unions; everyone has a finger in the pie of what has been happening over the last few months, but you need somebody in charge. It is essentially a hierarchical structure, and it has to have somebody at the top.

Q429 **Jack Brereton:** How do you think that could be reformed effectively? Do you think that the current structures around Network Rail's system operator function could still be reformed enough to be suitable?

Anthony Smith: You could look at empowering, and giving the so-called system operator function sufficient authority to be able to say yes or no in terms of overall structure, but that would require a bit of reform. The Government write the franchise contracts; they are done elsewhere and it needs to be brought into one place.

Q430 **Jack Brereton:** Would that be sufficient, or does it need to be wider?

Anthony Smith: No; a broader reform is needed. The discussions in the press today about a broader rail review, as long as they are based around a passenger-centric view, are probably welcome. If you list the number of



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reports we have had on the railways in the last few years—I have them on my shelf—there is Bowe, Hendy and Shaw. We keep having reviews, but somebody has to look at the whole system and how it fits together.

Q431 Jack Brereton: What are your views on that, Alex?

Alex Hayman: The May timetable challenges show that at the heart of that issue and many of the passenger issues that we have discussed today—compensation, complaints, you name it—there is a confusing landscape in the rail sector. There is no one body or individual taking charge and moving things forward.

Passengers need to be at the heart of the considerations and changes that are made. Yes, we have a regulator, but the regulator has too many duties, and no primary duty for the protection of consumers, unlike other regulated markets. Important reforms are required for that regulator to ensure that it is properly equipped to move forward passenger interests, hold train operating companies to account and take enforcement action where that is required. That would also require a step away and more independence from the Department for Transport and Government. The regulator really needs to be reformed to ensure that it supports customers first and foremost, and that that is its single primary duty.

Q432 Jack Brereton: Do you think that a new independent body is needed, with sufficient powers to act when it needs to, to address the issues we saw in May?

Alex Hayman: At the moment, passengers are not being treated like consumers, and they have not been treated like consumers for some time. Be it the regulator with reformed powers or a new body, that is a gap that needs to be filled more fully, certainly when it comes to complaints.

It is good news that there is an ombudsman on the horizon, coming in, we are told, in November. That is a really important development, and we need to be absolutely sure that the ombudsman is fully independent and empowered to support passengers' disputes and act on them, that its rulings are binding, and that the information coming from the ombudsman is transparent, for everybody to see, so that any systemic issues raised by the challenges and disputes going forward to the ombudsman are free for us all to see, and more improvements can be made to the rail sector.

Q433 Jack Brereton: Anthony, who do you think should ultimately be held responsible for when things like this go wrong?

Anthony Smith: Whoever is in charge. At the moment, it is not entirely clear who is, which is why we are sitting here. I hope that is something the Committee can push in your recommendations: a clearer sense of who has the overall responsibility.

Q434 Jack Brereton: What do others think about that?



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Emily Ketchin: For me, the acid test is who I turn to when things go as dramatically wrong as they did with the 20 May timetable, and we find out about cuts in services. Trust me, I still do not know who we need to turn to, to sort out the Harpenden problem today, six months down the line. That says it all. There needs to be a single body that is accountable and that consumers can turn to; there needs to be clarity on who you turn to and on what powers that body has.

Stephen Brookes: At the moment, I have niggling concerns that a lot of the drive for the ombudsman is within the Rail Delivery Group. Two of the key staff on accessibility at RDG have been moved over to work partly on selecting the new ombudsman. Is this going to be an industry fob-off? I would like to see the Committee ensure that this ombudsman is responsible to its service users and is not just a final arbiter that supports the rail industry as opposed to the customer. From within the RDG, I see no future for that post at all.

Q435 **Jack Brereton:** What has been quite stark, and we have heard some comments on it today, is the fact that people did not really know that there was an issue, it seems, until minutes or days before the timetable was implemented. Do you think that the Government actually knew that those issues were going to happen, and could they take any responsibility for that?

Stephen Brookes: The letter I had from Jo Johnson negates that by saying that they did not know. Everything in the letter says that it caught them all unawares; it was too big, too fast and too complex, and should never have happened. Somebody somewhere set wheels in motion that nobody could control. It is the ultimate rolling rock. Once it started, everybody hoped it would stop at the bottom of the hill, but it didn't; it rolled up the other side and it is still rolling. There was no control and no mechanism for control, as far as I can see.

What is that ombudsman actually going to do? I see nothing at the moment, because the industry is still too fragmented. Trying to get companies to talk to each other is interesting. As an independent person, I am being asked by various rail companies who my counterpart is in such and such a rail company. To go back to the adage I used earlier, I used to have a telephone. Why don't people get out of their little holes in the rail industry, start talking to each other and work constructively? Otherwise, all we are going to do is add another set of communications to somebody who is going to do what?

Q436 **Jack Brereton:** Do you think the ORR investigation will fully shed light on all the issues and properly investigate all the concerns that have been raised?

Alex Hayman: It remains to be seen. The ORR clearly has a responsibility to look at it thoroughly, with a level of independence. What I want to see is a body, in the ORR, that would then take action on the back of that and, where appropriate, take enforcement action and act



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with teeth on behalf of consumers and passengers to ensure that these things are not repeated in future.

Q437 **Jack Brereton:** What about its own role? A minute ago, we discussed the fact that it may not have taken action when it needed to. Do you think it is capable of investigating its own role in this, and whether it should have taken action more urgently to address the issues?

Alex Hayman: That is not something we have looked at, so I would rather not comment.

Q438 **Jack Brereton:** Anthony, do you have any comments on the ORR investigation.

Anthony Smith: If the ORR were not to do an investigation, you would wonder who was going to do it. It has great expertise in these complex industry areas, and the kind of critical path analysis that it brings to safety investigations will be useful. Professor Stephen Glaister, who is leading the investigation, is well respected. As you know, he is leaving the ORR quite soon, so he does not have a vested interest in the future, in that respect. The way they have appointed some independent people to the panel is sufficient to ring-fence the independence of the review. My greater worry is that it is mandated to look at only this particular timetable crisis, but what we are seeing are symptoms of problems with the whole system for the way the railways are run, financed and franchised. It is a bigger issue.

Q439 **Chair:** Do passengers feel confident about the ORR's ability to investigate itself, given that it has a role in what happened?

Emily Ketchin: I will hold my counsel on that and wait to see the outcome of the investigation. What I will say is that Mr Prosser himself attended Harpenden at our request, and we have spoken to him and will follow up with him. Again, as part of engagement and feeling part of the process, we feel that our voice is being listened to, but let's wait and see.

Stephen Brookes: I agree with Emily that at least the ORR is now talking to us—not consulting, but talking and listening—when in the past we were just the plebs at the bottom of the ladder. That engagement is there. Anthony made that point.

In the end, the report will come out, but with a single focus on this one issue when there is the overriding and complex issue of the rail industry not working cohesively. Can an ombudsman overcome that? If everybody is still going up and down the ladders and around the Wrekin, hiding bits and not talking to each other, we are still going to have another disaster at some point, perhaps not as major as this one but similar, and we will sit in front of your Committee again and say, "The rail industry has failed passengers, because—" We should not be sitting here in front of you. The industry should be able to cope with itself, but it is not doing so.

Q440 **Chair:** Anthony, I am tempted, given that you said there should be



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someone in charge, to query what you think about the Secretary of State telling us that he does not run the railways, but it may be a bit unfair to ask that of Transport Focus, although you are very welcome to answer the question if you want to.

Anthony Smith: I have no view as to who it should be, but somebody should be much more clearly in charge. On the other hand, let's face facts: you cannot take politics out of the railways, and you never have been able to. When every new politician comes in and says, "I'm not going to run the railways," you just sigh slightly. It is a highly politicised process; small decisions have massive impacts on people's lives, and that becomes a political issue.

Q441 **Chair:** It seems very clear to me that the Department of Transport sits in the middle of all this, given that it is responsible for Network Rail and all the franchises.

Anthony Smith: Absolutely.

Q442 **Chair:** I wanted to ask about the meeting that you described on 17 May. It is quite simple, really. Do you think that GTR did not know, or that they did not say, that it was going to go wrong?

Anthony Smith: I think they did not know, and there was a tremendous amount of optimism in the air that it would be sorted out on the day. As the crisis unfolded on a daily basis, it compounded itself. Drivers were not available or did not have the right training. The trains were in the wrong place. As Stephen said, it snowballed badly day by day, and gradually got out of control.

Q443 **Chair:** Given that the 15 July timetable was intended to enable them to train, I think, 59 drivers a week and that it will take the best part of a year to do that, how can they possibly not have known that they did not have sufficient trained drivers?

Anthony Smith: It was the daily evolution of the crisis; as things started to get worse and worse, they suddenly found that they had drivers who had to be completely retrained, because their year-long certification had expired. It was literally day by day. I tend to be optimistic about life. I do not think that people were lying; I think they were just being very optimistic. It was a daily crisis that got out of control.

Q444 **Chair:** Do other members of the Committee want to ask further questions? No? You are happy. Before I release the panel, do Stephen or Emily in particular want to add anything, or is there anything we have not asked you that you wanted the Committee to hear before we thank you?

Emily Ketchin: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Stephen Brookes: Thank you very much indeed for listening to us.

Chair: We thank all our panel for giving evidence today.