



The Association of British Commuters

The British public should know that southern commuters have experienced a year-long nightmare with the collapse of Southern Rail. We have desperately called for government action and have been repeatedly ignored; even while many of us have lost our jobs, or relocated our homes because of it.

Our thousands-strong network of commuters has been at the front-lines throughout, and with the complete lack of government action on the matter, many have put all their efforts into investigating the true story behind the crisis.

What is rotten in Southern Rail started long before the current industrial action; which now takes place on top of a broken infrastructure, chronic understaffing and a company whose relations with the public have irretrievably broken.

The following questions have been crowdsourced from the passengers most affected by this most unprecedented collapse of a rail service.

The industrial dispute – a matter of urgency

- Why can't a resolution to the dispute like the Scotrail solution be achieved? Reportedly, such an agreement was achieved between Southern Rail and the RMT in August, with the RMT calling off strike action. The offer was then suddenly withdrawn – was this blocked by the DfT? If not, who within GTR made the decision?
- Why can't a solution to the dispute confining DOO to the Brighton mainline be achieved, giving time for the specific needs of the rest of the network to be addressed? Reportedly, such an agreement was achieved between ASLEF and Southern Rail in November, and then withdrawn – was this blocked by the DfT? If not, who within GTR made the decision?
- Why can't a truce be established where the implementation of DOO is paused for a period of 12 months? What is the urgency to implement DOO at a time when the company is already in a state of collapse, suffering from chronic understaffing, and seems to have no proper plan for implementing the technology?
- The RMT and ASLEF unions are adamant that the manner in which DOO is being implemented is unsafe; and the Rail Delivery Group equally insistent that DOO is safe. Given the not unreasonable doubts over the independence of the RSSB report from the interests of the rail industry; shouldn't the DfT commission a further, fully independent safety report of the technology and settle the question once and for all? Such a move might also be incorporated into an effort to call a truce to the industrial dispute.

Govia Thameslink Railway

- For commuters in the South, it is hard to imagine a greater rail catastrophe than the one we are living through. How bad do things have to get before Govia is considered in default – at what point does the crisis reach proportions that the Department for Transport considers reason to withdraw the franchise?
- Should GTR be awarded Force Majeure when industrial action was entirely predictable even in 2015? Why does Rail Minister Paul Maynard claim that he “cannot discern” the reasons for the strikes when RMT and ASLEF stated they would take industrial action in November 2015 and the industry-led RSSB report itself predicts it? Industrial action was a virtual certainty and the reasons for it should have been consulted on, and planned for.
- Does the Department for Transport have a feasible operator of last resort? Is a change of subcontractor not now a matter of urgency given the absolute toxicity and outright danger involved in the breakdown of relations with the public? If Govia or their shareholders themselves insist on leaving the management contract, do you have a suitable plan in place to take over?
- Why are the Government so insistent on blocking TfL from operating the Metro services when TfL have a proven track record of improving National Rail services in the capital?
- Now that Department for Transport has acknowledged GTR's performance is "unacceptably poor", will Govia and its parent companies be excluded from consideration for any future franchises, as Claire Perry suggested in July? Will the DfT prevent the Govia subsidiary, London & West Midlands Railway Ltd, from being awarded the West Midlands franchise in June 2017?

Problems with the implementation of Driver Only Operation

- Is the Department for Transport aware that Govia has not sufficiently planned for the implementation of DOO on Southern Rail? We ask them to address the following:
 - last minute-changes to the OBS role on 11th November, indicating a complete lack of planning for disability access.
 - incidents of camera failure on older 377 trains; preventing departure even when a second member of staff is present. Will Govia's directive of 26th November, requiring the driver to exit the train to perform dispatch, not lead to further delays on the network?
 - the specific needs of various rural stations, which have not been adequately addressed. Even a major station such as Horsham does not have adequate lighting to allow a train operating DOO to depart from platform 2 during the hours of darkness.
 - access requirements for the disabled, which were almost entirely absent from the original RSSB report on DOO. No adequate provisions have since been made to ensure the right to 'turn up and go travel' on the network.

Disability Access on Southern Rail

- The Transport Select Committee commented in its Sixth Report that “no official impact assessment has been made of the potential effects of DOO on disabled people’s access to the railway”. We now notice that there is a new map on the 377 trains indicating that disabled people must book in advance for assistance if they wish to travel. We believe this constitutes a permanent and ongoing breach of The Equality Act, inhibiting the right to ‘turn up and go’ travel.
- The Transport Select Committee also recommended that the Department for Transport should make a proper assessment of the impact of DOO on disabled passengers. Is this now underway and who has been appointed to do this? Are they independent of the railway industry/TOCs, and will this involve consultation with disabled passengers themselves?

Compensation

- The taxpayer-funded compensation of one month’s travel for season ticket holders barely scratches the surface of the economic damage, loss of earnings and extra expenses that commuters in the South are still suffering. What more will the Minister do to compensate the public, and who will be footing the bill for this?
- Why are taxpayers footing the bill for compensation – will Govia be penalised in any way for the massive effect on the economy, and thousands of individual livelihoods?
- What compensation will be given to the thousands of passengers within the travelcard zones who use Oyster or contactless PAYG?
- What compensation will be arranged for part-time rail users and the self-employed?
- Will fares on the Southern network be frozen in January? Given the complete breakdown of a functioning rail service, this is surely the very least that passengers deserve.

Franchising Policy

- What are the key factors in deciding which bidder to use and how are these factors weighed? When will the procurement practices of the DfT become transparent to the public, especially in the case of future “management contract” models?
- What accountability process is in place to measure the impact and integrity of civil service decisions? If there isn’t one, what will you do about it, specifically?
- Will Govt commit to having passengers on the new regional rail boards (as they agreed to passenger representatives on the Chris Gibb project board) and demonstrate that they have committed to a new era of transparency and public consultation in rail policy?
- The practice of understaffing, especially at such extreme levels as demonstrated by Southern Rail, quite clearly inhibits the responsiveness essential to an over-capacity network. Is the chronic understaffing policy of Southern Rail suggestive of a wider practice that should be urgently looked at?