



Helen Whately MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

5 December 2017

Dear Helen

Thank you for your letter of 28 November regarding the Thameslink timetables which will be phased in from next year. I fully understand your position that any postponement of new services is unwelcome and I know that a meeting is being arranged to discuss these matters further. However in advance of that I thought it would be helpful to set out the context behind the recently announced changes to the introduction schedule for the timetables.

The Thameslink Programme is a hugely complex and demanding project involving the delivery of major station upgrades, the introduction of a brand-new fleet of 115 new trains, the construction of two maintenance depots, the introduction of new signalling and control technology and the remapping of rail services across the South-East region. The investment of £7 billion will deliver a massive boost in rail capacity, open up new journey opportunities, improve service reliability and speed up journey times for many passengers.

Given the scale and complexity of the Programme, the DfT requested us to undertake an evaluation of options to phase-in the introduction of the new timetables. The objective was to ensure that the benefits of the programme are delivered as early as possible but not prejudiced by disruption associated with too much change being introduced at once. In evaluating options for phasing in the timetables we adopted a number of overarching principles including; ensuring the continuation of services on routes already served, the early introduction of Southern element of the timetable because of its wider benefit to improving performance across the region, a focus on ensuring proper integration with Southeastern services, providing sufficient opportunities for technology to bed in and the allowance of sufficient time for structured 'lessons learnt' reviews after the introduction of each timetable phase. In view of these principles and the impact on other operators services across the South-East region we proposed a phased introduction plan to DfT based on six monthly introduction steps aligned with the industry's normal timetable change dates in May and December.

This plan was reviewed by DfT officials and presented to Ministers who approved it. It has also been endorsed by the Thameslink Programme Industry Readiness Board chaired by Chris Gibb who led the Government's review into the performance of Southern network. This Board includes representatives from all affected industry parties including Network Rail, other train operators the ORR and DfT.

The introduction of timetables on a phased basis is consistent with best practice in introducing major change programmes. As you may be aware the National Audit Office have recently reviewed the delivery of the Thameslink Programme and concluded that the DfT's recent decision to phase-in the timetable "...is a sensible step to protect value for money and passengers from further disruption, and which draws on lessons learned from other major programmes". They noted however that challenges remain not least with the relatively poor state of the railway infrastructure in the South-East which may hamper the delivery of benefits. To address this Network Rail are continuing to invest £300m improve asset reliability across the core Thameslink routes.

Whilst the DfT's decision means that some of the improvements will be delivered later than anticipated we believe that this is the responsible approach to take. The choices made on phasing ensure the delivery of benefits to the greatest possible number of passengers whilst ensuring that the risks are managed as effectively as possible. The resulting plan means that 70% of programme benefits in terms of capacity will be delivered in May 2018 with benefits for all regions across the expanded Thameslink network.

The introduction of services on the Maidstone East route is now planned for December 2019, rather than December 2018. As an entirely new service its postponement was preferred to reducing existing services elsewhere. Southeastern's existing Maidstone East peak services will continue to run between Ashford International and London Blackfriars so there is no reduction to current services.

Other new services were also reviewed using the criteria explained above. For example, the new half-hourly Thameslink route from Rainham via Kent Medway Towns to London Blackfriars. However, this service will come in as planned as its introduction with additional new trains allows Southeastern the flexibility to use their existing coaches to lengthen other metro services used by Kent passengers. As there are only three existing Maidstone East trains that run into Blackfriars in the morning, and two in the evening, replacing these with Thameslink trains would not release as many Southeastern coaches.

When the programme is complete, Kent will benefit significantly in a way that was not originally envisaged. The Maidstone East route was anticipated as a peak service, but our strategic planning team reviewed this and was able to prove a case for greater frequency and capacity on the route leading to the all-day service of two trains per hour, Monday to Saturday, which is now planned.

As mentioned previously The Thameslink Programme - including the complete redesign of the timetables will deliver substantially improved rail services across the South East region. Ideally there would be no postponement of any of the benefits, but after careful assessment by the industry, this amended implementation plan has been supported by Government and all industry parties as being the most appropriate way forward.

We have updated Kent County Council, Maidstone Borough Council and other stakeholders along the route about these changes. I look forward to meeting with you. I will be joined by Phil Hutchinson my Head of Strategic Timetable Planning.

Yours sincerely



Charles Horton
Chief Executive Officer