



Department
for Transport

From the Parliamentary
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Dear Colleagues

I am writing to you concerning the ongoing situation with Southern rail services.

As I said to you at our meeting last week, I am not even remotely happy with the current situation. I had hoped that the restoration of the timetable and the work to bring together the operation of the tracks and the trains on the route would have made more of a difference than it has so far. But the ongoing and inexplicable action of the Unions is making it very difficult to deliver solutions to the other issues on this network.

Let me deal with the strike action first. I know that many of your constituents do not understand why the current dispute has been so protracted. They want it to be brought to an end as quickly as possible and so do I.

This dispute arose from the introduction of state of the art new trains and new ways of working ahead of the introduction of the new Thameslink service in 2018. This will see many more trains travelling through London and will improve passenger journeys. We are investing around £2 billion on new 12 carriage trains, which will provide a step change in comfort and capacity for passengers going into central London. This huge investment is allowing us to phase out older trains on the network, which are proving increasingly unreliable, and replace them with new, safe, modern trains, with drivers in control of the doors.

These new trains will only need the driver to operate them. In light of this Guards have been asked to sign up to new conditions of employment, changing their role to one of 'On Board Supervisors'. However, it has always been my expectation that, in normal circumstances, all Southern trains that currently have two members of staff will continue to do so. Likewise, it is my expectation that those trains currently serving passengers, that have only had

one member of staff for a very long time, will continue to have the same staffing requirements.

To be clear, when they transfer to the new role, the current Guards will be paid the same salary, with overtime and pay increases, and have at least a five year job guarantee. The staff affected by the changes have all signed up to the new conditions of employment, which makes the strikes even more inexplicable, and the new way of working begins on the 1 January 2017. Despite an offer from GTR, their Union has turned down a £2,000 bonus for making the transition to the new roles and ways of working.

The outstanding issue is that the Union insists that if the second member of staff on a train is, for example, delayed on an incoming journey or otherwise unavailable, then the train should be cancelled and the passengers asked to leave it and wait for another – even though the train does not require two members of staff to operate. That seems an absurd proposition, as we would be potentially asking 1500 people to disembark a train, that otherwise could have completed its journey. Cancelling trains in this manner serves no purpose and increases delays. I simply cannot understand why the Unions are insisting on putting passengers second.

At a time when new technology will change the ways in which the railway operates, if Unions insist on retaining outdated ways of working it will be impossible to deliver the benefits and improved reliability that the new technologies can bring.

To make matters worse, the drivers' Union ASLEF is now also balloting for strike action against driver controlled operation of trains, even though this has been happening across much of this network since the 1980s. For example most of the shorter distance services are operated by one member of staff, as well as some services from places like Horsham.

It makes the strike threats even more inexplicable, and my own view is that the decision to push this action is primarily political, something I think is an appalling way to treat passengers.

However the Unions are not entirely to blame for the problems of this network. I am aware that the performance of the railway, after some improvement earlier in the autumn, has deteriorated again in recent weeks. To be clear, this has been more to do with failures of the infrastructure, which is operated by Network Rail, rather than by train operator failure.

Some of those issues should be resolved by the work that Chris Gibb is doing as head of a new project board, working with the train operator, the Department for Transport and Network Rail, to rapidly identify where the problems are and improve the way this railway runs. The infrastructure team and the train operating team moved into a joint control room at Three Bridges

at the end of last month, and so there should be a more joined up way of dealing with problems now.

In addition, Chris is working to resolve some of the most regular causes of problems – ranging from a piece of worn out tunnel track that will be replaced in the first part of next year to level crossing problems that are slowing down trains and impacting the timetable. The railway is so intensively used that any operational issue can have a big knock on effect. The first of the new trains are suffering initial teething problems as well, as is often the case with new trains, but these are being worked on now and should be resolved quickly.

GTR has an obligation to communicate effectively to their passengers, when things go wrong. As many colleagues will know, it appears that this has not been the case or near the standard people would expect. This is a great disappointment to me and I have told their management that this must improve immediately.

It is clear that much more needs to be done and I am now in detailed discussions with Network Rail about the continuing problems with the infrastructure, track and signalling, which is clearly unacceptable. I will aim to meet you again shortly to discuss how we can make real progress in solving the problems.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul Maynard". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'P' and a long, sweeping underline.

PAUL MAYNARD