Written evidence submitted by Dr Celina Fox (RTC0057)

I have lived in Great Chishill, Cambridgeshire, 15 minutes from Royston, for nearly three years. I bought my house partly because of the frequent and rapid train service to London King’s Cross (LKX) throughout the day and evening. Since the chaotic ‘introduction’ of the new timetable by GTR in May, the service has all but collapsed, dogged by cancellations, late running and extended journey times. As has been stated by our local MPs and even the Minister, this is ‘unacceptable’, although the word is meaningless as little has been done to return the service to an ‘acceptable’ standard and we, the poor passengers, have been forced to accept the unacceptable.

1. The chaos was predictable. On the 23 July 2017 I submitted my views to the GTR timetable consultation exercise, observing apropos the substitution of the Great Northern Royston/LKX service with the Thameslink Royston/London St Pancras (LSP) trains, ‘that the length of the route south of the river will increase the risk of delays and cancellations, especially given the company’s notorious record running Thameslink and Southern Rail.’ I understand from station staff at Royston that when the new timetable was introduced in May 2018, only 7 of the 38 drivers required for the Thameslink trains had been recruited, let alone trained.

2. I also learnt from the Royston station staff that the GTR timetable was drawn up by managers based at Three Bridges, with no first-hand knowledge of the size of communities north of the Thames and stations along the route. As a result the twice hourly non-stop fast trains to Cambridge from LKX speed through Royston as if it were a rural village. In fact it is a vital hub for high tech industries in the town and the whole South Cambs/Herts district. Many commuters prefer to use Royston station to Cambridge, easing the congestion experienced in that city and at that station. The town is expanding, many people having moved to the area, like me, because of its previous fast connection to LKX. It is government policy, I understand, to improve communications in the whole of this region of growth, not to make them worse. What possible justification can there be for prioritising Cambridge at the expense of Royston?

3. It should take 35-45 minutes to get between London and Royston. The ‘revised’ timetable from 15 July (which boasts a large red triangular exclamation mark on the cover as warning not to take it too seriously) details the latest revisions.
   • From Monday to Friday, the Great Northern trains from Ely, King's Lynn and Cambridge stop at Royston until 09.24, taking 38-41 minutes to get to LKX. Thereafter for the rest of the day and evening there are NO fast or semi-fast trains from Royston to LKX. There is a very slow stopping service hourly taking over 1 hour 10 minutes. The alternative is the semi-slow hourly Thameslink service to LSP which takes 52 minutes.
   • From Monday to Friday, there are NO fast or semi-fast trains from LKX to Royston until 16.42 but then the service is reasonable with trains nearly every half hour taking 36-38 minutes until midnight. Earlier in the day there is a twice hourly very slow service from LKX taking over 1 hour 10 minutes or a semi-
slow hourly Thameslink service from LSP taking **54 minutes**. To add insult to injury the Great Northern 16.12 LKX fast train to Cambridge and Ely stops at Ashwell & Morden, not Royston, a small village station serving a tenth of the passengers of Royston (150,000 c.f. 1.5 million in 2016-7).

4. This service makes no allowance for the shift or flexible working hours of modern employment contracts. With the new timetable (when it works) there is now no quick way of travelling by train outside peak times between London and Royston, forcing many to take to cars and adding to road congestion. It is ironic that the government has permitted GTR to add at least ten minutes to the journey – nearly a third – and up to forty minutes more, in effect doubling the time it should take, when billions are being spent on HS2 to cut ten minutes from the London/Birmingham route.

**My recommendations for action are:**

• Remove the franchise from GTR. They have amply demonstrated they are not capable of running the service. I will not bore you with all the cancellations and late running of trains I have experienced over the last few months but I now dread getting the train to London and attempting to get back. GTR’s incompetence goes beyond not being able to run a timetable. I was sitting on the 19.42 at LKX a few weeks ago, when about five minutes after it was due to leave, a clearly exasperated Great Northern employee announced on the system they were still waiting for the driver to turn up. Five minutes later he announced that the driver was in a taxi and the 20.12 would probably leave first. So we all got off and headed for the 20.12, only then to be told that the driver of the first train had arrived and it would be leaving first... That is beyond incompetence – it is a grotesque farce. Even the automated message in the carriage was wrong, stating that the first stop would be Cambridge, whereas, as the driver confirmed some time into the journey, the first stop was Royston.

• Ensure that at least one of the twice hourly fast trains between LKX and Cambridge stops at Royston in both directions. While it would add little or no time to the Cambridge journey – I note that the 16.12 LKX fast train to Cambridge stopping at Ashwell & Morden arrives at exactly the same time in Cambridge as the one an hour earlier, which makes no stops at all – it would go some way towards alleviating the real sense of grievance many people feel in Royston and South Cambridgeshire about the grossly unfair way this timetable was drawn up.

• Ensure that the rolling stock is adequate for the service. Currently you cannot get a seat on a peak hour fast train from Royston into LKX. Yet the Thameslink rolling stock, twelve carriages long, is virtually empty because there are much faster ways of getting across London to travel north/south than by using that service.

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