

Tim Loughton MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

31 March 2016

Re: Improving customer service on trains and at stations

Dear Mr Loughton,

I am writing in relation to our plans to make changes to customer service on trains and at stations, which aim to make our employees more visible and of greater assistance to passengers.

Regrettably, our trade unions have indicated that they are not in agreement with these changes, so I am writing to provide you with background information in light of the potential for industrial action which may affect some of your constituents over the coming months. We believe any action would be unnecessary and counter-productive, and only harm the very people the railway is looking to better serve. We are continuing our engagement with the trade unions; have urged them to reconsider their early position and to engage with us as part of the consultation exercises we are running.

Despite this the trade unions have publicly indicated their concerns about three principal issues - our plans to evolve the role of the conductor to improve onboard customer service and train punctuality; our plans to evolve the roles of the ticket offices and gateline staff which, again, is intended to improve customer service; and our plans to extend some Gatwick Express services from 10 to 12 carriages to better meet the increasing number of customers travelling on the route.

We have made clear to employees and the trade unions that none of the above changes will result in either compulsory redundancies or any reduction in income for affected employees.

All of these changes are commitments in our franchise agreement with the Department for Transport.

Improving customer service on trains

We believe that on-board staff play a vital role in our customer service offering. Amongst other things they provide face-to-face customer service to passengers, and offer a reassuring presence on trains. On some older trains the conductor role will remain, but on the modern rolling stock we are introducing to keep up with the rapidly growing demand on our services, there is the opportunity to review the traditional conductor role to offer a more visible service to a greater number of customers, travel on more parts of the network, deliver high-quality customer service, and also check tickets.

This new role will not operate the doors of the train, a responsibility which will transfer to the driver, aided by modern CCTV offering them a clear view of every door on the train.

Over 60% of our services already run without traditional conductors operating the doors and have done on parts of the railway for the past 25 years. Thameslink and Great Northern have no conductors, and just under

Govia Thameslink Railway

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half of the Southern services currently operate in a similar manner. We are therefore proposing to extend a safe and proven operating model to the new fleet of trains.

Under the new arrangements we will be able to better meet customer needs by deploying staff where and when most needed, making them more visible to passengers. In addition to this, there will be a punctuality benefit. During service disruption we face issues with crew displacement; the proposed operating model will allow us to restore the service more rapidly for customers as the evolved role will not require "route knowledge" (as it does currently) and if necessary a driver alone would be able to run a train, as they currently do on other parts of the network.

Despite the fact we have guaranteed to our employees that there will be no compulsory redundancies nor any loss of income from these changes, the RMT union has notified us they will be balloting their conductor members for strike action from 6 to 19 April. Any strike could come as soon as seven days after this latter date.

Improving customer service at stations

A further improvement in customer service is planned by evolving the role of our ticket office staff and gateline staff at 83 of our busier stations, to offer a wider range of customer services from the concourse.

The different channels through which tickets are sold and the way customer service is provided at stations has radically changed over recent years. In particular, an increase in online sales; greater use of Ticket Vending Machines; the ever increasing use of Oyster and contactless payments along with the use of smartcard technology has resulted in a need for an alternative retail and customer experience model.

Despite scaremongering from the unions that stations will be unstaffed as a result of these changes, the reality is that they will actually be staffed for an additional 2,600 hours per week. Although some ticket offices will close, face to face help for passengers will be available, and for more time each day than it is now in most cases. Our staff will be more visible, accessible and readily available to help customers use the existing and new ticket vending machines, answer passenger enquiries, offer assistance to disabled passengers and help passengers buy the best ticket for their journey.

We know many of your constituents have provided feedback through the public consultation, and we are in discussion with London TravelWatch and Transport Focus to address their concerns as we continue to develop our proposals.

Again, we have guaranteed that there will be no compulsory redundancies and that no employees will suffer a loss of income. Further meetings are planned with the RMT and TSSA in April.

Longer trains for the Gatwick Express

We have recently started running new Class 387 Gatwick Express trains on this route. Starting in April, we are planning to start running 12 car trains on the route serving London to Gatwick Airport, with some services running onto Brighton. This will extend trains from the current 10 carriages to 12 on some services, offering greater overall capacity and a more comfortable travelling environment for passengers.

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Despite the obvious benefits of this change, the ASLEF union has indicated they are opposed to the introduction of these longer trains. They argue that they consider the extension of these services, which have always been operated solely by a driver, to amount to an extension of driver-only-operation, something they oppose as a matter of principle.

The Union's position is surprising as Gatwick Express has for many years operated without a conductor, and is already operating extended services from Gatwick to Brighton using 10 cars without a conductor. In addition to this, Thameslink services on the Brighton Main Line have operated 12 car trains between London and Brighton since 2011.

Our drivers have been trained to drive these new trains for a few months now, and we believe they are well prepared to do so. As a result, the new 12 carriage services will be introduced gradually from early April, and we await confirmation from ASLEF as to whether they will support and cooperate with the introduction of the new and longer trains.

Consulting with the trade unions

We continue to believe that any issues the trade unions have about our plans are best resolved through dialogue and discussion, and that industrial action is completely unnecessary. Regrettably, RMT has decided to call a ballot on potential industrial action against the changes to the conductor role. ASLEF has indicated its opposition to the longer Gatwick Express trains.

We will, of course, be urging our employees to vote against industrial action. As indicated above, the earliest possible date for any action would be 26 April.

Clearly, industrial action could have a significant effect on your constituents who rely on the railway service, and we will keep you up-to-date throughout the next steps of the consultation process with our trade unions.

Yours sincerely,



Dyan Crowther
Chief Operating Officer

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