



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

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Department for Transport  
Great Minster House  
33 Horseferry Road  
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I write regarding a number of ongoing and pressing issues that are having a considerable impact on passengers travelling with Southeastern.

As you know very well from our previous meetings, as well as from those with colleagues whose constituencies are similarly served by Southeastern, the south east rail corridor into central London includes some of the busiest lines in the country. With no underground as an alternative, local passengers – many of whom work in the city - are entirely dependent on a franchise they have no confidence in, and which, despite frequent and severe overcrowding, has not procured any additional rolling stock since 2009. Given that even that last addition consisted of high speed trains which do not directly serve the suburban network area, and that passenger numbers have increased by 30 per cent since Southeastern took over the running of the franchise in 2006, this issue is a priority for commuters.

Responding to a debate I tabled on 28 January last year the former Rail Minister publically assured passengers that a decision would be made by Spring 2016, and in a subsequent debate on 2 March 2016 said 'I am bound and determined to get new rolling stock on the line by the end of this year.' This is a commitment that has been reaffirmed in numerous meetings and Transport Questions since, and has understandably led rail users to expect that a long overdue solution will be brought forward as a matter of urgency.

While I appreciate that there have been complications in the various proposals Southeastern have put forward, and no firm guarantees on the number of stock had been made, myself and colleagues were led to believe at our meeting on 21 November that a business plan for class 377 trains would almost certainly be agreed, subject to GTR receiving their new class 700 stock from Siemens. Indeed, in your letter to me of 14 November you confirmed that suitable depots and stabling facilities, including at Slade Green, would provide sufficient capacity for additional rolling stock.

It was therefore very disappointing to see your response of 16 January to a Written Parliamentary Question tabled by Heidi Alexander MP, in which you state that these proposals are no longer deliverable because depot related costs have escalated significantly. I would be grateful if you can confirm what exactly these unforeseen costs are, and whether it is due to a substantial underestimate of stabling costs on the part of Network Rail that this much needed expansion to capacity has been jeopardised?



I have set out very clearly my views on the Secretary of State's decision not to devolve responsibility for metro services to Transport for London (TfL) once current franchises are due for renewal. I am quite certain this is a view that is shared by the majority of commuters in London, who will, I fear, judge the Government's decision with considerable cynicism given one of the justifications for blocking TfL's proposals was that it could not guarantee extra capacity. To see that the Department has now, in such quick succession, failed to resolve this problem in a timely manner itself is incredibly disappointing.

I also have serious concerns about a number of recent incidents on the local network, most notably the freight derailment at Lewisham on 24 January. I believe most passengers appreciate that, on occasions, minor delays will be caused for a variety of reasons, and I of course understand that considerable effort was needed to remove the two derailed wagons and 30 tonnes of sand, as well as rebuild a portion of the track following this incident. However, the subsequent disruption this caused passengers throughout the entire week cannot be emphasised enough, and I would urge you to carefully consider the findings of the current investigation being carried out by the Rail Accident Investigation Branch and publish it in full as soon as possible.

Ultimately, we need a more responsive, flexible rail network that can overcome delays and setbacks. The fact that near empty London-bound trains, much to the frustration of disrupted passengers, still passed through stations like Grove Park without stopping is a clear indication that, on the contrary, customers are continuing to be let down by rigid timetabling and a system that seems incapable of foresight or contingency planning. A similar situation occurs almost every Monday morning due to inexcusable, unexplained overrunning engineering work. It will require tangible improvements on the ground to convince passengers that the measures being implemented by Network Rail to address these problems are not just warm words.

I would be grateful for your thoughts on these issues, and, as ever, would welcome the opportunity to discuss them with you in person. I am copying this letter to David Statham, the Managing Director of Southeastern, as well as John Halsall, the local Route Managing Director at Network Rail.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Bob Neill', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

**Bob Neill MP**