

GTR Letter to Alistair Burt MP, 26th July 2019: Appendix A

This document has been produced by Govia Thameslink Railway in response to various questions and information requests that arose from the public meeting hosted by Alistair Burt MP on Friday 12th July 2019. Tom Moran (TPM), Managing Director of Great Northern & Thameslink Railways (GN/TL) undertook to respond formally to these requests in 2 weeks, this being Friday 26th July.

This document is addressed by Mr Burt and intended to be shared with relevant attendee(s) of the meeting.

Please contact Patrick Ladbury, Stakeholder Manager for GNL/TL, if you have any questions regarding the information below. patrick.ladbury@gtrailway.com

Please note that we believe the information below to be accurate on the date of issuing, which is Friday 26th July.

1. 'Skip stopping'

It was clear that attendees are unhappy with the practice of 'skip stopping' (i.e. running a service non-stop through Arlesey in order to make up delays on the service) and wanted it to stop. There was also a very clear sense that Arlesey was being skip stopped more than other stations, and disproportionately so. This has been an ongoing discussion between GTR and the Rail User Group – Kim Griffin, Head of Network Operations at GTR's Railway Operating Centre (ROC), attended a previous RUG meeting to harie the ROC's operational principles regarding skip stopping and why it is necessary.

Following a phone call with Alistair Burt and Steve White in June, GTR added the first weekend train into London from Arlesey to our list of protected status trains. The protected status trains are a set of services that we seek to operate regardless of any wider disruption. GTR also committed to strengthen the protection of Arlesey services during times of disruption with a minimum service level of one train per hour wherever possible.

TPM was clear that, while we have not, nor would not, commit to ending this practice as it is sometimes important to skip stop to minimise customer disruption overall, we would of course provide all relevant information and look at the suggestions and respond.

Questions/requests and GTR response

a) Can GTR share the data on failure to call for both Arlesey and Sandy?

We are happy to provide this data. Our data, which covers the period from the introduction of the new May timetable on 19th May to 13th July, demonstrates the extent to which Arlesey and Sandy are affected by failure to stops at their stations: 1.1% and 1.2% of services respectively. To put this in context, this means that, of the 338 stations across GTR, Arlesey is the 31st most affected station by failure to stops, and Sandy the 20th.

Failure to stops are caused by number of things - sometimes we simply cannot stop at a station, for example due to a trespass, and sometimes we chose to in order to recover the service. We have provided the total numbers here for full transparency as the impact on customers is the same regardless of the reason.

As we discussed in the meeting, choosing to 'skip stop' is a measure we only take when it is necessary to get our train service back on track and minimise the disruption for all customers. It follows that this is only necessary when we have disruption in the first place – this has been more of a problem in the last few months due to driver availability. This has been an issue due to a combination of take up of rest day working being lower than anticipated and slightly fewer trainee drivers having qualified than originally planned. This is exacerbated by us being in the summer period, at which time holiday leave is higher than it is at other times of the year.

To mitigate this has required us taking a number of actions: pausing some driver training to boost the numbers out on the network and postponing non-essential activities for drivers to further increase driver numbers. While this is happening, we have 16 drivers on Great Northern and 30 drivers on Thameslink, completing their training by September which will improve the situation.

As a result of a review I undertook since joining the organisation, I believe we are likely to regain high confidence in delivering all our timetabled services in September as, by that point, we will have more fully qualified drivers, more trained drivers on the new fleet and routes and a reduced level of leave. However, we are likely to see some cancellations, particularly on Saturdays, until then.

b) Can GTR place a limit on the number of times failure to stop occurs at Arlesey during any one period?

In addition to the actions agreed with my colleague, Steve White (COO for GTR) during his recent call with you, we have followed up on Mr Burt's request that we put a maximum limit per period. The ROC already operates a set of principles that define when stations are skip stopped including the commitment from Steve White to protect, whenever possible, a minimum service level of one train per hour for Arlesey and Sandy during disruption.

We have formally set up this review and the ROC is currently modelling the impact on the entire network including Arlesey and Sandy. Once we have that, we can decide whether we will make a change. The ROC makes a decision not to take stops out at these stations in some or all circumstances regardless of the impact on the overall service recovery. We will update you with a clear decision on this by 9th August, i.e. one month after our initial meeting.

c) What is the timeframe for ceasing the swap over of drivers at Finsbury Park?

We do currently swap over drivers at Finsbury Park. For reference, this is because drivers have to be qualified on not just the right trains but also the right routes, and currently this is not the case (for example, a driver from Cambridge depot may be qualified to drive between Cambridge and Finsbury Park but no further).

Swapping over of driver should not result in delays but this does sometimes happen – we work hard to stop this.

We will not cease swap over as it would not make sense for all drivers to be qualified on all routes but we are looking to reduce it as we extend 'route learning'. This would be post September when we have completed our major period of driver qualification training.

d) Is it possible to turn trains around at Kings Cross during disruption as all the other services on the line call at Kings Cross?

This is not operationally possible due to the practicalities of how we turn trains round. Only platforms 0-8 at Kings Cross are able to accommodate the 12-coach trains which serve Arlesey and Sandy and these platforms are used by LNER which has a turn-around time of up to 60 minutes. This means there are very few occasions when there is a spare platform for 12 carriage trains to divert to Kings Cross during disruption.

This was demonstrated during yesterday's extreme disruption to all lines due to high temperatures – all platforms were full with LNER trains which could not move, making it impossible for us to use those platforms.

e) Is GTR's performance measured differently through the core stations compared to other stations?

Performance is measured equally across all locations, and the calculations are the same for every measure. However, some busier stations may influence results more because there are more trains contributing towards the measurement scores.

2. Information during disruption

The meeting discussed that passenger information during disruption should be improved. TPM agreed with this aim.

There were no specific questions relating to disruption information – the general request was for an update on what GTR is doing to improve this situation

Questions/requests and GTR response

Improving information to passengers at times of disruption is a priority for us and we have worked closely with the Arlesey Rail User Group (RUG) and our Railway Operating Centre (ROC) to develop advice for Arlesey passengers on the quickest way to get home during disruption. The advice has been posted on the RUG's facebook page and we have also shared it with the new Sandy RUG. It is at Appendix 1 of this document

In addition to developing this advice we have also worked with our Area Manager and our Railway Operating Centre Review to put on a minibus at Hitchin station as soon as two consecutive trains are cancelled to help passengers back to Arlesey during disruption.

3. Ticketing issues

Attendees were critical of ticketing availability at Arlesey station, particularly staffing of the ticket office. For reference, Arlesey station ticket office is open 06:45-12.05 Monday to Saturday morning and we also have two Ticket Vending Machine (TVMs) which are available at all times, situated on the London-bound platform.

Questions/requests and GTR response

We have been working to improve ticket availability and reliability at Arlesey and have made some specific changes this year in response to feedback and ticketing issues. These include:

- Moving our supply of spare equipment so Arlesey now has replacement tablets on site which can be used immediately if there is a problem with the machine, rather than waiting for equipment to be delivered from other stations;
- Making Arlesey a priority station for redeploying staff from other stations in the event of staff shortages. This is designed to ensure that, as much as is possible, we have enough colleagues at the station to help with tickets;
- Installing a new 4G router at Arlesey to improve the reliability of the Ticket Vending Machines and the new TOMTIS ticketing machine in the ticket office. As there have been a few incidents of the machine 'freezing', we are having the machine checked to see whether switching to another 4G provider would help – if it will, we will do this promptly;
- Introducing a new logging process with our supplier that records faults and issues with the ticketing machine which will help with a quicker response time. The only issue logged in the last three weeks has been regarding a vandalised screen which highlights the improvement in performance of the ticketing machines since the introduction of the 4G router; and
- Asked staff to pro-actively manage the queues at the TVMs on the platform, particularly in the morning peak. The TVMs have been on the platform for the last ten years and we have had no recorded safety incidents during this time. However, we are conscious that passengers have expressed concerns and the station is getting busier and so have asked staff to pro-actively manage the TVM queues.

Please see below (4. Station Improvements) for our response regarding the request for an additional TVM on the northbound platform).

4. Station improvement requirements

Attendees suggested and requested various improvements to Arlesey station. This was both in the context of improving the station overall, and in response to the question of how the money from the Passenger Benefit Fund should be spent. TPM made the point that the approach GTR was taking for the PBF was to ask customers what was most important to them so GTR could prioritise the money (£80k) on what was most important to passengers. A number of people made the point that this money should not be spent on any 'business as usual' improvements that should be done in any case.

During the discussion, PL was able to confirm that a new shelter would be installed in the next 2 months.

Questions/requests and GTR response

We hope the responses below demonstrate we have acted on previous discussions with the Rail User Group and the feedback from the meeting and are making progress in improving facilities. Some of these actions are ongoing and we will update you on progress as soon as we have it.

a) Can another Ticket Vending Machine be installed on the other (northbound) platform) and one of the existing TVMs be moved from the platform?

We have followed up on this request and we have already conducted one site visit to scope moving one of the machines off the platform. We also have a further visit booked in for our Retail Systems Manager to visit Arlesey on Monday 29th July to look at the power supply and whether we can move the machine to the northbound platform. We will update shortly once we have this assessment completed.

We have also agreed that our supplier will hold spare ticketing equipment at Arlesey station to prevent unacceptable delays if there are any future ticketing issues at the station.

- b) Can the bicycle facilities be improved at Arlesey by having a) better lighting around the bike racks and/or b). working CCTV cameras to cover the cycle racks**

We have arranged for a site visit by our station facilities manager on Monday 29th July to review the lighting and security provision for the cycle racks at Arlesey and recommend what improvements are needed. We will update you following that meeting.

- c) Please provide details on the size of the new shelter and the timetable for installing it.**

Work has already started in delivering the new 3x1 bay shelter (1.6m x 4.8m) with a scheduled completion date for the first week in September

- d) Can new information screens be installed?**

GTR are working with Network Rail on a project to improve customer information screens across its routes. New customer information screens are due to be installed at Biggleswade at the end of this year and at Sandy and Arlesey towards the end of 2020. We have asked Network Rail if it is possible to install screens at Sandy and Arlesey at an earlier date in 2020.

- e) Can an extra tannoy speaker be added to the end of the southbound platform as customers cannot hear announcements?**

This is also part of the site visit on Monday 29th July, on which we will report shortly.

Additional station improvements

Sandy

- We will be refurbishing the footbridge both inside and outside. This will be done by Network Rail – they have carried out maintenance reports and work is scheduled for early 2020.

Biggleswade

- We are currently waiting for Network Rail to provide a project timeline for the Access for All grant to install lifts at Biggleswade. We will update you as soon as we have any further information.
- We extended the Biggleswade car park by 40 spaces earlier this year.

Further questions

The meeting covered a wide range of issues and the following questions were specific ones raised by one or more attendees.

Questions/requests and GTR response

- a) How many new drivers are being trained up by September, broken down between Thameslink and Great Northern?**

We have 46 drivers completing their training over the summer with 16 drivers on Great Northern and 30 drivers on Thameslink.

- b) Regarding car parking at Hitchin, can you provide an update on any plans?**

There are no current plans to extend the car parking capacity at Hitchin. An initial meeting between Network Rail, GTR and contractors took place in May to look at the possibility of developing a second entrance for Hitchin station with some additional car parking space. However, no further design or costing work has been carried out on the project to date.

c) When will GTR have a service to be proud of for the three stations in his constituency: Sandy, Arlesey and St. Neots?

We want to be clear that we need to improve significantly. We believe that the new rolling stock (due in by end October) and our investment in more drivers (training due to be complete by September) will make a noticeable difference to customers.

d) Why do trains no longer run straight to Welwyn Garden City from Arlesey?

NB: This was a specific request from one attendee, who asked for a personal response from TPM. Tom has emailed the individual with the information, which is below.

GTR undertook a major consultation regarding the introduction of the May 2018 timetable. As part of the consultation we looked at the top 6 destination stations from each station on our routes and used this information to design the new timetable so it resulted in serving as many of those stations as possible. Welwyn Garden City was not one of the top 6 destinations from Arlesey and, as a result, we did not prioritise Welwyn-Arlesey services in the timetable design. As you will be aware, the service to Arlesey now runs on the fast line north of London which means you can still reach Welwyn, but do have to change trains.

Appendix 1: Advice to passengers in the event of disruption

Arlesey's ordinary Thameslink service is the 9J service group which operates between Peterborough and Horsham. When there is a significant disruptive incident affecting the 9J service group such as a signal failure, the team at GTR's operating centre will try to bring in a contingency measure to ensure that Arlesey is still served.

This cannot be guaranteed, as it depends on the nature of the incident, but as passengers you should be aware that GTR will start to try to bring in contingency measures if it expects disruption to two or more back-to-back Arlesey 9J services. These measures include placing additional stops on the fast Great Northern trains operating between King's Cross and Peterborough and operating a minibus service from Hitchin.

The fast Great Northern trains depart from King's Cross, and the next scheduled stop is Stevenage. If the GTR control team has placed additional stops on the fast service, these will show on www.nationalrail.co.uk

In terms of advice, if you find yourself at St Pancras International or King's Cross and can see that there is disruption to the 9J service group, you can:

1. Connect to the free St Pancras WiFi.
2. Use the www.nationalrail.co.uk website or free app.
3. Set the "where from?" to "London – [all stations]" – this will show departures from both St Pancras International (9J services) and any additional stops put on the fast King's Cross to Peterborough trains.
4. If there are additional stops on the King's Cross services, walk across to King's Cross.
5. Consider asking a member of staff to search for additional information specific to Arlesey on "Tyrell Check". "Tyrell Check" is a live stream of messages from GTR Control to all staff and will contain the latest information.

If you are at a different station to St Pancras International or King's Cross, or if it is clear that the 9J services are disrupted, information on alternatives is not yet available and you do not wish to wait for the next 9J train, consider using any fast service (no intermediate stops) to Stevenage. Stevenage is a scheduled calling point for both the 9J service group and the fast Great Northern King's Cross to Peterborough trains. At Stevenage, you will have the option of connecting with a 9J, connecting with a different train if additional stops can be added, or are in close proximity to Hitchin if the minibus service is running. If it is late at night, staff at Stevenage will also arrange for a taxi for you to be able to complete your journey.

NB: This advice is the same as that provide by Karen Gregson, our area station manager for Arlesey, to Ceri Eaton one of the attendees at the meeting.