Introduction

1. The Preston Park Train Campaign (PPTC) was formed in the aftermath of the timetable changes of 20th May. It speaks on behalf of many rail users at Preston Park Station who are deeply concerned about the longer-term implications of a significant reduction in scheduled services and who have also experienced widespread short-term disruption. The campaign has been working with the local MP, Caroline Lucas (Brighton Pavilion), to raise questions in Parliament and has also held a meeting with GTR management representatives to understand how and why changes were made to train services at Preston Park Station.

About Preston Park Station

2. Preston Park is a large suburb in the middle of Brighton, readily accessible from many parts of the city. The population of the four council wards surrounding the station is 59,321 (Brighton and Hove has a population of 273,369 residents). The station is the first stop from Brighton and is used by many residents of Brighton and Hove, in addition to the council wards mentioned above. Preston Park station has three platforms, a ticket office with infrequent opening hours and no ticket barriers.

3. It is a busy commuter station serving London stations (including Blackfriars, London Bridge, St Pancras International and Victoria), Gatwick Airport and stations along the south coast to Littlehampton. People also travel locally for work at large local employers such as American Express, schools (there are 20 schools and 2 sixth form colleges in the area) and for frequent events in Preston Park including the Brighton marathon (which starts in Preston Park and regularly attracts approximately 12,500 runners and 150,000 spectators) and for Brighton and Hove Albion football matches (nearest station for shuttle buses that run to 30,000+ stadium). Preston Park also hosts other events such as the annual Pride event.

Timetable Changes

4. There are two major concerns about the 20th May timetable changes. The primary concern is the substantial reduction of services for Preston Park. Secondly, and in the short term, the disruption caused by unreliable and unpredictable services has had a substantial negative impact on users of Preston Park Station i.e. the reduced service means that these disruptions hit passengers harder.

5. Our longer-term concern is the future level of services after the emergency timetables have been replaced, with a significant reduction in the frequency and capacity of trains expected. In particular, the complete removal of Gatwick Express trains which started in Brighton (one stop away) which were replaced by trains coming from Littlehampton (11 stops away). Trains from Littlehampton are frequently full to capacity on boarding and often so full they cannot be boarded at all. Explanations of the reason for these changes have been inadequate and it is unclear if this situation is likely to continue.

6. The campaign has received a large number of distressing messages about the impact on the work and family lives of many people using GTR trains (further details below). Trains are regularly subject to long delays, cancelled or do not stop as advertised, frequently with little or no warning, making it very difficult to organise travel from day to day with services running one day and not the next. Many commuters pay an annual standard fare season ticket price of between £3,968 and £5,532 to travel between Preston Park and London Terminals (season tickets for Preston Park are the same price as those from Brighton and Hove), but are not receiving a service reflecting their personal investment.

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1 2011 census figures for Hollingdean and Stanmer, Patcham, Preston Park, Withdean and Brighton and Hove.
7. We recognise that many communities throughout the country are suffering from high levels of disruption and that Preston Park is not unique in experiencing problems. However, the campaign believes that the significant changes to the Preston Park timetable appear to have been made with limited understanding of passenger levels or the consequences of even seemingly minor changes to routes and capacity. GTR confirmed verbally during a face to face meeting with the campaign and Caroline Lucas MP that they did not have accurate figures for passenger numbers at Preston Park.

8. Calculating station usage is difficult at Preston Park as there are no ticket barriers, but also as many people have told the campaign that they buy tickets from Brighton (at the same season ticket price) for flexibility to deal with disruption. Industry standard systems such as LENNON will be no use for estimating the number of people using the station. In the absence of these sorts of data it is not possible to get information on passenger numbers without a physical count.

9. We are concerned that this does not appear to be a sufficient basis for significant change and passengers could reasonably have expected a much higher level of due diligence to have been applied by the company and the Department for Transport.

Summary of main changes, from information compiled by the campaign from various sources:

**Cut in services**
- There has been a 25% overall cut in peak time services to/from London Bridge-St Pancras.
- In the evenings trains all start from Cambridge or Bedford i.e. trains no longer start at London Bridge, at peak times they are full to capacity before reaching London Bridge so large numbers of people are unable to board.
- This situation is exacerbated by large gaps in services at key stations, including interchanges at Haywards Heath and Brighton.
- The number of trains from Brighton to London Victoria calling at Preston Park has reduced significantly, with all morning services coming from Littlehampton making commuting on them unpredictable and challenging.

**Withdrawal of Gatwick Express**
- Gatwick Express trains no longer stop at Preston Park after having served the station for 10 years. Many Preston Park passengers have therefore organised their routines around this continuity, so abrupt changes mean significant behaviour change to adapt. This has forced many passengers travelling to London Victoria to attempt to board already full trains from Littlehampton or to travel to Brighton or Hassocks as well as other stations.
- Journeys are cramped and uncomfortable but Gatwick Express services appear to have plenty of capacity. Photographic evidence from campaign members shows many empty carriages travelling from Brighton to London, in contradiction of GTR claims that there are capacity issues. The Rail Minister does not accept the evidence from passengers that trains frequently have seating space at Gatwick Airport.

**Originating station and other challenges**
- All trains to Victoria start in Littlehampton so are frequently already full on boarding at Preston Park, having stopped at ten previous stations.
- Trains to Victoria are every 30 minutes, while two morning peak trains from Preston Park do not arrive in Victoria until after 9.30am, unhelpful for those without flexible working hours.
- There are long gaps between trains running to Brighton.
- Fewer trains/connections to Haywards Heath in the new timetable make travel to all destinations more difficult and time consuming e.g. there is often only one train an hour to Preston Park from Victoria at night, which if a passenger misses gives no timely connections Haywards Heath or Brighton.
Feedback from Preston Park Station Users

10. PRP passengers are squashed onto less frequent, shorter trains coming from further afield making commuting unbearable. Comments the campaign has received include:

- ‘After 18 years of commuting this has been too much and I also have handed in my notice in London and have had enough.’
- ‘That’s me! I can’t do it anymore. This is my last week in London then notice served and not going back.’
- ‘I’ve handed my notice in because I cannot cope with the terrible service anymore. 8 years and this past few months has finally sent me over the edge.

Gatwick Express

11. The campaign has received a large number of comments from commuters who had previously used the Gatwick Express service to and from London Victoria. Although this does not represent all users of Preston Park (many of whom travel to London Bridge and other stations both in and outside London), those Gatwick Express passengers have now been displaced onto other services, exacerbating overcrowding and having a negative impact on passengers on services from Littlehampton, who are also having to deal with packed trains.

12. Almost all Gatwick Express trains stop at the next station, Hassocks (a significant increase in service to Hassocks with trains every 15 minutes during peak hours). Many Preston Park rail users find it difficult to reconcile this situation given the relative population sizes of the communities each station serves and what appears to be an illogical disparity in frequency compared to pre-May 2018, with Preston Park losing all of its services to Hassocks. At the same time, Haywards Heath, a major hub/junction for trains to/from London to destinations in the South East, now has fewer than half the Gatwick Express services of Hassocks despite having a larger population. Some Gatwick Express services start from Brighton with stops only at Hassocks and Gatwick Airport before London Victoria. There has yet to be an adequate explanation of why Hassocks receives a more frequent service than other stations on the Brighton mainline.

13. We are repeatedly told by GTR and Ministers that these changes are to improve reliability or to reduce overcrowding further down the route, with additional stops not being possible as it would reduce punctuality. We also understand the reluctance of GTR (and the Government) to further change the timetable until the situation has stabilised.

14. However, while this temporary situation continues many Preston Park rail users are forced to make uncomfortable decisions about their travel, either risking overcrowded services from Littlehampton, changing travel patterns by changing at other stations or getting earlier trains to improve their chances of getting on a train. Changing trains, getting up earlier in the morning or getting home late might seem trivial, but the pressure this has put on many Preston Park rail users is significant. Many of the messages the campaign has received are about family time lost, children’s bed times missed or school runs disrupted. People have also been forced to change jobs or faced complaints from their employers. This stress is difficult to measure.

Solutions

15. We acknowledge that changes were undertaken to ‘smooth out’ the services between Brighton, the South Coast, London and Bedford, with additional new services to Cambridge. We also recognise the complexity of such changes and the inevitable short-term disruption that this can bring. Yet the response from GTR has been unsatisfactory, in essence that some should needlessly suffer unduly. No community should have to suffer.
16. Following a sustained period of disruption due to industrial action and a generally poor level of reliability, passengers have seen what tolerance they had evaporate. Bland corporate responses from GTR to passengers and unsympathetic statements by the Government have added to the frustration. There is some concern that Preston Park is being downgraded and that existing station facilities could disappear. There needs to be a concerted effort by ministers and GTR to demonstrate that they are working together to resolve problems, clearly explaining why the current situation came about – repeated, references to record investment and promises to address the problem are no longer enough.

17. For Preston Park passengers, there needs to be recognition of both the short-term disruption and the longer-term impact of service changes. This should be based on solid data: GTR needs to commit to a proper analysis of passenger numbers at Preston Park, monitoring usage during peak hours through physical counts rather than ticket sales or estimates.

18. At the least it would appear that a reinstatement of Gatwick Express services at Preston Park station would be sensible. This would help to reduce overcrowding on other trains and should not see problems further towards London given that the campaign has gathered feedback that seats are regularly available at Gatwick Station.

19. The campaign understands that Hassocks has lost services that stopped at Clapham Junction but gained Gatwick Express trains. Both communities appear to have been left with an unsatisfactory service but with a logical solution, that of changing stopping patterns to balance the needs of both Preston Park and Hassocks users. Neither community should prosper at the cost of the other, but a balanced service reflecting their needs should be feasible.

20. Services to London Victoria from Littlehampton are overcrowded, leading to uncomfortable conditions both for those attempting to join at Preston Park and those who have boarded at stations along the South coast. GTR must set out how the timetable can be revised to significantly increase services from Preston Park that have originated at Brighton rather than Littlehampton and reintroduce them as soon as possible.

21. GTR should clearly set out options for improving services from London Bridge, including how additional trains starting there could be reintroduced so that commuters are not reliant on overcrowded services from Bedford / Cambridge. If this is not feasible they should be clear on why not and what mitigation measures they intend to take.

22. Preston Park station is a busy commuter route that had a frequent if unreliable service to and from London. Contrary to assertions by GTR and the Government about the improvements the 20th May timetable changes would deliver, there has not been an improvement for users of the station and the prospect of a return to service levels pre-timetable change are poor. It is unrealistic and lacking any credibility to claim that timetable changes were made with an understanding of passenger levels at Preston Park. Although Preston Park may be only one station amongst a number across the country that are facing substantial disruption, it is difficult to accept that any station should see service levels reduced or altered without evidence. Services along the Brighton mainline are struggling to cope. GTR and the Government must take practical and visible steps to assure passengers at many stations between the South coast and London that changes will be made.

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