



Department
for Transport

From the Parliamentary
Under Secretary of State
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Dear Colleague,

STRIKE ACTION ON SOUTHERN

I am writing to you concerning next week's strike action on Southern and the ongoing performance issues on the GTR routes.

Firstly, once again to reassure you that the Secretary of State and I are very well aware of the performance issues on Southern, and are devoting a lot of time to addressing the root causes of the problems. There are a number of issues at the moment.

The first is the ongoing industrial action by guards. The RMT is in dispute with the company over plans to introduce driver only operation over the whole GTR network. It is worth saying that a substantial proportion of GTR trains are already operated in this way. The new generation of GTR trains which are being rolled out over the coming months are all designed to operate this way. These trains will benefit customers by having more capacity and air-conditioning to improve journeys. GTR have also assured me that no one is losing their job or having their pay cut as a result of the changes – the existing guards will become on board customer support staff.

As you will be aware, the levels of staff sickness on the route have rocketed in recent weeks. GTR's plan, following a consultation period with drivers is to introduce driver only operation across much of its network on August 21st. They have already done so on Gatwick Express. Unfortunately it is that plan which has prompted next week's strike.

I do appreciate how frustrating this is for passengers, although GTR have told us that they are planning to run around 60% of services next week, and hopefully the holiday season will ease the pressures on the network. Action of this kind by the unions is wholly unacceptable. However it has to be for the company and the union to resolve the issues.

I am sure that the majority of hardworking staff on this franchise would prefer to continue to serve the public in the coming weeks. With regret, all offers by GTR to the union have been refused. The union would now like to draw the government into the dispute for political reasons, but I do not believe that ministers should be involved in a negotiation of this kind. Despite three days of ACAS negotiations, the RMT seem unwilling at this time to accept the introduction of this new fleet of trains. In the end the train operators cannot and should not be prevented from continuing the process of modernising the railways.

However the dispute is not the only reason for under-performance. There has been some sheer bad luck in recent weeks – particularly with the collapsed sewer in Forest Hill and a similar problem in a different location in recent weeks. There was also a major failure near Gatwick, which is currently being investigated by police. In addition, the ongoing works at London Bridge have clearly had an impact on services. Both the Secretary of State and I have visited the station in the past fortnight, and the improvements will clearly make a real difference to passengers, even though they have been disruptive. Two-thirds of the new station will open after the August bank holiday weekend. There will also be more new trains introduced across the network this autumn, with increased capacity for many passengers.

I do believe that operational improvements are needed, involving both GTR and Network Rail. The Secretary of State and I have spent a considerable amount of time since taking up my position considering how this might be done. A number of your constituents have urged me to either take back control of the route or to hand it over to Transport for London. The latter action would be wrong, in my view, as TfL does not have the expertise, nor should the Mayor of London have political responsibility, to run a main line route from Cambridge and Bedford to Brighton. With regard to overall management changes, my prime concern is to get the problems sorted out rather than focussing on the franchise agreement and the contracting of the route. I think any changes would have to obviously improve the situation for passengers – otherwise they would simply be about moving the deckchairs. I will update you again shortly.

I am sorry that union action is causing so much trouble for your constituents but I do not believe that GTR should simply cave in to pressure from the RMT. They are clearly trying to resist logical and necessary changes that will bring benefits for passengers. The Secretary of State and I am happy to meet colleagues across the summer if necessary and please feel free to contact my office if that would be helpful.

With best wishes,

PAUL MAYNARD