Written evidence submitted by Hitchin Rail Commuters Group & Hitchin Rail Users Group (RTC0055)

Who are we?

The Hitchin Rail Commuters Group (HRC) was set up in April in 2018 in response to the timetable changes planned for May 2018. It is a Facebook group, open to all who use trains to/from Hitchin, to discuss and challenge the negative impacts of the timetable changes on our town and its residents. It now has over 1,400 members who share information on the state of the trains on a daily basis as well as campaign to improve the situation for Hitchin commuters. To date there have been 23,400 comments on the group about the current problems with Hitchin services.

HRC works closely with the Hitchin Rail Users Group (HRUG). HRUG is smaller and longer established, and has developed a longer-term perspective on Hitchin services through regular contact with the respective train operators since the Great Northern (GN) route was privatised. HRUG is keen to help with practical suggestions for improving Hitchin services; in the specific instance of planning for Thameslink 2018-20, HRUG made submissions at each stage of the consultations. HRUG endorses this joint submission led by the current and widely based evidence gathered by HRC.

Timetable promises before May 2018

After consultations in 2016/17 Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) promised to increase the number of trains in the morning peak from 22 to 24 and provide greater capacity. We believe that these positive statements meant that many Hitchin rail users felt no need to take part in the consultation, leading to greater concessions for smaller stations such as Royston and Welwyn North, at Hitchin’s expense. This is despite the fact that, after Stevenage, Hitchin is the largest station in terms of passenger numbers on routes between London and Peterborough/Cambridge.

Reservations were raised over the new timetable and its implementation before May 2018. The HRUG Thameslink submissions raised relevant issues of timetable structure (with an understandable focus on Hitchin’s needs), resilience in the face of operating problems and coordinated information handling at Kings Cross/St Pancras. HRUG considered, however, following the subsequent discussions with GTR, that its practically based views were not given sufficient weight in service planning: eg key concerns were consistently omitted from GTR’s ongoing ‘To Do’ listings.

Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) Press Releases on the new Timetable June 2017:

“Commuters from Hitchin and Stevenage will have 50% more fast trains to Kings Cross by the end of 2018 and new services across central London stopping at Farringdon (for Crossrail and Heathrow), and London Bridge (for Canary Wharf).”
Rail operator Great Northern, run by Govia Thameslink Railway, has just confirmed the increase following support of the proposals during phase one of its consultation into a new 2018 timetable."

GTR Press Releases on the new Timetable March 2018:

- **Curtain-raiser for Thameslink trains to run from scores more stations direct to central London and beyond**
- **Extra capacity for 40,000 more passengers in May**
- **Journey times to be cut for thousands of commuters**

Passengers are having the first taste of a vastly expanded commuter rail network with the introduction of an historic new service on Thameslink by GTR.

*From May 2018 when the full service begins, this will create space for 40,000 more passengers during peak periods into London, delivering a much-needed capacity boost for the rail network.*

When the new timetable was published it was clear these expectations had not been met.

Key problems with the weekday Hitchin timetable were apparent as soon as it was launched:

- A reduction of services in the morning peak, creating difficulties for working parents
- Fewer services stopping at Finsbury Park, a crucial connection to/from London Moorgate
- Slower and fewer trains returning to Hitchin from London in the evenings
- Loss of the non-stop Hitchin-London (and return) services, and longer journey times for the replacement so-called ‘fast’ services.
- New trains (Class 700 and redeployed Class 387) have about 25% fewer seats per carriage than the trains they replace, disadvantaging all travellers, and putting vulnerable, disabled and elderly commuters at greater risk.

The ‘chaos’ timetable – 20 May – 14 July 2018

The introduction of the new timetable immediately saw severe delays and cancellations causing [dangerous overcrowding at Hitchin station](#).

The table below shows the average percentage of peak trains serving Hitchin on time and cancelled from 20 May – 14 July (Monday-Friday). Data from recent train times - [www.recenttraintimes.co.uk](http://www.recenttraintimes.co.uk)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trains on time</th>
<th>Cancelled</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hitchin to London</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London to Hitchin</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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There was also a lack of communication from GTR management, with its staff at stations operating on the same information as that available to passengers. Train timetabling apps were not accurate, so planning journeys was very difficult. The impact on commuters was severe and prolonged:

I have had to break the news to my line manager that this may go on for another 6-8 weeks plus. Next week we will be having a conversation about how I make up any missing time, and this is with an honestly very family friendly firm. So not only will I get to spend longer commuting, I will also have to spend extra time in the evenings catching up on work to meet deadlines.

This week I would have been charged an extra £80 for late pick ups for my children (£10 each per day) but the child-minder has been kind - however has noted she can’t do that forever so will potentially have to find new child-minder.

there now only seem to be 4 direct trains to Hitchin an hour, many of these only 8 coaches when they used to be 12. It is simply a lie to keep saying there are more trains and capacity when there used to be at least 7 direct trains per hour in rush hour. It has added 20 mins at least to my working day which means less time with my family which is what is most galling.

It’s costing me £15 more for a service I cannot rely upon. I wish we had never moved here we made a decision based on transport links to London…I feel fobbed off my GNR they are the same company and yet I can’t use a Thameslink Carnet on a Thameslink train.

even when/if the trains are ever running normally my commute which was 8:35 and returning on 18:07 (arriving at 18:30) will now be 8:20 -18:16 from STP (arriving at 18:49). So all in all a 34 minutes longer commute. Nearly 3 hours a week. And they still try maintain that the trains are faster and more frequent! I’ve got a young family and this is a huge problem.

He [partner] travels in to London and back twice a day. Every train he was scheduled to take was cancelled this week. Not delayed but cancelled. He mostly travels at 5.30, 12.30, 4.30 and 9.30. He has arrived home after midnight and it’s taken him on average 3hrs to get home. The longest he’s waited for a train was 2.5hrs today.

I moved house at considerable expense from Colchester to Hitchin 4 years ago purely because I couldn’t face the commute and Hitchin was so much quicker. Since the new timetable and the chaos this week I’m thinking it isn’t viable to commute from Hitchin. The new timetable means a 30 minute increase in my working day due to not having a train at 7.55am from Hitchin to FPK and the later times of the evening trains now. I either choose to get in 20 minutes earlier or I’m 20 minutes late for work every day. I’ve been in tears every night from the thought of having to give up my job or having to move but I can’t face this long term. I’m almost 60 and the thought of standing for an hour a
day in 2 trains and travelling 3 hours a day in total even when everything settles down is just too much.

Why did the timetable chaos happen?

Neil Henry, Head of Operations and Performance at Network Rail (NR) and Stuart Cheshire, Passenger Services Director at GTR spoke at a public meeting in Hitchin on 4 July 2018. The reasons given for the failure to successfully implement the timetable were:

1. NR needed 18 months to complete the scheduling work for the new timetable and this was reduced to 2 months due to delays getting decisions on phasing the introduction of the new timetable from Department for Transport (DfT).

2. GTR needed 12 weeks to complete preparatory work, but this was reduced to 3 weeks.

3. GTR submitted bids for new services earlier in the year, but many were rejected by NR.

4. Many of the cancellations were caused by the need to manually key in changes to the timetable (eg Special Stop Orders) between 2200 – 0000 hrs each and every day, which led to input errors.

5. There were not enough drivers trained on the routes in advance because of the delays in agreeing the precise timetable routes.

6. The service control centre received very high volumes of calls meaning staff at stations often could not get through either to request changes, or to find out information to relay to passengers when services had been cancelled or delayed.

Useful background to these issues is found in Nigel Harris’ article in the Rail Magazine no. 854.

The interim timetable - 15 July 2018 to present

The interim timetable focuses on peak time services and aims to deliver 85% - 90% of the planned May 2018 timetable. Although the service is now more stable, with fewer cancellations and more accurate information about which trains are running, there are still issues. Despite regular questions being asked of GTR about when the service will be judged ‘stable enough’ to insert more trains, there has been no detail given about when this will happen and what ‘stable enough’ looks like. It should also be noted that this interim timetable has been introduced at the quietest time of the year - the summer holidays - and we are yet to see if it is sufficiently robust to withstand the full passenger capacity required from now on. Key issues remaining:

1. **Still not enough drivers despite assurances from GTR**
   
   GTR might technically have enough drivers but there are nowhere near enough trained for the new routes. A source inside GTR suggested that all route learning to Brighton was stopped during the timetable fiasco, and that currently only about 15 drivers at Cambridge and 15 at Peterborough have been trained. Around another 100 need to learn the routes. A lack of drivers causes delays as untrained drivers must swap with those that are trained at
Finsbury Park, or trains are cancelled or diverted to other routes that drivers have been trained on.

2. **Gaps in service and reduced frequency of trains both peak and off-peak**
The present interim timetable contains anomalous ‘gaps’. For example, at Hitchin, there is an unacceptable fast train gap to London from 0850 to 0941. Yet this is a key time period for parents who drop their children off at school or childcare. Parents are unlikely to be able to get into work before 10.45am if they arrive at the station after 9am; this gap needs filling and we have identified how this could be done immediately on a resource neutral basis. Likewise, there is a 55-minute gap from Hitchin to Cambridge between 0814 and 0909, so parents with a childcare drop-off at 8am won’t be at work until 10am. The fast journey time from Hitchin should be between 30-33 minutes. There are also gaps in off peak services to London and to Peterborough that could easily be addressed.

3. **Poor weekend services**
There are still too many weekend cancellations as well as unacceptable gaps in the service. The main issue on Sundays is a shortage of drivers as GTR ask drivers to volunteer for overtime at weekends and so cannot be sure they have enough staff to fulfil the published timetable.

4. **January 2019 price increases and lack of compensation**
We are angry and disappointed that an annual price increase is being implemented next January for those affected by this unprecedented and foreseeable disruption. Despite an agreement on compensation for the disruption since May such compensation has not yet been paid to ticket holders that have faced disruption. However, we understand that the compensation package will be extended to include non-season ticket holders, that travelled at least 3 days a week during the disruption.

5. **Lack of transparency in decisions made about which stations get which services**
There has been considerable frustration with GTR’s approach to deciding which trains stop where, and which stations get the fastest services. Passenger needs and volumes do not appear to be given due weight in the timetable development process, although “market research” was apparently conducted. At the Hitchin public meeting on 4 July and in correspondence GTR have been unable to tell us how they allocated services and stops to different stations. This is wholly unsatisfactory and our view is that GTR should be paying much more attention to passenger numbers when allocating services – more passengers should logically mean more trains, more journey opportunities, and shorter journey times, as these passengers form the core of the market to be served.
### Estimates of Station Usage 2016-17: Office of Rail and Road

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hitchin</th>
<th>Letchworth</th>
<th>Royston</th>
<th>Welwyn North</th>
<th>Ashwell and Morden</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trains towards London (6:00-9:00)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trains from London (4.30-7:00)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-stop trains in the morning towards London</td>
<td>0 (2 before May)</td>
<td>2 (6.04, 8.34)</td>
<td>0 (06.32, 7.05, 7.32, 08.06)</td>
<td>4 (6.29, 6.59, 7.29, 7.59)</td>
<td>4 (16.42, 17.12, 17.42, 18.12, 18.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-stop trains in the evening towards Hitchin</td>
<td>1 (5 before May)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (16.54, 17.24, 17.54, 18.24, 18.54)</td>
<td>5 (16.42, 17.12, 17.42, 18.12, 18.42)</td>
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August 2018