

News and analysis

Commuter chaos at UK railways



The news

British commuters have faced hundreds of train cancellations and severe delays since Northern Rail and Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) rolled out the “biggest timetable change in generations” on 20 May. Instead of improving services, the widespread overhaul sparked chaos on platforms in England’s north and south east. At the time *QW* went to press, the problems continued for weeks.

Northern has removed 165 train services a day until 29 July to improve reliability. GTR rescheduled every train in its franchise, which includes Southern, Thameslink, Great Northern and Gatwick Express. A GTR spokesman told the BBC that about 230 of its 3,600 daily services have been removed from the network to create a “more consistent timetable”.

A shortage of qualified train drivers, late upgrades and delayed timetable approvals have been blamed for the major disruption.

“We always said that delivering the biggest timetable change in generations would be challenging – but we are sorry that we have not been able to deliver the service that passengers expect,” said Charles Horton, CEO of GTR.

The views

The disruption has sparked public outrage. According to the BBC, about 25 newspapers across the north of England called on the prime minister to solve the crisis.

In a letter to UK Transport Secretary Chris Grayling, London Mayor Sadiq Khan said: “These changes were billed as a serious increase and improvement in services, but instead it has resulted in chaos, impacting terribly on passengers, both in and outside London, and damaging our international reputation as a global city.”

Grayling announced plans for passenger compensation and an inquiry into whether the companies breached their contracts.

Emily Yates, co-founder of the Association of British Commuters, told *The Guardian*: “GTR are amending the timetable at the last minute and then cancelling loads of trains anyway. This is not good practice from any perspective. They knew that this chaos was coming, failed to prepare and failed to warn passengers in the undeniable public interest.”

“There is no faith in this company whatsoever – even the communications we get, we no longer believe are true or valid.”

The analysis

Liesel von Metz, CQP MCQI, is Director and Principal Consultant at TGD Solutions Ltd. She shared her personal views with *QW*: “The UK Department for Transport (DfT) was slow to respond when industry specialists wanted to manage the risk by a phased implementation – a clear failure in DfT leadership, combined with an inability to properly understand the context and take heed of the needs of interested parties.

“Risk-based thinking was not effective. For example, not addressing the lack of capacity of the driving function. With train operating companies minimising both numbers of drivers and number of routes each driver signs, the lack of opportunity for learning new routes was an obvious risk.

“The swift moves to blame were characteristic of a lack of maturity in the rail industry culture, where many senior managers dislike potential problems (risks) being highlighted. If the rail industry had a mature quality approach which drove good leadership, an understanding of wider context, and a focus on meeting and exceeding customer (passenger) requirements, this meltdown could – and should – have been prevented.”

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