Written Evidence submitted by Paul Gloess (RTC0076)

I am now only an occasional user of Thameslink travelling to an office at Blackfriars from Harpenden, but I did commute for many years. I have many friends who commute daily and who have been extremely impacted by these timetable changes and the poor implementation delivery by the industry.

This evidence to the Transport Committee focuses on highlighting the lack of public clarity in the interaction of DfT, Network Rail and GTR relationships for production of Proposed Timetable for May 20th, their failure to consult and the consequent impact on passengers travelling from Harpenden to and from both West Hampstead (key interchange) and Blackfriars (as a proxy for central London).

Executive Summary

- **Causes:** the original DfT train service specification (TSR) of the GTR franchise, with additional routes to make situation more complex, could not be met with a workable timetable. Further work produced the May 20th timetable which was implemented without being consulted upon in breach of obligations, and there are no published requirement documents or passenger demand data used for production of May 20th timetable.
  
  The lack of single point of accountability between DfT, Network Rail and TOC for the ‘end-to-end’ service meant the logistics issues, planning failures and the non-delivery of works were ‘loose ends’ and not seen as fundamental items affecting the outcome as industry was effectively ‘planning to fail’.

- **Symptoms:** the chaos experienced by passengers from a May 20th timetable, and the further reduction in Jul 15th timetable, at the times of greatest passenger demand, are at c.50%-60% of the pre-May 20th effective quality of service levels of service.
  
  The impact of an ‘incident’ is magnified and broadcast over a much wider area, rather than being contained on one branch.
  
  Communications to both passengers and GTR staff is very poor for journey updates.

Causes: General observations, and some history

1. The Londonreconnections.com transport group of interested experts have published several excellent comprehensive analyses on the timetable changes. I have used some extracts to highlight certain points that I wish to draw to your attention.

2. **Holy Grails and Thameslink Fails (part 2): The plan that went wrong (18-Jun-2018)**
   
   
   This all points to the introduction of more complexity with a larger network of routes which introduced more dependencies between TOCs and this was not adequately addressed in advance by industry.

3. Extract from ref 1 with bold sentences. **“A fundamental problem with the Thameslink franchise from the outset was the timetable.** The main issue was that it just was not known if one could produce a workable timetable for 24tph through the Thameslink core. In one sense we still don’t since, if all planned trains were running in the current timetable as originally intended, we are only up to 18tph. The DfT have pointed out that none of the four bidders produced a timetable that was compliant with the bid requirements. It seems that one reason GTR was selected was that their proposed timetable was less non-compliant than the others. Nowadays, as part of the process, Network Rail not only scrutinise timetables put forward as part of a franchise bid but can theoretically actually veto the franchise application if they believe the timetable cannot work.
   
   Another reason that GTR was awarded the franchise was that their bid seriously addressed the issue of making a 24tph timetable work by planning to recruit experts from elsewhere both in and outside the
UK. Unfortunately, it appears that, unknown for sure by anyone at the time, a timetable that worked
to the DfT’s requirements was just not possible. The main problem was getting the necessary
number of trains through Windmill Bridge Junction just north of East Croydon.
One can, of course, wonder why the DfT put forward an Invitation To Tender (ITT) based on a
premise that was false – namely, that you could run the necessary number of trains through
Windmill Bridge Junction and East Croydon. One feels that it was a case of ‘this has to work – there is
no obvious alternative option’. At least there was no obvious alternative option without straying off
GTR territory which was the main reason for making the franchise area so large. It would perhaps be
unkind to point out that had the Uckfield branch been electrified this might not have been an issue.
Equally, one can wonder why it took so long for GTR to say that the originally proposed timetable for
December 2018 could never work and come up with an alternative suggestion. Many in the railway
industry were stunned when in the summer of 2016 GTR proposed an alternative route to Rainham
(Kent) for 2tph. Whilst there was a good rationale behind it (and also the prospect of better fare
receipts) such a major change at such a late time seemed to be inviting trouble – even if the option was
better than sticking to the original plan.”

The original TSR documents are indeed published on the DfT website, but nothing has appeared
associated with the recent May 20th and later changes. GTR have said ‘they were instructed by DfT to
make the changes to for the May 20th timetable’; DfT have said ‘they only specified an envelope of
47mins for Bedford-St Pancras’; but these are not yet in public domain for verification.

4. Extract from ref 1. “A further timetable issue
Rather belatedly, at some point in 2017, it was publicised that there would be serious conflict between
the East Midlands Trains timetable and the proposed Thameslink one. As with Windmill Bridge is it a bit
puzzling why this wasn’t discovered earlier. Thameslink might only be sending a maximum of 15tph
up the Midland Main Line (the same as before) but the duration was longer and the off-peak service
was improved. On top of that the Thameslink timetable had to dovetail in with the East Coast Main Line
so things were getting rather complicated.
What makes the matter worse was that each company (Thameslink and East Midland Trains) have
different objectives. Some of these are down to franchise specifications which is down to the DfT and
there is nothing to indicate that any analysis was done to ensure that the different franchise
specifications were compatible. “

5. Another analysis from the same group:
Why the timetable changes went wrong
– see https://www.londonreconnections.com/2018/the-cicadas-take-flight-explaining-the-may-
timetable-changes/ (ref 2) 21-May-2018
This highlights a plethora of issues coming together resulting in no consultation as obligated on
material changes to proposed timetables were finalised too late.

6. Extract from ref 2. Descoping issues: (Midland MainLine Electrification Delay impact)
“ Unsurprisingly, this has left disgruntled passengers at the big stations of Luton and Bedford
complaining about their downgraded experience (typically 11 minute longer journeys and having to
travel on Thameslink) to MPs and local councils, who then started campaigning for the removal of stops
of the Thameslink services to DfT, and then a second group of disgruntled users at smaller station
complaining to the same MPs and local councils that they now had poorer train service than
promised”
“ All this has meant there has, unavoidably and despite the efforts of all involved, been less pre-
checking and oversight than is normal at stages within the process this May. This has, in some cases,
resulted in timetables being finalised just over a day before the change, as opposed to the normal
industry standard of 12 weeks. In that environment, it seems inevitable that some commuter journeys for the coming weeks are going to be less than smooth”

Extract from ref 2 Cicadas take flight
“The far more justifiable headlines, however, will relate to the bad reasons for why this timetable is failing to run smoothly, and why some services are disappearing – many of which are well used by passengers. The long term consequence may well be a better GTR network, but neither the operator, Network Rail or the DfT can hide from the fact that many of the inconveniences, cancellations and delays that this timetable will initially bring can be traced back to logistics issues, planning failures and the non-delivery of works.”

7. These items above were critical to the successful delivery of a service by the combined rail industry.

Symptoms: Performance for Harpenden to/from Blackfriars, and to/from West Hampstead

8. The analysis below is based on data from the www.recenttraintimes.co.uk website between May 7th and Aug 31st which utilises Network Rail published datafeeds, and published timetables. It shows the reality of what the rail industry is delivering for those passengers travelling between the quoted stations which is effective quality of service levels at 50-60% of the pre-May 20th levels.

9. GTR recently publicised Sept service re-introductions (https://www.thameslinkrailway.com/travel-information/plan-your-journey/timetable-information) will make little impact as only one service from Harpenden is listed amongst the 18 listed.

This is apparently at odds to what GTR said to Iain Prosser at ORR. See picture on right.

10. Notes for graphs below: PPM is Published Performance Measure and is published by industry for whole network, however I have applied the same approach (PPM = % trains arriving within 5 minutes at destination, RT is Right Time ie on time or early), but for the origin and destination stations quoted rather than end stations of the route.

- Official PPM stats exclude trains not scheduled to run (from 2200 night before) even if they are on a timetable – hence certain timetabled trains are ‘missing’ from the schedule
- PPM = % RT-5 calculated ie within 5 mins late reaching destination quoted in the graph, and includes all incidents against those trains SCHEDULED to run
- Mod %RT-5 is calculated against the TIMETABLED number of trains (ie including the ‘missing’)
- ‘% RT-5 of old TT’ is calculated against the pre-May 20 TIMETABLED number of trains and represents the EFFECTIVE service level now provided compared to pre-May 20th level
- All columns are train counts on left hand axis, and all % are on the right hand axis

11. Harpenden to Blackfriars – morning ‘rush’ (0630-0830) to get to work for normal office hours

Trains reduced from 23 to 15 during this period or 35%, with no change in passenger demand. GTR point to the PPM statistics to say service has stabilised, and it has, and although the effective service has improved since Jul 15th, it is still at only c.60%-65% of the pre-May 20th level resulting in overcrowding as same number of passengers cram onto the trains (which are more heavily loaded by
ex-EMT passengers from Bedford/Luton).

The one service being reintroduced in Sept from Harpenden (0755 HPD arriving St Pancras Int’l at 0832 – 37 minutes duration) will raise the 15 services up to 16 or only a 30% reduction of pre-May 20th timetable.

12. Blackfriars to Harpenden – evening ‘rush’ homewards
There has been a minor improvement in effective service level from c.40% of pre-May 20th levels to c.60%. It is also not a stable service and there are collapses weekly to almost non-existent service level of c.20%. This has a very large impact on people trying to plan their lives outside of work and travel. (Many examples sent to the @CommonTrans twitter account).
14. Harpenden to West Hampstead DIRECT – morning ‘rush’ to get to work for normal office hours. The effective service is only at c.55% of the pre-May 20th level for this key interchange for onward London travel on Jubilee line and Overground services.

15. West Hampstead to Harpenden – evening ‘rush’ homewards
The Jul 15th timetable shows fewer cancellations, but on a much reduced service level which has shown no improvement since the new May 20th timetable was introduced. Effective service level hovers at c.50% of the pre-May 20th level. The only option is to change at St Albans which has created a Safety issue with overcrowding on platform and bridge at St Albans.
Symptoms: Impacts of faults are spread over wider areas than before

16. There have been two recent instances of failures within the Thameslink Core. One of electrical equipment (13th Aug Thameslink Core failure on ‘3rd electric rail equipment’) and one train fault (4th Sept Train failure Pantograph equipment) at City Thameslink at c.0630 affected service up to c.1100 from the north on GN line as well as the Bedford line, and all services from the south on the various routes through that station) as this ‘critical component’ was reduced to single line only working.

17. There was also a bad day on 26th July with multiple incidents, but Network Rail published the following very revealing information on their ‘train disruptions’ website in relation to:

“Disruption between East Croydon and Brighton expected until the end of service, Incident created 26/07/2018 16:51, Last updated 26/07/2018 21:47

Services are on a very tight schedule to maintain their pathways, and any incidents that occur, even something minor, can affect both the route where there problem occurred as well as any routes that connect to it. This in turn can mean that train carriages, drivers and other crew members are not in the right place at the right time to run their next services, further continuing a knock on delay for hours after.

Major disruption, particularly towards the end of the day, can have an effect on the following days’ service.

Depending on the nature of the incident, more trains than normal may be taken out of service to either ease congestion or for additional safety repairs. Trains may also have been placed in the wrong depots or sidings overnight, consequently being in the wrong location for the start of the morning service.

Southern and Thameslink control teams are continuing to work hard, and will do so throughout the night, to ensure as many services as possible will be able to run tomorrow morning; however, some services may be of fewer coaches than usual. “

18. Note the above is effectively an admission that the network is sensitive to impacts and is not resilient enough to dampen down the shock, but in fact spreads it wider. The combined system is ‘highly strung’ with not enough contingency to withstand the shocks and recover quickly.
19. This demonstrates that the extended route offerings are more inextricably linked, and the impacts of a minor issue can spread much further than before the new routes were introduced.

20. Another example, overhead line damage on Aug 17th at Royston on GN line caused impacts on St Pancras-Bedford branch as services were diverted as someone decided to instead terminate trains at Bedford rather than Royston to ‘ease congestion’, but which spread the impacts further across the network. Previously such an incident would have been contained within the affected Royston branch.

21. There have been passenger tweets asking why a train issue 80 miles away in Brighton affects services in Hitchin, and vice versa.

22. Quite often passengers are told to get off trains short of their destination so that trains can then skip stops to return the network to normal running as soon as possible. The industry appears to be ‘playing with a big train set’ and not worrying about what happens to the fare paying passengers. The latter especially as GTR ‘pre-paid c.£12m financial penalties’ to end Sept 18

23. Communication updates for journeys have been very poor to both passengers and GTR station staff and drivers, especially when incidents occur, with conflicting information across apps and station screens.
Conclusions

- There are fundamental problems in Franchise specifications from the DfT which are not highlighted through the bidding process eg
  - Impossible timetables,
  - Lack of visibility of passenger demand data input to DfT Train Service Specifications and to the TOC Franchise bid and timetable proposals
    For example, it would only have been highlighted at a consultation with the customers (which didn’t occur for May 20th Timetable), that Harpenden train services at the times of greatest passenger demand were being cut by 35%.
- The actual impact on passengers is not reflected in the official industry PPM stats.
- The network/route designs introduced have made the combined system more sensitive to minor shocks, with the impacts are broadcast across the network far and wide.

I ask the Select Committee to use the above information to put pressure on the DfT, Network Rail and the TOCs to put passengers first and to be more open and honest about issues in their communications. If the industry makes promises, then it should keep them.