

To: iain.stewart.mp@parliament.uk

Subject: Ongoing disruption to travel on the Marston Vale Line

Dear Iain

I am writing to you as Chair of the Bedford to Bletchley Rail Users Association and because you are MP for the area in which I live.

I would like to bring to your attention recent disruption suffered by passengers on the Marston Vale railway line which runs between Bedford and Bletchley. Recently there has been heavy disruption to passenger services on the line. This is illustrated by the following. Between 1st June and 23rd July there have been delays or cancellations on 31 out of 45 running days; reasons for these were – train faults (19), crew shortages (10), signalling problems (4), operational incidents (3), trespassers on the line (3), level crossing barrier faults (2), police incident (1), and congestion (1).

I am sure you will agree this is unacceptable and we believe it is causing genuine hardship. The line is used by many people have no alternative transport and I have evidence that it has caused hardship in terms of loss of earnings and missed medical appointments. The line which has seen growth in passenger numbers in excess of national trends over the past few years now losing those hard won users because of a lack of reliability - others are simply reigned to a poor service - they should be better served.

The major cause is the unreliability of new (or more strictly refurbished) trains- these are upcycled former underground trains that have been produced by Viviarail who have converted them to diesel electric operation. Secondary issues have been a lack of staff to service an ambitious new timetable introduced by London Northwestern in May, and inability of Network Rail to fully staff the signalling centre which serves the line. The remaining issues are perhaps in line with more usual events.

Many are blaming the train operator London Northwestern Railway for the current state of affairs and we agree that as train operating company blame lies most directly with them. They have been poor at communicating the issues at the very least and it might have been possible for them to provide alternative trains although this is hampered by constraints imposed by franchising arrangements. Whilst the Association does not see the train operator as blameless we believe that the situation is a symptom of the wider national picture, where it appears that the current arrangements for rail franchising do not serve rail users well. Rail Users might be better served by a longer franchises, which are not exclusively selected by the Department of Transport but by a group in which all stakeholders in railway service are represented. Contracts placed with train manufacturers should reflect some expectation that they will mitigate failures caused by their unreliable new trains during their introductory phase.

We do of course realise that the Williams Rail Review will shortly report on the future of the railway network and await its findings. We also acknowledge that some, including members of the Association might support a return of the railways to public ownership.

For the moment can I ask whether you might bring the plight of rail users on the Marston Vale line to Paul Maynard and that Grant Shapps is also made aware of the situation. We would hope that they in turn might engage with the Department for Transport more widely and would hope that both the issue of train reliability and staffing issues be taken up with the train operator (and where appropriate the train manufacturer) and that Network Rail are reminded of their obligations with regard to signalling and level crossings. We would also ask that the DfT take note of this occurrence and consider it against a background where we believe the current method of awarding rail franchises and the length and goals of those awards do not appear to be acting in the best interests of rail users

Best wishes

Dr Philip Warner

Chair Bedford to Bletchley Rail Users Association