

## Submission to House of Commons Transport Committee Rail timetable changes Inquiry

Railfuture is a national, independent, voluntary organisation campaigning for better rail services over a bigger rail network. Analysis by our Policy Director Ian Brown CBE FCILT of the failure of the May 2018 timetable changes and the subsequent December timetable 'cutbacks' announced by the Rail Delivery Group on 10 July 2018 is given below.

In summary the key points of our analysis are:

- Most commentators are only seeking to apportion blame for this failure
- All the players - Department for Transport, Network Rail and train operators – are responsible and must work together to learn the lessons
- The impact of the failure is out of proportion to the individual causes, which are **industry leadership** and **industry structure and process**
- The December timetable cutbacks are a pragmatic short-term response to the problems – but may come at a cost, as for example SWR seek to renegotiate their contract
- Investment must continue so that passengers see benefits
- Long-term strong leadership is required from the DfT as an informed and intelligent client, and the Rail Delivery Group as a robust service provider
- Network Rail and the train operators must develop and resource a process to respond rapidly to major demand changes.

### **Murder on the Thameslink Northern Express**

Normally the principal timetable change time is the May timetable. The December timetable is far less extensive, confined to minor corrections, seasonal variations, and sometimes to incorporate infrastructure changes such as Crossrail from December 2018. This December timetable change would have been different as a significant element would have been catch up for changes only partially implemented on Northern and Thameslink in May.

### **So what went wrong and who is to blame for the May 2018 timetable fiasco on Northern and Thameslink?**

The blame culture has become a national blood sport, and who is to blame depends on your position if employed in the industry or politics with the guilty parties ranging from the government/DfT (very popular choice), Network Rail, the Train Operators (second most popular choice), the railway trade unions and privatisation – but with barely any mention of

Network Rail's regulator, the Office of Rail and Road.

Just like the plot of Murder on the Orient Express they all could have done it.

The key test is proportionality. Let us just look at one example - non completion of Manchester to Preston electrification. Network Rail, for the supplier problems we all know about, are certainly culpable in not delivering this scheme. They are not however responsible for the total timetable chaos as a result of this. The reason for saying this is that the chaos on Northern is way out of proportion to this initial problem and indeed, others such as a shortage of rolling stock.

If we do this test with all the players on both Northern and Thameslink we find a similar situation whereby each player may have committed a speeding offence, some more serious than others, but didn't do the murder.

The Railfuture view, just as with the plot of Murder on the Orient Express, is that they all did it.

There are two underlying reasons why the situation is way out of proportion to the individual component problems: **industry leadership** and **industry structure including process**.

We will see endless inquiries pinning blame on whoever the author likes least, but no matter how we look at it no one cause is big enough in itself to promote such chaos. Ironically you could say that such a fiasco needed really concerted organisation!

## **Industry leadership**

Delivery of any product needs a strong, informed and intelligent client focused on delivery not just of the physical elements but on the service being produced for the customer. All the components of delivery should be focused on this. Can the DfT be viewed as a sufficiently strong, informed and intelligent client here? Just forcing increasingly panicky players to meet a timetable change date is not leadership.

Where was the Rail Delivery Group? Did the RDG see this coming and if so did it provide the right challenge to the DfT. Well evidently not or it was ignored. This begs the question whether the RDG is fit for purpose.

The oversight of the Thameslink 2018 Industry Readiness Board under Chris Gibb and its Independent Assurance Panel under Chris Green, two seasoned and widely-acclaimed veterans of the industry, should have ensured that this fiasco did not occur. However it

seems that everyone was so invested financially and reputationally in the May 2018 timetable and all that it represented for stakeholders that 'group-think' set in. With no-one daring to challenge the project other than to claim mitigation was possible to whatever new risk or problem emerged, the project team sleep-walked to disaster.

## **Industry Structure**

To deliver a service, as distinct from an engineering project, requires a systems integrator, a role which Network Rail needs to adopt as a mainstream activity. This entails ensuring that all the relevant components are in place before going ahead. This is different from just putting the timetable into the database.

To achieve this requires a more timely and carefully controlled, dare I say disciplined, staged timetable implementation process with clear milestones at T-40 T-24, T-12 for example. This should be the production line to delivery of the promise to the customer and should be managed as such. Network Rail has done this for physical projects with the GRIP process (for all its faults and cost implications.)

Even if the leadership issue is fixed, which it must be, we still have a major problem. The British rail industry is simply not agile enough to react to major change and to adjust quickly for the need to react to supply side disruption, whether it is infrastructure project problems, control/systems issues or rolling stock delivery and acceptance. It needs to be, if it is to grow. Many supply industries have addressed this and the rail industry can learn from them. They call it the agile supply chain.

A key component of the supply chain is the number of train drivers to cover the train diagrams, with the requisite knowledge of both the route and the train type. The calculation of how many people are needed is not difficult, even including spare cover. The industry does need to address succession and retention including recruitment and training procedures allowing proper time to recruit and train people for these skilled positions, without the risk of recently-qualified drivers being poached by other operators. These are all industry issues.

## **Where does this lead us?**

Network Rail, in the last year, has delivered the largest investment programme since the Railway Mania. Railfuture wants to see a bigger, better railway. The dilemma is that the railway cannot be better unless it is bigger, so addressing the capacity issues that were the basis for such a large investment programme. We have a temporary partial respite as passenger journeys have dipped recently but this is likely to be short term if the industry gets

its act together.

### **What happens in December 2018?**

General planned changes on routes where the operation is stable will go ahead as normal where these are not structurally significant, potentially disrupting other operators. This allows 14 operators listed below to make useful, if modest, improvement.

The billed December 2018 'cut backs' do not represent a reduction in service but do postpone further service aspirations of the remaining 8 operators until May 2019.

On Northern and Thameslink the intention is to use the timetable planned for May 2018. This actually represents an increase in service on both these routes from the current position where interim timetables are in place with considerably fewer services running than was published for May 2018.

It is entirely sensible that these should recover, both in terms of frequency and reliability, to the planned May 2018 level, followed by a short period of stability, before embarking on further stages in May 2019.

What Railfuture does not wish to see is the industry going into its shell in the longer term (as it did after the Hatfield accident), so compromising the benefits of major upgrades. Railfuture wants to see further upgrades delivering benefits to passenger and freight customers in terms of both capacity and resilience.

### **What about the other six operators planning big changes? Why not confine this to Northern and Thameslink?**

There are various reasons here. In some cases such as with London Overground a similar position as with Northern applies - late delivery and acceptance of rolling stock and infrastructure.

South Western Railway were planning very big changes again using refurbished and recently delivered rolling stock and the management team was keen to implement them. The question here as elsewhere is whether they are really ready? Proper industry leadership and industry process would have provided the necessary verification. A short pause here whilst lessons are learned from elsewhere may indeed be wise – although there will be a financial impact on SWR, hence its call to renegotiate the franchise contract.

TransPennine made significant changes in the May 2018 timetable. Further changes are

only sustainable if they are planned in conjunction with Northern so are deferred until May 2019. This particularly affects the Manchester to Preston corridor. Some of the remainder such as Cross Country are subject to franchise competitions or in the case of West Midland Trains, a major rolling stock delivery programme. Cross Country need a fundamental makeover.

GWR is possibly a disappointment here having delivered the first of three phases of the Inter City Express Programme, albeit with operational issues with using pairs of short trains in the interim. GWR cannot really get the benefits projected until Phase 2 and 3 are completed allowing for a much more comprehensive service improvement, particularly for Devon and Cornwall.

## **Railfuture's View**

The December 2018 changes must be seen as a pragmatic response to current problems, and part of a phased plan to implement the benefits of the huge investment going into the rail industry.

The rail industry must hold its nerve - as the situation eases we need continued investment in it. Passengers must see the benefits in terms of increased capacity and service reliability to more customers, even if implemented more slowly.

The industry, to be successful, does need to address the issues of providing leadership in the form of a strong client (ie Government) and a strong response (ie the Rail Delivery Group). Frequent reorganisations and staff relocations (as happened with the move of Network Rail timetabling staff to Milton Keynes) must be avoided as they inevitably result in loss of accumulated knowledge. Retention of 'institutional memory' is essential.

The systems integrator role needs to be addressed urgently within Network Rail, as does a more disciplined and timely timetable implementation process and the retention of institutional memory.

A much longer term, strategic co-ordinated approach to driver recruitment, training and retention is required.

*This is also published as an article on the Railfuture website at*

<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/article1797-Murder-on-the-Thameslink-Northern-Express>

*Please also see the related article **Timetable trauma***

<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/article1785-Timetable-trauma>

Train operators who will stay with the May 2018 timetable after the December timetable change are:

*Cross Country*

*Govia Thameslink*

*Great Western Railway*

*London Overground*

*Northern*

*South Western Railway*

*Trans-Pennine Express*

*West Midlands Trains*

Train operators who will operate new timetables from December 2018 are:

*Arriva Trains Wales*

*C2C*

*Caledonian Sleeper*

*Chiltern Railways*

*East Midlands Trains*

*Grand Central*

*Greater Anglia*

*Heathrow Express*

*Hull Trains*

*LNER*

*Merseyrail*

*Scotrail*

*TfL Rail/The Elizabeth Line*

*Virgin Trains West Coast*