1. Introduction

1.1 Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog representing the interests of bus, coach and tram users across England, outside London; rail users throughout Great Britain; and users of motorways and major ‘A’ roads in England. We welcome the committee’s inquiry: it is essential that lessons are learned which prevent passengers suffering in this way in future.

1.2 Passengers were being affected by timetable planning problems long before the 20 May crisis. Transport Focus warned of these problems in its report in November 2017\(^1\) into failures to publish accurate timetables 12 weeks in advance, which led to the Secretary of State for Transport ordering an immediate investigation into how tickets were on sale for cancelled trains.

1.3 Throughout the timetable crisis we have been monitoring and highlighting the consequences for passengers; pressing for stability and clear information; and articulating the need for generous compensation. Members of our Transport User Panel provided feedback about their experiences. We held a board meeting in public to question Network Rail, Northern and TransPennine Express about their actions. Laterly we have focused on what must change within the industry to prevent this happening again. Our activities, observations and other information can be seen on our website here: https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/home/rail-timetable-change-2018/

1.4 The ramifications go well beyond the three most affected companies (Govia Thameslink, Northern and TransPennine Express). The decision to defer the December 2018 timetable improvements and prioritise stability is understandable given what happened in May. However it means some passengers will wait longer for much-needed improvements, and there is a knock-on effect on how quickly Network Rail can get back to publishing accurate timetables 12 weeks in advance for all train companies.

1.3 In this memorandum we describe the passenger impact of what happened in the weeks following 20 May; we set out the questions Transport Focus believes should be answered so lessons are learned; we mention some of the specific changes we wish to see made for the benefit of passengers; and we provide a timeline of Transport Focus activity in response to the crisis.

---

\(^1\) Advance notice of rail engineering works – correspondence
https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/advance-notice-rail-engineering-works-correspondence/
2. **The passenger impact**

2.1 Passengers were impacted in three main ways:
- The service was not what passengers had paid for; it was not the improvement they had been promised
- The service was unpredictable; for many passengers it was a lottery with practical and emotional impacts
- The crisis affected people’s home and work life; for example, being late for work, missing appointments and not getting home before children went to bed.

This is what one passengers said to us at the height of the crisis about a journey from St Albans to St Pancras:

_Thameslink journeys have been utterly unpredictable so it's nerve-wracking as well as frustrating. Will there be a train with room to squeeze on? When will I arrive? How late will I be? (Not will I be late as I know I will be). Should I just give up. After 25 years using the route I've no idea what the timetable is supposed to be. Online information is no use as allegedly on time trains simply disappear between setting off for the station and getting there._

2.2 **Information.** The unpredictability was made worse by poor information and lack of openness. A simple example being Govia Thameslink's continual use of “because of an operational incident” to explain cancellations because there was no driver. This was not the open, honest explanation passengers wanted and deserved. Reliable journey planning on websites and Apps was impossible. The timetable was amended in two different ways. Particularly on Govia Thameslink, some trains were cancelled in advance and some were cancelled on the day, despite having been previously advertised as running. Replacement buses did not appear in journey planning systems for some weeks – and then only after pressure from Transport Focus. In short, the way cancellations and other changes were made contributed to the unpredictability of the train service from a passenger perspective. And information on the day was not good either. The management of Darwin, the national real-time running database, was often poor. Trains were left showing “delayed” long after they had, in practice, been cancelled. Also, trains making extra stops or not making their scheduled stops were not always ‘amended’ in information systems, making them invisible in online and App journey planners and causing confusion to passengers on the trains.

2.3 **Ticketing.** The industry was slow to make a decision that, given the disruption, passengers could get on any operator's train – including those on which their ticket would not normally be valid. The delay in putting passengers' interests above 'the rules' only underlined the sense that train companies weren't on passengers' side. The impact was uncertainty and worry – in normal times there can be dire consequences if you are on the wrong train. Could a Northern only ticket be used on a TransPennine Express train? Could a Thameslink only ticket be used on a Gatwick Express train? Passengers did
not know what was permitted. They did not know if they needed to pay extra to avoid the risk of a fine, just to get where they wanted to go.

2.4 **Compensation.** Transport Focus has successfully pushed for compensation over and above that required by the relevant train company Passenger’s Charter. It took too long to announce, but at least there is now information available about what season ticket holders are entitled to and about the process to claim it. Govia Thameslink is contacting its season ticket holders direct to explain what they need to do, which is good practice. Northern are not contacting season ticket holders direct, relying instead on passengers noticing the communication and registering for the scheme. It is not yet clear what TransPennine Express intends to do. We will shortly be carrying out a survey to determine the level of awareness among passengers in the north of England.

Transport Focus was concerned that regular users of the railway, but who do not buy a season ticket, experienced the same unreliability as others but were to receive no compensation beyond the normal Passenger’s Charter entitlement. We felt this was unfair so have pushed hard for passengers in this category to receive compensation. Our argument has been successful in relation to Northern and Transpenine Express passengers, and we are working to ensure the decision announced on 31 July 2018[^2] is implemented in the best way for passengers. We are continuing to press Govia Thameslink to also recognise that it was not just season ticket holders who were impacted.

Transport Focus wishes to draw to the Committee’s attention to two weaknesses in passenger compensation arrangements which have been highlighted by the timetable crisis:

- The inequity that on Govia Thameslink compensation for delay starts at 15 minutes, whereas on Northern and Transpenine Express it starts at 30 minutes
- The wholly inadequate nature of the so-called “enhanced compensation” (set out in the Passenger’s Charter of some train companies) when there is a period of sustained poor performance. For example, a Govia Thameslink passenger would have to be 30 minutes or more late on 12 occasions in a given four-week period to qualify. In our view this threshold is set firmly in the train company’s favour not the passenger’s – train performance has to be absurdly poor before passengers benefit. And if you do qualify you are ‘rewarded’ with two free return journeys anywhere on your train company’s network or a voucher to the value of a single journey between the stations for which you have a season ticket.

2.5 **Weekends.** Passengers travelling at weekends have also been affected. We understand that before the decision to defer timetable changes in December 2018, Network Rail had been broadly on track with its Informed Traveller T-12 recovery plan – with the significant exceptions of Govia Thameslink and Great

Western Railway. Weekend timetables, taking account of any engineering works, are being published very late for Govia Thameslink, sometimes not until Friday evening for the following day. As a consequence, journey planners can show incorrect, or potentially incorrect, information well beyond the point passengers should be able to trust it. This continues to make knowing what service will run very difficult for passengers: it is impossible to know if the information presented is wholly correct, wholly incorrect or partially correct. All this goes to underline Transport Focus’s call for an action plan by Network Rail and Govia Thameslink – in particular – to get Informed Traveller timescales first to T-6 and then back to T-12.

3. Making sure it doesn’t happen again

3.1 Making sure there are enough drivers, in the right places with appropriate training. As the Committee heard first-hand from Northern and Govia Thameslink Railway, it was only in the final days before 20 May that the scale of the driver situation was truly understood. Should the industry have been able to work this out sooner? Given that Northern was already struggling with driver availability before 20 May, how it was felt things would suddenly improve when many more drivers would be required is baffling. If enough drivers were on the payroll, our intuitive feeling is that had the companies made more conservative assumptions about their ability to complete sufficient training by 20 May and to deploy drivers efficiently, or if they had better understood the risks associated with their assumptions, it would have been clear much sooner that the new timetable could not be operated reliably. We find it difficult to believe that, if the risks to delivery had been properly understood and managed the true picture wouldn’t have emerged faster.

Transport Focus believes there are some key questions to be answered:
- Whether sufficient drivers were on the payroll on 20 May, as the operators state
- Whether the assumptions made about the rate of training that could be achieved were reasonable
- Whether the assumptions made about efficient deployment of drivers were reasonable
- Whether the risks associated with those assumptions were understood and reasonable mitigations identified
- Whether there was effective governance around monitoring those risks and assurance around the implementation of mitigations
- Whether in delaying the Blackpool electrification commissioning by three weeks, Network Rail understood the re-training implications of a large number of drivers not have used the route in the preceding six months.

3.2 Depart from the agreed process at your peril. It is clear that the ‘mobilisation period’ between the train companies receiving the final timetable from Network Rail System Operator and its introduction was squeezed so much that there was insufficient time to complete the activities required. Specifically,
development of resource-efficient train and crew diagrams and the associated 
rostering discussions with trades unions, together with staff training to work on 
different types of rolling stock and to operate new routes. It is now clear that it 
is for good reason the timetable development process starts 40 weeks before 
the date of introduction and, in particular, that considerable critical activity 
happens in the final months.

It would be tempting to assume that the May 2018 timetable change was of 
such magnitude that it was inevitably going to fail. However, our discussions 
with key industry players suggest that the scale of change was less significant 
than the failure to adhere to agreed timescales for development of the 
timetable. We suspect a key learning from the crisis will be ‘depart from the 
agreed process at your peril’, but we have a nagging suspicion that the train 
companies could have done more before receipt of the final May timetable. For 
instance, could they have carried out resource planning on a ‘reasonably likely 
outcome’ basis? Perhaps they did, but the eventual timetable was markedly 
different from long-standing assumptions?

Transport Focus believes there are some key questions to be answered:
- Was the fact so many trains were being altered all at once was a material 
factor in what went wrong?
- Were the risks associated with squeezing the ‘mobilisation period’ identified 
and articulated to decision-makers at the point timetable development for 
Northern and Govia Thameslink diverged from the timeline in the agreed 
industry process?
- What were the mitigations and were they reasonably likely to address the 
risks identified?
- Was there appropriate oversight of progress in implementing the 
mitigations?
- Did Network Rail understand what train companies need to do between 
receipt of a timetable ‘offer’ and its introduction, and how long those things 
take?
- Did train companies carry out all the driver training and resource planning 
they could reasonably have done while they were still waiting for Network 
Rail to provide the final timetable?

3.3 Somebody needs to be in charge. One of the insights from the industry’s 
evidence to the Committee was that Northern seemingly did have sufficient 
doubts that 20 May was achievable (given timing of the decision to revise the 
Bolton electrification commissioning date) to have sought a delay. But other 
parts of the industry rejected the request because it would have delayed things 
they wished to achieve in May. While it may have been compounded by failure 
to implement adequate mitigations, one interpretation of events is that from that 
point onward the post-20 May crisis on Northern was inevitable.

In our research over a number of years passengers have expressed frustration 
that nobody seems to be ‘in charge’ on the railway. As the Committee heard,
one of the issues was that the System Operator – closest to being ‘in charge’ when it comes to the timetable – did not feel able to press the stop button in the absence of industry consensus.

Frankly, the industry must in future be able to stop when it knows it is walking towards the edge of a cliff. We think a key question to be answered is what changes, if any, are needed to give the System Operator authority to stop implementation of timetable changes when there is significant, demonstrable risk of failure.

4. **Specific improvements Transport Focus advocates**

The post-20 May crisis, and the problems Network Rail was already experiencing publishing accurate timetables 12 weeks in advance, has shone a light on systemic weaknesses. Now is the time to address those with significant impact on passengers. We mention some of them below.

4.1 **More information in the System Operator timetable data.** At the moment, an information provider or a ticket retailer (for instance, Trainline) which ‘consumes’ Network Rail System Operator’s timetable must trust that any train in the data is accurate in relation to engineering works taking place – they have no means of knowing otherwise. National Rail Enquiries (NRE) adds manually-generated messages where other information indicates there is an error, and some ticket retailers use the NRE information. But the system is labour intensive, reliant on multiple manual processes and is therefore not perfect. Transport Focus believes that the System Operator should in future:

- Flag any train that is known to be showing incorrectly in data so a warning can be presented to passengers making journey enquiries or buying tickets. The most likely scenario is in the time-lag between a possession being agreed outside the normal process and the revised train plan being worked up and published.

- Flag any train where it is not yet confirmed that it will run. In normal circumstances this should not be necessary – a train will either be confirmed by default because it is after T-12 or flagged as being incorrect. At the moment it is necessary to caution passengers against assuming trains are correct when they might not be – for example, beyond T-6. And there will always be circumstances where the ability to convey uncertainty would be useful – for example if there is doubt about a route’s reopening date following a major landslip.

- Provide accompanying text alongside any material Short Term Planning alteration explaining what has changed and why. This would be ‘consumed’ by journey planners to present contextual information to passengers about how and why the timetable is different from normal. An example: “this train is diverted between X and Y, taking 30 minutes longer than normal. It will not stop at Z. This is because track is being renewed at Z.”
At Transport Focus’s encouragement, discussions are going on between Rail Delivery Group, Network Rail and ticket retailers about this.

4.2 **Transparency as a catalyst for improvement.** Transport Focus believes that transparency would be a catalyst for improvement in achieving Informed Traveller T-12 timescales, in particular at reducing the number of late access requests that require the passenger timetable to be changed sooner than 12 weeks before the day in question. We believe the System Operator should routinely publish the following:

- Details of who requested late access, the justification and the mitigations agreed to minimise the period when passenger information is inaccurate in public-facing systems.
- Details of the number of trains amended after T-12, by operator, and how far before the day of operation they were amended. It must be possible to analyse this information by day of the week, to avoid impacts at weekends being hidden within an overall figure.
- Details of the System Operator’s own performance at publishing accurately and completely at T-12, by each operator.
- Details of each operator’s performance at bidding changes accurately and completely at T-18.

4.3 **Urgency in addressing known errors.** Transport Focus has consistently highlighted that known inaccuracies in the timetable are not always corrected until very late in the day. Some of this seems to relate to apparent System Operator practice that if timetable change requests are received from train companies late they are, in effect, put on a pile and processed at the ‘last minute’, even if the late bid was caused by another part of Network Rail. We believe the System Operator needs a robust process to ‘mop up’ errors which exist beyond T-12.

4.4 **Passenger information when trains are cancelled the day before.** The post-20 May timetable crisis highlighted a long-standing passenger information consequence of cancelling trains the day before they are due to run (known in the industry as ‘P Coding’). Once a train is ‘P Coded’ it simply disappears from information systems – it does not exist to be shown as cancelled. This has implications for passengers who are looking (online, on an App, on a station information screen) for a train they intend to catch but which does not now exist. At least you know where you stand if your train has “cancelled” marked against it. There is an important trust point, too. It helps fuel the suspicion that denying the existence of a train in the first place results in fewer cancellations being reported in official statistics. Therefore Transport Focus believes the System Operator should introduce changes to the timetable data which allow a train to be ‘P Coded’ for industry internal purposes, while showing as “cancelled” in publicly-available timetable information.

4.5 **Greater automation.** Finally, it appears to Transport Focus that parts of the timetable planning process are ripe for greater automation. We believe the
System Operator needs a tool which automatically identifies trains in the timetable data which are incompatible with the engineering work which will be taking place, and that conflict with other planned trains. If this existed it would be easy to highlight errors to passengers and easy for the industry to focus attention on fixing problems.

5. **Timeline of Transport Focus activity**

28/11/17  Transport Focus raised concerns about Informed Traveller T-12
10/05/18  Transport Focus published update on issues passengers face while the industry is not meeting Informed Traveller T-12
17/05/08  Transport Focus board meeting in public at which Network Rail and Rail Delivery Group questioned about Informed Traveller T-12 recovery
07/06/18  Transport Focus wrote to Govia Thameslink and Northern regarding 20 May timetable crisis
08/06/18  Letter to Secretary of State for Transport regarding 20 May timetable crisis
12/06/18  Letter to Govia Thameslink requesting that specific actions be taken to improve the situation for passengers
19/06/18  Transport Focus board meeting in public at which Network Rail, Northern and TransPennine Express questioned about the timetable crisis
28/06/18  Transport Focus welcomed compensation for passengers in the north of England, but highlighted that non-season ticket holders not included
03/07/18  Letters to Northern and TransPennine Express
20/07/18  Publication of evidence submitted to the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) Glaister Inquiry
02/08/18  Letter to ORR setting out specific changes required to improve passengers’ experiences in future

*August 2018*