Written evidence submitted by St Albans City & District Council (RTC0056)

Executive Summary:

- Commuters from both Harpenden station and St Albans City station have been adversely affected as a direct result of the 20th May 2018 timetable change (20th May timetable). These adverse effects have been further compounded by the service reductions imposed in the 15th July 2018 timetable (15th July timetable).

- St Albans District is located within the London commuter belt. 21% of the District's working population commute regularly using Govia Thameslink Railways (GTR) services into London and rely on a reliable service.

- Harpenden and St Albans commuters have suffered as a result of 1) poor timetable design, 2) poor implementation and 3) inadequate compensation in the wider context of adverse health, economic and wellbeing impacts.

- St Albans City & District Council seeks that the frequency of trains to and from Harpenden and West Hampstead Thameslink/London St Pancras International is restored to a level preceding that of the 20th May timetable.

- The Council also seeks that any subsequent changes to the service are effectively communicated by GTR to all commuters in good time and that the entire timetable process allows sufficient time for an extensive consultation process, including sufficient time for changes to be made to the timetables as a result of short comings in the timetable as at consultation. The changes referred to above that had an adverse impact on Harpenden were presented as a fait accompli in very late 2017, when there was no time for a re-work to improve the service.

- The Council welcomes GTR’s decision to extend the compensation scheme to non-season ticket holders. The Council urges that this decision be upheld ensuring that all passengers receive the full amount they deserve. This includes one-off buyers, non-season ticket holders and Carnet ticket holders.
1. Introduction:

1.1 St Albans City & District Council (the Council) is a non-metropolitan District Council and located within the London commuter belt. 21% of the District’s working population regularly commute to and from London and rely on a reliable and efficient rail service.

1.2 The District is home to three railway stations two of which are served by GTR. Harpenden station is located in the north of the District and is 24 miles from London St Pancras International. St Albans City station in the south of the District is located 20 miles from London St Pancras International station.

1.3 For the financial year 2016/17, Harpenden had entries and exits totalling 3,356,144. For the same period, St Albans City station had total entries and exits totalling 7,396,964, making it one of the busiest stations outside of London. These figures were compiled by the Office for Rail and Road (ORR). Figures for entries and exits refer to the total number of people travelling to or from the station.

1.4 A core issue impacting rail services from Harpenden and St Albans City in the lead up to the 20th May timetable were changes to the East Midlands Trains (EMT) service calling pattern for Bedford and Luton. Up until the introduction of the 20th May timetable, a number of peak-time EMT trains that called at Bedford and/or Luton passed through St Albans City and Harpenden stations but did not stop. Since 20th May, peak-time EMT services do not call at Bedford and Luton; we are told this is because of conflicts with the GTR timetable and also because of delays in the upgrades to the Midland mainline. In their place GTR introduced two peak-time fast-trains per hour stopping at Bedford, Luton, St Albans and London St Pancras International (and stations further south). This has led to congestion at St Albans City station with commuters from Harpenden interchanging at St Albans to board fast services, putting added pressure on the station’s infrastructure, most notably the single bridge crossing and platforms.
1.5 The Council welcomes the independent inquiry (the Glaister Review) into the disruption caused by the 20\textsuperscript{th} May timetable and awaits the findings from the Review.

2. **Impact of GTR’s 20\textsuperscript{th} May and 15\textsuperscript{th} July Timetables on St Albans District**

2.1 **Poor timetable design**

2.2 It has been acknowledged by the Secretary of State for Transport that passengers on some GTR and Northern routes are ‘facing unsatisfactory levels of service’ and ‘unacceptable disruption’. This has been the case for commuters from St Albans City station and Harpenden station. Commuters from Harpenden and St Albans stations have been further impacted by the interim July timetable, which has resulted in further service reductions.

2.3 The 20\textsuperscript{th} May timetable was intended to bring improvements to the rail service experienced by users. However, on 11\textsuperscript{th} June 2018, at a meeting of the Council’s Planning, Resources, Housing and Commercial Scrutiny Committee, St Albans City & District councillors asked the Government to make urgent improvements to the Thameslink train line following the introduction of the 20\textsuperscript{th} May timetable. In particular, it was requested that the Minister of State for Transport reinstate peak-time trains at Harpenden station which were removed as a result of the 20\textsuperscript{th} May timetable.

2.4 The analysis presented in Appendix 1 takes peak time as those services leaving Harpenden and St Albans between 06:30 and 08:30 and arriving in London (depending on station) between 07:00 and 09:00. This definition differs from the industry standard but represents a more realistic picture of when the District’s rail users are using the trains to travel to work. For the return journey it is recognised that passengers have more flexibility, as such the analysis here includes the industry definition of evening peak i.e. 16:30-19:00.

2.5 As indicated in Appendix 1, when morning peak-time fast trains from Harpenden to London St Pancras for the December 2017, 20\textsuperscript{th} May and 15\textsuperscript{th} July timetables
are compared, Harpenden has a net loss of three (December 2017 to May 2018) and four (December 2017 to July 2018) fast trains. Additionally, despite St Albans gaining a fast train when the December 2017 and 20th May timetables are compared, the 15th July timetable reduces the number of peak time fast trains stopping at St Albans to a level below the December 2017 timetable. Therefore, rather than improvements, Harpenden and St Albans have both experienced reductions in service.

2.6 If we take all services running between Harpenden and London St Pancras at peak time (6:30am-9:00am) the picture is a bleak one. Prior to the 20th May timetable, Harpenden was served by a total of 23 trains, with 19 of these being fast or semi-fast (i.e. 35 minutes or under from Harpenden to St Pancras). However, this number was reduced to 18 trains (12 of these being fast or semi-fast) before a further reduction to 15 trains (11 of these being fast or semi-fast). One major consequence of this has been overcrowding on a daily basis with many commuters forced to stand for 35 minutes and upwards resulting in a number of health and safety incidents.

2.7 Another unforeseen consequence of the poor timetable design and subsequent poor implementation has been the overcrowding at St Albans City station with passengers travelling to Harpenden now using the station as an interchange. St Albans City station has a single bridge crossing ill-suited to these surges. As such, there is a serious health and safety risk.

2.8 Significant gaps have also been introduced between fast services under the 20th May timetable. At Harpenden, for example, 18 minutes between the 06:33 and 06:51 and 17 minutes between the 07:04 and 07:21. The longest gap between such services in the previous timetable was 12 minutes with an average gap of 8 minutes. Indeed, the pre-20th May timetable had shorter gaps between fast services for its day time off-peak service. The 14 minute gap from 08:06 particularly affects working parents who relied on services after 08:00 after leaving children in childcare.

2.9 The decision to have the new fast services (i.e. those departing Bedford at 07:22, 08:22, 08:52 etc.) stop at Luton, St Albans and London St Pancras but not
Harpenden, alongside the extensive cuts to services from Harpenden, has left commuters from Harpenden at a significant disadvantage. Whilst Harpenden receives fewer passengers (3.4 million in 2016/17) than Luton and Bedford Midland, 3.7 million and 3.9 million, respectively (ORR, 2016/17), they are not so dissimilar as to justify the level of cuts inflicted on Harpenden.

2.10 We understand that the decision to run these services came as a result of East Midlands Trains’ (EMT) decision to stop peak services calling at Bedford and Luton until around 2020 due to delays in upgrades to the Midland mainline and conflicts with the GTR timetable. This resulted in an edict from the Department for Transport for GTR to provide alternative fast services. However, the omission of Harpenden from the stopping pattern, given the figures quoted above and in light of testimony regarding overcrowding (below) needs to be revisited as a matter of urgency. If these trains were to make an additional stop at Harpenden this would help to alleviate some of the problems, most notably overcrowding. It would also reduce interchanging at St Albans station and, resultantly, overcrowding.

2.11 Travelling to West Hampstead Thameslink, an important interchange for commuters from Harpenden and St Albans, has become increasingly difficult. A major aspect of this is the reduction in services from timetable to timetable to the point where travelling to West Hampstead has become unviable for some commuters. Before 20th May Harpenden was served by 9 (76 carriages) trains (6 fast/semi-fast) to West Hampstead, this was reduced to 7 (60 carriages) trains (1 fast/semi-fast) on 20th May and 5 (1 fast/semi-fast) trains in the interim 15th July timetable. There are also significant gaps between fast and semi-fast services including a 48 minute gap between the 06:51 and 07:39 service as well as a 31 minute gap between the 07:39 and 08:10 service.

2.12 There has been a similar situation during the evening peak time. Evening services from St Pancras International to Harpenden have been severely cut. First, there was a reduction from 23 to 22 trains when the pre-20th May and 20th May timetables are compared. While a small reduction these figures alone conceal the reduction in fast or semi-fast services (35 minutes and under) from


17 to 13. The 15th July interim timetable reduced the total service from 22 trains to 17, including a sizeable peak time gap between the 18:36 and 18:58 services.

2.13 The journey from West Hampstead to Harpenden has also been significantly reduced in the evening. Prior to 20th May, there were 11 trains running from 16:43 through to 18:53. This was reduced to 10 in the 20th May timetable before a further reduction to 6 trains in the 15th July timetable, including a one hour gap between the 17:07 and 18:07.

2.14 Poor implementation

2.15 The 20th May timetable’s poor design has been further compounded by its poor implementation, while the 15th July timetable has led to further service degradation. As a direct result of the new timetables, rail commuters from Harpenden and St Albans City stations have been subject to: unacceptable cuts to the number of morning and evening peak-time services; an unpredictable service including sudden train delays and cancellations, unannounced “phantom trains” and unexpected platform changes. It is estimated that one fifth of services were cancelled following the disastrous 20th May timetable change and this continued until the 15th July timetable change. The Public Performance Measure of punctuality shows a significant drop since the 20th May timetable introduction. However, trains cancelled before 10pm the night before are excluded and therefore don’t reflect the full impact of the disruption.

2.16 Passenger experience makes clear that GTR have been unable to adequately implement and operate the 20th May and 15th July timetables. Cancellations, delays, unannounced early terminations, calling pattern changes and unexpected platform changes have become a daily occurrence for rail users. For example, one commuter was forced to wait at West Hampstead for 45 minutes for a train to St Albans compelling them in future to allow at least two and half hours to get to St Albans. One poll conducted by the St Albans Commuter & Passenger Action Group reported passengers accumulating up to five to seven additional hours (i.e. travelling and waiting) per week as a result of disruptions to the rail service.
2.17 One commuter commented on the poor service: ‘Planning to take the 18:21, more than 30 mins delayed. Boarded at 18:55, only for us all to be chucked off the nearly empty train when it decided to run express to Luton. Now waiting for a 19:03 slow train. Also delayed. More than an hour late on what is timetabled as an 18 minute journey. Pathetic.’ There have also been cases of trains terminating midway through their journeys inconveniencing the passengers on board.

2.18 As the testimonial above intimates, alongside the cancellations, delays, terminations and platform changes there has been a lack of or inaccurate communication on GTR’s website, the Thameslink App, at stations and even aboard trains. In one instance, five out of six northbound services from West Hampstead were cancelled or terminated with no explanation. Trains that have had 12 carriages for weeks have unexpectedly transformed into 8 carriage services.

2.19 Inaccurate information at rail stations has added considerable time and expense to people’s journeys. Passengers have alighted trains in light of information on boards at stations and on trains which indicated it would not stop at the station they required only for the train to then stop at that station unexpectedly further up the line. In one instance at Blackfriars, a train scheduled to go to St Albans ended up at Finsbury Park on the way to Peterborough, forcing passengers to get a train back to London St Pancras to wait for another service to St Albans.

2.20 Unannounced and/or last minute stop orders and the resultant overcrowding continues to be experienced by rail users from the District. Already overcrowded “fast” trains have been stopping at unscheduled stations taking on more passengers with few departing at the originally unscheduled stops before St Albans as it was inaccurately advertised as a “fast” train. This only contributes to unsafe conditions on the trains with cases of overheating and passengers fainting.

2.21 Meanwhile, last minute platform changes have led to surges between platforms only for that information to turn out to be inaccurate forcing them to wait
even longer. In the meantime more passengers are arriving leading to overcrowded platform areas and, consequently, overcrowded trains.

2.22 The Thameslink App is unfit for purpose due to its regular display of inaccurate information. Station staff have been referring passengers to the Network Rail App instead as GTR had not updated their own App.

2.23 Inadequate compensation in the context of adverse health, economic and wellbeing impacts

2.24 It is crucial that the Transport Committee consider in depth, and that GTR are made aware of, the immense detrimental impact of the 20th May and 15th July timetables on rail user’s health and wellbeing as well as the effect on the local economy, which needs to be reflected in the compensation given.

2.25 Sudden or unexpected platform changes as well as overcrowding have led to serious health and safety issues. For example, a sudden platform change at Harpenden station resulted in injuries to two commuters during a rush from one platform to another, which required accident and emergency treatment. A St Albans commuter from West Hampstead Thameslink had a similar experience when an unscheduled train to St Albans City stopped on platform four but left before commuters on platform two waiting for the next scheduled train were able to get across to it.

2.26 Health and safety has been an issue on the trains as well as the platforms. There are cases of heavily pregnant women having to stand on cramped journeys, sometimes for 40 minutes or more. Since the introduction of the timetable, passenger testimonials indicate that many trains are ‘full to the point of people fainting.’ Other commuters have witnessed passengers pass out as a result of overcrowding during rush hour. Platforms at St Albans City station have become more crowded as passengers who would have, pre-20th May timetable, travelled direct to their destination, are using St Albans as an interchange to await services that stop at Harpenden. This has meant that platforms and the bridge crossing have become dangerously overcrowded.
2.27 Neither has there been any reasonable adjustment for people with disabilities or mobility issues. Walking-stick users have had to stand, often in pain. One rail user, who is profoundly deaf, struggled to hear any of the announcements on cancellations or delays and felt little had been done to address this stating: ‘I don’t feel like they accommodate anyone or make reasonable adjustments – let alone if you are disabled!’

2.28 Figures on cancellations and delays alone do not adequately convey the hidden impacts of the 20th May and 15th July timetables. This is particularly the case for those whose journey involves a change (such as Harpenden to West Hampstead), as the combination of using two disrupted services has a multiplying impact.

2.29 In particular the impact is not just lost time, but on wider family life. A number of parents have missed the bedtimes of their children and important events including Sports Days, Parents’ Evenings and England football matches during the World Cup.

2.30 Commuters caring for housebound or disabled older relatives have been unable to fulfil their caring responsibilities as a direct result of the new timetable. Frequently, we are seeing families struggling to balance work deadlines and childcare duties. Single-parent families and families where both parents work rely on a predictable service to maintain the fine balance of work and family; this has not been achievable in the present context.

2.31 The timetable changes have also had a detrimental impact on residents’ leisure time with fewer people willing to take the risk of travelling into London given that they cannot be sure when they will be able to return home.

2.32 Current residents are having second thoughts about living in the District in the present context due to the impact on family life of GTR’s May and July timetables: ‘[T]he decision to downgrade Harpenden services means I am losing an hour of travel time each day…[this] represents a 50% increase in journey time and a personal loss of 20% of my time with family during the week. I am
considering driving to another station to make my commute acceptable, adding to pollution and congestion in the process. This seems like madness. I don’t want to move from my home I love but unless services are restored I have little option. I am saddened and angry about the situation in equal measure."

2.33 The timetable changes have produced very real physical and emotional stresses on rail users: One Harpenden commuter commented: ‘I suffer with terrible anxiety that I have to try very hard to keep under control. With the delays and cancellations I am a nervous wreck before I even make it in to work and then constantly worry all day about how I am going to get home.’

2.34 Pressure on career opportunities and job security has been another consequences of the May and July timetables. Rail users from St Albans and Harpenden are genuinely worried about taking jobs in London given the unreliability of the current service. Commuters have lost contracts in London and experienced drops in salary as a result. The Council has received numerous testimonials of commuters to and from the District being late for work meaning they have to stay later. Therefore, there is concern amongst current workers about holding onto their jobs and worries for people yet to enter the market about missing study and future career opportunities.

2.35 The Council welcomes the extension of the delay repay compensation system and hope that this can be implemented swiftly. However, we would like to highlight the impact that the flaws in the previous system had. For instance, non-season ticket holders experienced the same delays and cancellations as season ticket holders but were not covered for compensation. A season ticket only offered significant benefit to a traveller who uses the trains 10 times a week, Monday to Friday peak hours. For any other travel pattern, such as part time working (e.g. 3 days week), a season ticket was either more expensive or broadly neutral. This has been highlighted in the case of Carnet ticket holders. On this point, passenger testimonials from rail users highlighted that this indirectly discriminated against women as a disproportionate number were daily ticket buyers or Carnet holders. Therefore, the Council welcomes GTR’s commitment
to extending the additional compensation and that this decision is upheld and implemented as a matter of urgency.

2.36 However, the extended delay repay compensation system still does not completely capture passenger experience, particularly those who had to take alternative transport. For instance, to avoid having to wait until 2am to get home on a weeknight a group of passengers to St Albans booked an Uber which cost £70 in total. However, as this was a taxi and not a train it sits beyond the remit of delay and repay but is clearly a direct consequence of GTR’s May and July timetables. This is not an isolated experience with a number of passengers booking Ubers adding to their financial outgoings. The unreliability of the service has forced some commuters to drive from St Albans and Harpenden to West Hampstead or central London to ensure they get to meetings and/or appointments on time. This incurs considerable financial cost on the part of commuters as well as environmental costs. This, added to the cost of season, daily or Carnet tickets is completely unacceptable.

2.37 A survey carried out by St Albans BID (Business Improvement District) company highlighted the detrimental impact of the 20th May timetable on business and trade. 82% (36 of 44 local businesses) confirmed that problems with Thameslink trains have directly affected business. The same survey demonstrates that the effects have been overwhelmingly negative. For instance, due to the unreliable service, people travelling from outside to jobs within the District are arriving late for work which is having an impact on services. Businesses reported loss of reservations: ‘We have had a number of cancellations per week [because of] the train issues resulting in at least a loss of £1,000 to £3,000 per week. On one occasion we had 3 cancellations (14 people) which based on our average spend cost us £700 in lost revenue. This has therefore had a huge impact in our business.’ Additionally, for those who trade at St Albans City station, there are reports of erratic sales and loss of business. Overall, the feeling is one of dissatisfaction and frustration.

2.38 For further detail on what went wrong and the impact of the 20th May and 15th July timetables, please refer to submissions to the rail inquiry from the
Hapenden Thameslink Commuters’ Group, St Albans Commuter and Passenger Action Group and the Association of Public Transport Users.
3. **Conclusion:**

3.1 Rail users using GTR services to and from St Albans City and Harpenden stations are dissatisfied and disappointed with the level of service following the introduction of the 20th May and 15th July timetables.

3.2 The adverse effects of the timetable took a variety of forms including cancelled and delayed trains, the arrival and confusion caused by unannounced trains, injuries to commuters, detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing, cuts to the number of morning peak-time fast trains and flaws in the delay and repay compensation system.

3.3 Therefore St Albans City & District Council seeks the below actions to address the consequences of the 20th May and 15th July timetables:

4. **Recommendations:**

- That GTR restore the pre-20th May frequency of peak-time fast services from Harpenden to West Hampstead Thameslink/London St Pancras International.
- That major improvements be made in information reporting online, at stations and aboard trains. This information should be clear, timely and in multiple formats to allow all passengers to plan their journeys with confidence. Reasonable adjustments should be made for people with disabilities.
- To ensure that any future changes to services to and from St Albans District are properly consulted on and any subsequent changes effectively communicated to all passengers so as to result in minimal disruption.
- The Council welcomes GTR’s decision to extend the compensation scheme to non-season ticket holders. The Council urges that this decision be upheld swiftly ensuring that all passengers receive the full amount they deserve. This includes one-off buyers, non-season ticket holders and Carnet ticket holders.
- That GTR ensure that they adhere to published timetables to provide all passengers with a service which they can rely on.
• That processes and mechanisms be reviewed or put in place to ensure that situations such as the present one do not arise again.
• The Council welcomes the independent inquiry (the Glaister Review) into the disruption caused by the 20\textsuperscript{th} May timetable and awaits the findings.

Submitted jointly by:

Cllr Alec Campbell, Leader of St Albans City and District Council and the Conservative Group.

Cllr Chris White, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group.

Cllr Roma Mills, Leader of the Labour Group.


August 2018
5. **Appendix 1**

AM Peak-Time Fast Trains to and from Harpenden and London St Pancras – December 2017, May 2018 and July 2018

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<tr>
<th>FAST TRAINS TO AND FROM LONDON</th>
<th>DECEMBER 2017 PEAK TRAINS AT HARPENDEN AND ST ALBANS</th>
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<tr>
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<td>6.32  6.40  6.46  6.55  7.00  7.12  7.20  7.31  7.39  7.50  7.56  8.06  8.10  8.22  8.26</td>
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<td>St Albans</td>
<td>6.38  6.46  6.58  7.01  7.06  7.18  7.26  7.38  7.45  7.56  8.02  8.12  8.16  8.28  8.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Hampstead</td>
<td>7.07 7.07 7.07 7.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>St Pancras (arrive)</td>
<td>6.58  7.05  7.15  7.21  7.25  7.39  7.45  7.57  8.05  8.17  8.21  8.33  8.37  8.49  8.53</td>
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