



Hon Lilian Greenwood MP  
Chair, Transport Select Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

26<sup>th</sup> October 2018

**By Email and Post**

Dear Ms Greenwood,

**Re: Harpenden Train Cuts**

I am writing to you following your evidence sessions with the Secretary of State for Transport on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> October.

We are grateful to the Committee for taking evidence from the Harpenden Thameslink Commuters group earlier in your inquiry and I would like to thank Mr Stringer for specifically raising some of our concerns with the Secretary of State and his colleagues.

Having listened carefully to the evidence given to you and also reviewed the transcript, I felt it right to write to you again as some of the answers given raised concerns, specifically certain responses by Ruth Hannant, Director General for Rail, Department for Transport as explained further below.

I have copied this letter to the Secretary of State should he or Ms Hannant wish to reconsider or clarify her answers.

Line	Evidence given to the Committee	Comment by Harpenden Thameslink Commuters' Group
Q533	Graham Stringer: I am told, and we have had evidence, that some communities who lost their services, particularly on GTR—Harpenden is a good example—were not properly consulted. They were going to miss out on a number of trains to their station. It seems that the Department for Transport waived their obligation to consult in those circumstances.	
	Ruth Hannant: I do not think that is the case.	Ms Hannant is mistaken. The lack of consultation for Harpenden has already been (rightly so) conceded by the DFT. In particular it was conceded in the House of

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		<p>Commons on 18 April and the Rail Minister, Jo Johnson in seeking to explain the lack of consultation said would have been “disingenuous” to consult (Hansard Column 428). No doubt Ms Hannant will review the position and clarify her answer to the committee.</p>
	<p>In the case of GTR and Northern, the base timetable that was due to run in May was extensively consulted on. That was done by Northern in May 2017, and GTR ran one of the biggest consultation exercises an operator has ever carried out. They had over 25,000 responses over three consultation exercises and ran hundreds of events. That was for the base timetable.</p>	<p>The base timetable which was consulted on was for an improvement to services to Harpenden – not a reduction. In addition to the loss of services caused by the introduction of the “Bedford Express” services, Harpenden also lost stopping service which run on the Wimbledon Loop. As <a href="#">this</a> document demonstrates the base consultation included these services calling at Harpenden during peak times.</p> <p>Accordingly, at best, it is insulting to Harpenden passengers when senior rail officials are incorrect in their understanding and do not properly familiarise themselves with the key facts in preparation of giving evidence to the Committee.</p>
	<p>The issue you are alighting on is that due to the phasing decisions, and in Northern’s case due to the late changes to the timetable, there were changes to the timetable that had been heavily consulted on</p>	<p>The decision to run Bedford Express services fast through Harpenden is nothing to do with the phasing decision. The two are not linked in any way.</p>
	<p>and actually there were very few options available to the operators in those circumstances, because the timetables were very much driven by operational factors.</p>	<p>Ms Hannant’s response acknowledges that there were options and that in our view is key as Mr Johnson had said it was disingenuous to consult as there were no other options. So, frankly, the DfT and the government have been totally unclear and contradictory.</p>
	<p>Having a consultation at that point, given that options were not available, would have been a disingenuous thing for the operators to do.</p>	<p>We have demonstrated to GTR, DfT (and in our evidence to the Committee) that there were (and remain) viable alternatives to the stopping pattern of the Bedford Express services. Indeed, when we first suggested the alternate to a senior GTR executive in April, their response was that our solution would have been a better solution to the one which was to be implemented.</p>
	<p>What they have done subsequently,</p>	<p>No extra services have been introduced –</p>

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	<p>however, in both situations is to listen very carefully to passenger concerns that have been raised, and they have acted to introduce extra services where they can.</p>	<p>in fact current service still fail to meet even the low bar set in the May 2018 timetable.</p> <p>Furthermore Thameslink had confirmed in a rail meeting with St Albans District Council at which our group was an active participant that it would collate passenger numbers from the Bedford Express Services (as our Group considers that those trans are very lightly loaded which is visible when they pass through Harpenden) yet now in a type of volte face that we have become so accustomed to Thameslink are refusing to release those loading as, as they put it to us "Because we operate under a management contract, the DFT would need to give us their authority to share this information with others."</p>
	<p>For example, in the case of Harpenden, on balance, even though there were fewer trains, they were longer trains, and in total I think they only lost four carriages in the peak</p>	<p>GTR made this claim with respect to the full May 2018 timetable. Given that GTR are not delivering the full timetable this claim cannot be accurate.</p> <p>Irrespective, the May 2018 timetable reduces services during the busiest parts of the morning to times when they are of little use to regular commuters.</p>
	<p>but, given the concerns that were raised, the operator is introducing two extra services via Harpenden from December</p>	<p>The December 2018 timetable was already scheduled to run an additional slow service from Harpenden as a result of the phasing. It is disingenuous of Ms Hannant to imply to the committee that this was the result of GTR or the DfT "listening" to passenger concerns. The reality is for from it.</p> <p>The only additional service is the removal of the Bedford Express status on the 1851 ex-St Pancras. This service was indefensible from the outset since EMT run a fast train to Bedford just a few minutes later. (Again this was highlighted to GTR before its introduction in May and it is incredible that they are waiting until December to rectify the situation despite it causing a 30 minute service gap to many station during evening peak and completely at odds with Ms Hannant's claim that GTR is listening and responding to customers - below).</p>
	<p>What they have done subsequently, however, in both situations is to listen very</p>	<p>There are currently no extra services.</p>

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	<p>carefully to passenger concerns that have been raised, and they have acted to introduce extra services where they can. They have listened to concerns when they have been raised, but at the time, consultation on the specific operational changes, because of the issues we have been discussing, was not possible at that point.</p>	
	<p>Chris Grayling: On that particular route, an added complication around timetabling has been the modernisation of the midland main line, which has meant that there are slightly fewer services running up to 2020 while the work takes place.</p>	<p>The loss of one third of key services cannot reasonably be described as "slightly fewer".</p>
Q543	<p>Graham Stringer: The evidence we heard from passengers using Harpenden was that it was not just capacity in terms of extra carriages. It was trains at particular times that enabled them to get to work or wherever they were going. They were severely disadvantaged by that, and they stated, contrary to what you have just told us, that they were not properly consulted about that. There are always two parts to consultation, aren't there? There is listening to what people think about your proposals and communicating what the proposals were. They felt that those consultations were inadequate.</p>	
	<p>Ruth Hannant: As I said, GTR did not consult on the changes as a result of the phasing decision. That is because they thought that consultation would have been disingenuous, because there weren't any options, but they absolutely did communicate those changes to passengers. I appreciate that those are two slightly different things.</p>	<p>Ms Hannant contradicts her previous answer twice in this response. As a matter of fact, as we have set out, there were alternative options. In terms of communicating with customers in Harpenden, GTR presented the timetable changes as an improvement. Even at a public meeting arranged by Bim Afolami MP in March 2018, they initially attempted to portray the new timetable in this way. It is not true to say that GTR communicated openly or honestly with Harpenden Commuters about the cuts to services. They even threatened to call the police to arrest two ladies from our group handing out leaflets highlighting the cut backs in April 2018.</p>
	<p>Chris Grayling: The truth is that there have had to be changes. There are decisions around Bedford, St Albans and Harpenden</p>	<p>For a decade Harpenden commuters have experienced disruption whilst the Thameslink programme works were</p>

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	about trying to provide in the interim period, while the midland main line work is taking place, a timetable that will be more substantial when those works are completed in 2020.	carried out with the promise of improved services from May 2018.

Once again, may I thank the Committee for its interest in the problems of Harpenden commuters. I look forward to reading your report in due course.

Yours sincerely,



**Emily Ketchin**

On behalf of the Harpenden Thameslink Commuters' Group

cc: Graham Stringer MP  
 Bim Afolami MP  
 Rt Hon Chris Grayling, Secretary of State for Transport