Written evidence submitted by Mrs Helen Wheatley (RTC0034)

I use the Great Northern service from St Neots to Kings Cross. I live about half an hour from St Neots, but I chose to use the St Neots line (instead of the Bedford TL line) as it is cheaper, was more reliable and I was more likely to get a seat. The last two of these have been seriously undermined but I still don’t think the Bedford line is any better.

I moved to Sharnbrook about a year ago and one of the drivers was being closer to London for work, my move reduced my travel time by around twenty minutes to two and a quarter hours. Each way.

The service was known to be reasonably reliable, the occasional ‘person on the tracks’ or ‘overhead line problems’ notwithstanding. These we accept and understand.

When the new timetable was released I was dismayed to find that the train I originally got, 07.18, which arrived at 08.00, had extra stops added and was now due to arrive at 08.14 (I think) in St Pancras. This is too late, especially as the trains are routinely 5-10 minutes late anyway. So, I need to get a train at 06.59 which was due to arrive at 07.44. I have immediately lost the advantage I gained from moving (apart from a slightly reduced cost).

The evening train I got was 18.07, this had been brought forward from 18.10 at some point in the last year and on the new timetable was brought forward again to 18.06. Still gets in at the same time though! I leave work at 17.30 and it is a rush to get to KC in time, but I do usually manage it.

Additionally, if I need to get a different train, now half of them go from St Pancras and there is no app that shows ‘all London stations to SNO’, so I have to keep checking KC-SNO and then STP-SNO for which will be the best train. And there are no display boards in KC for trains going from StP – surely this would be a very sensible thing?

So, that is the effect of the new timetable – if it were working!

You will be aware of the delays, cancelations, rerouting, additional stops being added, stops being removed at the last minute, poor information, consequent overcrowding etc.

The impact on my life has been thus:

1) I live alone and so there is no one else to prepare food when I get home, I already get home around 20.00, so getting in later has made my life difficult and my nutrition has suffered as a result, as well as costing extra when I have resorted to take aways

2) I have had an increase in general anxiety – I was explaining to a colleague, commuting long distances is OK if it is routine and mundane. I park in the same place, stand in the same place on the platform, get the same seat, sit next to the same huffing man, get off and walk through the same barrier, stand at the same place on the Tube platform, etc, all on autopilot. But when the trains are totally dysfunctional, I have to think every second what is happening, where should I be, when will I get home, do I need to contact my boss, will this train get in on time, listen put for announcements etc. I can no longer snooze on the train as I don’t know when my stop will be (very few of the trains have decent announcement systems).

3) This then leaks into my night-time sleep. I get up at 05.15 to get to work, having got home at, hopefully, 20.00 but I am unable to sleep due to the anxiety and worry. I also spend about half an hour each evening filling in delay repay forms – my browser now opens this automatically if I type ‘Great Northern’ into the search box.
4) I work both part time (three days a week) and on short term work. While this is my choice, there is a need in the job market for people to work in such roles. For this reason I have been slightly less affected but, at the same time, it means I am paying more for my travel as I cannot buy a season ticket. It is mainly women who work part time, which means that the inability of train companies to provide a sensible pricing system for people who work part time could amount to indirect sex discrimination.

5) The overcrowding has been horrible. I have had to stand on my way in and frequently on the way home. I am not disabled or elderly (I am 50) but I do find this a struggle after a full day at work and an early start – to the extent that, at times, I have felt quite ill, sometimes dizzy. It also means I miss my 30 minute snooze. This has all been extra difficult in the current ‘heatwave’. Additionally, the lack of information has had us running from platform to platform, boarding trains then being thrown off, getting on trains just hoping they go where we expect and so on.

6) I have missed the Archers regularly and even Coronation Street! I only saw the second half of the England World Cup Semi-final (see photo).

7) Given the issues, when my current role ends in September, I have decided not to look for another role in London. But I will not find work in my specialism and at my level locally, so this will put me into a road commute with a minimum of forty minutes but more likely over an hour. This cannot be good for the aims of the government with regard to the environment.

8) I’ll just add a note about the new rolling stock introduced earlier this year (which I gather has been part of the problem in fact) – it is HORRIBLE! So uncomfortable, seats far too small, no leg room, hard seats etc. We are told there is a greater capacity, which I gather there is – but far fewer seats. This, to my mind, shows the total disdain with which passengers are held by the TOC and, sadly, the government – you want more of us on there paying, but you don’t care how uncomfortable we are in the process.

I note this comment from the Chair of the Committee:

“As if passengers had not been suffering enough with high fares and varying levels of service, the May 2018 timetable change caused additional upset and distress.”

This is a gross understatement I’m afraid.

I have seen people crying, disabled people being stuck, people with children unable to get home late at night, people shouting at staff, at one point a few weeks ago the BTP had to be called in KC due to irate passengers, and as a woman travelling alone, it was past 11pm then, I didn’t feel entirely safe myself.

But the cruellest irony is that the Peterborough to London line was one of the most reliable and punctual.

*July 2018*
(photo of departure board for GNER on the day of the England semi-final, as posted on my own Facebook page that day)