Written evidence submitted by Mr Ian Rolfe (RTC0070)

I live in Higham. I rely on using the train for all my travel including accessing employment as visual impairment prevents me from holding a driving licence. The major timetable changes on May 20. have adversely affected Higham much more than other places on the route, as Higham is now only served by Thameslink.

During the worst of the Thameslink chaos it seemed they had all but given up on running services between London and Rainham. Leaving Higham with no train service at all. E.g. Rail enquiries on Sat. 26 May showed virtually every train is cancelled leaving only a sporadic rail replacement bus service between Higham and Strood. This was repeated on most days between 20 May and when the interim timetable was introduced on July 15-. This meant it was almost impossible for me to access services in my nearest town centre, Gravesend as it is in the opposite direction to the rail replacement bus leading to doubling back and journey times of about 1 hour. A totally unacceptable situation.

Since the introduction of the interim timetable they are only running ½ the number of trains that were in the May timetable. Giving only an hourly service. The means I have had to change my hours of work and now I am finding myself becoming increasingly socially isolated as it is getting too difficult for me to take part in most of the activities I do in the local towns with the train service so sparse. The latest thing to be affected is I can no longer attend my local Catholic church in Gravesend within any reasonable travelling time. I have to leave home an hour before the service starts. Due to the removal of services from the timetable I have to wait 50 minutes for my train home. Meaning I would not get home until well over an hour after it finishes. On the first Sunday of the interim timetable I was not aware the times had change from the pattern that had been in place for the previous several weeks and there was also a short notice cancellation which left me stranded in Gravesend with my 6 year old son. This forced me to get a taxi home at a cost of £16. A sum which I cannot afford and GTR would not compensate me for. Please be aware I am not entitled to any benefits for my disability. The main criteria for any transport related benefits are that you are not able to use public transport. What use is this if public transport can’t get you to where you need to go when you need to.

I am feeling increasingly trapped and have to consider if I can continue to live in Higham. We as a family do not want to move and cannot afford the financial costs and disruption it would result in. But would never have chosen to live here with the current level of public transport.

We really need GTR to confirm that they are going to reintroduce the 2 trains per hour both off peak as well as peak and to commit to a date. As things stand I fear they are content to leave us with the current level of service for the long term. And there may even be a hidden agenda to permanently reduce our service

Many people in Higham would be very keen to see Southeastern Highspeed services stopping here as they are currently passing through but do not stop. However they refuse to do this even during the current time of disrupted services. This is something they used to do when their own services to Higham were disrupted so I cannot believe it would cause too much difficulty with the timing of the Highspeed services.

No one here wants Thameslink services or had been properly consulted. There was no publicity during the consultation process that we would be seeing such major changes to our train services. In fact most people were not aware until the May timetable was published and it was a done deal. I
have had evidence from the ticket clerk at Higham who said she only sold one through to a Thameslink north of London station in the first month.

Even if everything had gone perfectly in May we would have had an inferior service to the old Southeastern service. So the chaos since May really has added insult to an injury!

*September 2018*