

Chris Grayling MP
Department for Transport
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Jo Johnson MP
Department for Transport
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Sir Oliver Heald MP
House of Commons
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Heidi Allen MP C/o Nicola Gillam
House of Commons
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Bim Afolami MP
House of Commons
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Alistair Burt MP
House of Commons
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Grant Shapps MP
House of Commons
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Stephen McPartland MP
House of Commons
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20th August 2018

Dear Mr Grayling, Mr Johnson, Sir Oliver, Ms Allen, Mr Afolami, Mr Burt, Mr Shapps and Mr McPartland,

We write to you as the Chairs of Rail User Groups on the Cambridge and Peterborough branches of the Great Northern network to convey the great anger of our members on learning of the proposed rail fare increase in January 2019 and to ask that you instead instigate a fare freeze in 2019. Together we have a combined membership of over 7000 and our stations represent a combined total of

17,925,390 passenger journeys every year. Our members, their families and friends represent a sizeable proportion of the population in the constituencies in which our stations are based.

We are sure we do not need to remind you of the great failure that has occurred in delivering the first stage of Railplan 2020 this year. For three long months our members have suffered daily disruption on an unprecedented scale and many of our stations found themselves in the bottom 20 of over 2,600 stations in the UK for punctuality performance¹.

Govia Thameslink Railway (“GTR”) and the Department for Transport (“DfT”) have made a great effort to present the emergency interim timetable implemented on 15 July 2018 as a good news story. However, performance is still significantly below the level that GTR was able to deliver prior to the implementation of the May 2018 timetable. By way of example, GTR’s own figures reveal that in January and February 2018 82.8% and 81.3% of Great Northern trains arrived at their destination within 5 minutes of the scheduled time respectively². Even since 15 July 2018 Great Northern performance has been significantly below this level, achieving only 77% of trains arriving within 5 minutes of the scheduled time³. Far from being a good news story, the real story is that GTR still cannot deliver an acceptable level of performance even under its own interim emergency timetable, where the service is significantly reduced from what was planned for May 2018. This is nothing short of a debacle.

We have enquired of GTR as to the cause of the ongoing poor performance following the introduction of the interim timetable and the unequivocal answer has been that the problem has been infrastructure failures. For example, on the evening of 15 August 2018 damage to the overhead lines near to Alexandra Palace by a GTR train caused severe delays in the evening rush hour which spilled over into the morning rush hour on 16 August 2018. You will doubtless be aware of the National Audit Office report from last year, which concluded that the current state of the infrastructure meant that the proposed May 2018 timetable could not be delivered, because the infrastructure is too fragile for the load it is being asked to bear. The likely consequence would be the kind of cascading delays that we are now experiencing, even at the reduced level of service offered under the 15 July interim timetable. The response to the National Audit Office report was £100m of investment into the Great Northern infrastructure. We are concerned that this sum is likely to be inadequate and at a level that is economically irrational; the cost to national GDP from the wholesale disruption experienced since May must likely far outstrip £100m. As RUGs we are becoming increasingly concerned that it will be impossible for GTR to deliver an equivalent level of service to that achieved prior to May 2018 without significant further infrastructure investment or a return to a compartmentalised timetable with trains terminating and originating at London Kings Cross or St Pancras.

Against the backdrop of such poor performance, any increase in rail fares is absolutely unacceptable and is, we anticipate, likely to lead quite understandably to public demonstration. Many of us have written to our MPs previously as to the reasons for which we consider the industry compensation scheme announced in July to be wholly inadequate. To recapitulate briefly, firstly, we are still at a loss as to why it was deemed acceptable to offer one month’s compensation when the period of disruption was two months at a minimum, secondly, we believe that it is unfair on the users of our stations that

¹ Source <https://www.ontimetrains.co.uk> For example, to select just a few of our stations, at the height of the disruption Arlesey was the second worst performing station in the UK 18/06, Letchworth was the fourth 13/06, Hitchin the seventh 12/06. On 11 July, shortly before the implementation of the interim timetable, Letchworth was eighth worst, Hitchin ninth, Royston sixteenth, Arlesey seventeenth, Biggleswade twenty-first and Welwyn North twenty-second worst in the UK for punctuality.

² Govia Connections Stakeholder Magazine, Spring 2018 https://www.greatnorthernrail.com/-/media/goahead/gtr-all-shared-pdfs-and-documents/connections/connections_spring-2018.pdf?la=en

³ Source, GTR email to Great Northern Stakeholders, 16 August, 09:59

certain categories of regular tickets have been excluded (for example carnets). We note that there is still a deafening silence on both these issues.

To hear that once again, come January, the rail passengers which use our stations will be asked to pay an increased fare for a barely fit for purpose service is a poorly timed kick in the teeth. The usual arguments that funding is needed for investment would make more sense if the investment that the funds refer to actually delivered – which is clearly not the case for the 2020 timetable and infrastructure developments. Most contractors who fail to deliver on this type of investment would usually see some level of impact on their bonuses and shareholder returns.

Whilst Mr Grayling's suggestion to reduce the fare increase by linking it to the lower Consumer Price Index rather than the higher Retail Price Index would be a welcome gesture were it to occur, we believe that this is inadequate. We would suggest that the better question would be by how much are fares to be reduced to compensate passengers for the inadequate service for as long as it continues? Whilst we recognise that there is no realistic prospect of a fare decrease, we would suggest that a fare freeze for our embattled passengers would be a start in addressing the shortfalls in the industry compensation scheme we have identified above and continue to await a response on. More than that, it would represent a powerful gesture from both the Government and the industry that they understand the very great suffering passengers have been put through and that they are finally listening

We therefore ask that you implement a fare freeze for all GTR services in 2019.
We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,
on behalf of our members and rail users

Leanne Stott and Dr Stephen Rose, Co-Chairs Letchworth Rail Users Group

Dr Edward Carder, Chair Royston Rail Users Group

Lee Shufflebottom, Chair Ashwell and Morden Rail Users Group

Roger Smith, Chair Hitchin Rail Users Group and Rosalind Southward, Chair Hitchin Rail Commuter Group

Daniel Matthews, Chair Baldock Rail Users Group

Cllr Susan Van de Ven, Chair Meldreth, Shepreth and Foxton Rail Users Group

The Committee of Arlesey Rail Users Group

Cllr Peter Neville, Representative of Welwyn North Rail Users Group

Mary Lowe, Representative of Hatfield Association of Rail Travellers

Michael Guerra, Chair Welham Green Rail Users Group (Welham Green and Brookmans Park)

Aljit Vohra, Chair Stevenage Rail Users Group

Julian Vaughan, Representative of Biggleswade Rail User Group