



Ian Mearns MP

Working for Gateshead

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The Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London
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12 June 2018

Dear Secretary of State,

During the past month over 2000 Northern Rail trains have been cancelled completely. A further 2000 or so have been “part cancelled” and hundreds of services have been confined to inadequately short trains. These statistics show how clear it is that Northern Rail is yet another failing franchise.

Northern Rail’s passengers, our constituents, have been left in the lurch, with cancellations and delays causing complete chaos. We in the North have passengers who cannot travel to work, children who cannot travel to school, with some commuters reporting that more than 70% of their journeys have been delayed over the past six months.

Northern Rail was awarded the franchise in 2016 under the stipulation that the outdated pacer trains would be phased out by 2019, along with other improvements and extra services being introduced. We are sure that you will be aware that these things have not yet happened.

Your announcement that improving Northern Rail’s service is the Department of Transport’s ‘number one performance priority’ is welcome, but it is crucial that this aspiration is quickly followed by positive action to relieve the travelling misery that our constituents are enduring.

We hope that you are also willing to make regular statements to the House to allow those of us who represent Northern Rail’s passengers to question the Government on your plans, which are of a huge significance to so many of our constituents.

The problems with Northern Rail should have been dealt with long before now. It should not have taken the situation to reach such critical levels before the Department for Transport woke up to what is quite demonstrably a system which is simply failing.

There are significant failings at an operational level as train operators have struggled to recruit new drivers and train existing drivers in the appropriate route knowledge. Like Network Rail,

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train operators have had two years to prepare for these changes.

Arriva Northern Rail have not had an overtime agreement with the train drivers' union ASLEF since February, which clearly restricts the company's operational flexibility. It should be noted that overtime agreements are contingent on the time being used for training. Less overtime therefore means less training. No overtime facility has led to significant service cancellations.

To compound matters, the franchise operator has serious issues with driver retention, losing staff to other operators and also has a shortage of driver instructors which increases the time it takes for newly qualified drivers to become operational. In addition, the company's depot strategy has added to the difficulties with a new depot at Blackburn taking drivers and route knowledge from other depots. These failures of management mean that Arriva Northern Rail has been unable to run a full service on the previous timetable, never mind the new one.

As Secretary of State your statement, which suggested that tinkering with rosters and recruiting new drivers on Arriva Northern Rail will solve the franchise's problems, seems naïve. Changes to rosters require negotiation, and agreement has to be reached over improvements to productivity. It takes 13 to 16 months for a new driver to be fully trained. The Department's current proposals will therefore have a limited impact on the immediate difficulties. These operational oversights are not restricted to Arriva Northern Rail but are manifest in other franchises such as GTR.

It is counterproductive to attempt to shift the blame onto parties who are not responsible for decisions taken by the Department for Transport. Denying Transport for North any meaningful powers but publicly blaming them as an organisation for your Department's mistakes represents the worst of both worlds for transport devolution.

We are all too aware that Arriva Northern Rail is not the only franchise whose failure is penalising the travelling public. Your decision to strip VTEC of their franchise is an obvious testament to that.

The franchise system is not fit for purpose and the travelling public would, by vast majority, welcome a radical solution to this systemic failure and a return to public ownership and public control. It is what the majority of the travelling public want, and it is what they deserve: trains which run, and run on time. It is the very least that our constituents should expect.

Yours sincerely

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Liz Twist MP

Holly Lynch MP

Caroline Flint MP

Helen Goodman MP

Yvette Cooper MP

Andy McDonald MP

Derek Twigg MP

Rachael Maskell MP

Thelma Walker MP

Richard Burgon MP

Emma Hardy MP

Julie Cooper MP

Tony Lloyd MP

Laura Pidcock MP

Angela Rayner MP

Nick Brown MP

Gill Furniss MP

Bill Esterson MP
Sharon Hodgson MP
Imran Hussain MP
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