Written evidence submitted by St Albans Commuter and Passenger Action Group and Harpenden Commuter Group (RTC0083)

About us:

Both St Albans Commuter and Passenger Action Group and Harpenden Commuter Group were formed as a result of the timetabling change of 20 May 2018 which impacted the rail services for both Harpenden and St Albans City stations. Both of these groups have submitted their own separate submissions to the inquiry as some issues and thus experiences differ by station. Both Harpenden and St Albans City stations are located within the St Albans City and District Council area and the district council has made its own submission to this inquiry.

Jacqui Taylor and Nicola MacLeod did some of the investigative work in helping put together the submissions for their respective passenger/commuter groups and both realised a further issue they feel the Transport Select Committee should take a look at as part of the inquiry. They are therefore submitting this issue jointly and keeping it separate from the submissions made by the groups.

Note: Jacqui Taylor is also a District Councillor for St Albans City and District Council and now sits on the council’s Rail Consultative Forum that was also established in response to the effects the timetable change has had on the district’s residents and local businesses. The council’s written evidence document is the submission of the council and this note is simply for transparency as to the position she holds at the council. Jacqui is submitting this in her personal capacity as a member of the St Albans Commuter and Passenger Group.

Executive summary:

- We would like the possible lack of diversity across senior management in the rail industry to be examined as a potential component in failure/under-performance.
- Further we would like the Department for Transport’s role in ensuring/encouraging diversity to deliver better outcomes to be examined.
1. Diversity & the IRB
1.1 Transport Committee 9 July 2018; Rail timetable changes, HC 1163

We noted the oral evidence given to the Transport Committee by Chris Gibb, Chair, Thameslink 2018 Industry Readiness Board; and Chris Green, Chair, Thameslink 2018 Industry Readiness Board’s Independent Assurance Panel on the above date. During this examination of witnesses, we note the following question was asked:

Q209 Chair: With the benefit of hindsight, do you think that the Industry Readiness Board had the right people on it? Was it operated in the right way? Why didn’t the Industry Readiness Board spot that the implementation of the 20 May timetable was going to go so badly wrong?

Chris Gibb: First, I will explain what the Industry Readiness Board is. It is a collection of the companies involved in delivery of the Thameslink project: all the train companies extending from what is now London North Eastern Railway to GTR, Southeastern and Arriva Rail London, all the Network Rail routes, the Network Rail system operator, the Department for Transport and the ORR. There are about 20 people on the board. They have a mixture of different experience. Some of them are old railway people such as Mr Green and me. Others have lots of experience in other industries and bring a different line of questioning. Having chaired that board for some 18 months, it is really tough to chair. It meets every fourth Friday, in the afternoon. Everybody comes, very diligently, and everybody has an opinion and a contribution. There is lots of disagreement. There are people with different contractual obligations. There are different opinions, and it is a tough meeting to chair. The board has chewed over hundreds of issues in the last 18 months and resolved many of the issues. On the particular issue of delivery of the timetable on 20 May, unfortunately, with the benefit of hindsight, it would seem that time simply ran out. With a little bit more time, all the issues faced on 20 May could have been dealt with, but the time ran out. I do not think the industry understood the consequences of the time running out in the way it did.

1.2 Firstly, we are pleased to see this question being asked by the Transport Committee. However, what has struck us as we have looked more and more into who was doing what, who was responsible for what in this timetabling change, is a seeming lack of diversity amongst senior people across the rail industry.

1.3 We have looked at the members of the Industry Readiness Board (IRB) that are listed in the Department for Transport (DfT) document ‘Extract from Thameslink Programme Governance Industry Governance Arrangements for Transport Select Committee Timetable Hearing’ dated 12 July 2018.

1.4 Of the 15 people listed in the table in 2.2.3 it would appear there is only one woman and she is from the DfT, so it would appear the representation from the rail industry on this board was entirely male. Further research suggests that diversity may be further lacking within this group of men. Although we acknowledge that we
are limited into how much we are able to research this and are very much aware that diversity extends beyond immediate visual appearances.

1.5 We would therefore ask the Transport Select Committee to further examine whether the IRB was operated in the right way with respect to recognising that more diverse teams generally lead to better outcomes. And to consider the possibility that the industry has managed to throw together a board of people that, whilst they may each be very experienced and competent, are all too similar and therefore that could have contributed to generating a culture of excessive risk-taking.

2. Further lines of enquiry regarding Diversity in the Rail Industry.

2.1 We feel it is now widely recognised across so many industries that non-diverse teams do not generate the same levels of analysis as diverse teams, and so do not cope well in periods of change, particularly periods of extreme change. Whilst they may still provide challenge, this tends to be extremely limited in scope and often fixates on detail rather than broader aspects, such as an assessment of the implications of failure and the brave choices required to avoid failure. Quite frequently, they simply cannot envisage life outside the status quo. Our questions here are:
2.2 How well does the rail industry truly recognise this?

2.3 Does the rail industry recognise diversity as an issue generally and if so, what is it actually doing to tackle the problem?

2.4 Does the DfT consider diversity across the rail industry a problem? This question is particularly in regard to senior management. We looked at who are the Chief Executives/Managing Directors of 31 UK Train Operating Companies / Groups and found only one was female. Again, we have concern that diversity may be lacking even further.

2.5 New technology and work practices completely revolutionise the business environment with increasing rapidity and this ‘disruption’ is now a part of business life. No industry, not banking, food production or rail transport provision can or will remain static. The standard response received from members of the Thameslink management team when questioned of “I’ve been doing this for 30 years” may well be a key part of the failure. It takes a very diverse team to be able to implement radical change well. The rail industry is seeming to be a case study in how poorly non-diverse teams perform during periods of large scale change. Therefore:

2.6 Does the DfT consider diversity when boards/panels are put together for the purpose of programme delivery such as the Thameslink Programme? If not, why not?

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