



Department
for Transport

From the Secretary of State
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Dear colleague

I am writing to you concerning the ongoing industrial action on Southern Rail and the planned drivers' strikes next week. I wanted to update you on our efforts to prevent the strike, and also on what is being done to provide support to your constituents if the strike does go ahead. You may have seen that the strike has been reduced from six days to three, but the spacing of the dispute across the week will unfortunately mean significant disruption on most of those six original planned days. In addition to this, a further three days of strike action have been announced for January 24, 25 and 27 which will cause further disruption later in the month.

Firstly, as you will be aware, the strikes and work to rule that have disrupted the network in recent months have been prompted by a union argument that Driver Only Operation (DOO) on the network is not safe. You will recall that the modernisation programme that is taking place on the Thameslink routes, which will mean much more capacity through Central London from 2018 onwards, requires the most modern, efficient working arrangements to be effective. Most existing trains on that route, and most of the Southern Metro trains, are already DOO and the change programme that Southern have been pushing through – as well as the introduction of new trains – means that all trains operating on the Brighton main line will need to work in this way if the full potential of the Thameslink investment is to be realised. Virtually all new trains in the UK and Europe are built in this way, and almost all other rail systems in Europe operate in this way too.

Over the past few weeks Ian Prosser, who is the lead executive director within the independent rail regulator responsible for safety on Britain's railways, has been doing detailed safety audit work on the extension of DOO by Southern. He has published his report today, and he has concluded that there are no significant safety issues. His view is that there is no basis for industrial action based on safety concerns.

He does suggest some further minor improvements that are required before DDO is introduced at a small number of stations, for example improvements to station lighting. GTR has given me and Ian Prosser a categorical assurance that trains will either not operate under DDO conditions at these stations until they meet the necessary lighting standards – or, where this is not immediately possible they will put in place alternative dispatch arrangements, for example station staff dispatch.

Ian Prosser's report means there is no possible justification for the strike action to continue. Many of your constituents have asked why the Government does not appear to be doing more to try to resolve the situation. The reality is that I and other ministers have been working extensively with a range of different people over the past few weeks to try to find a solution to the issue. We will continue to use all the different channels available to us to help try to reach a resolution. But it is very difficult to escape the conclusion that there are political motivations for what is happening.

I am well aware that the level of disruption that your constituents are experiencing on non-strike days is also wholly unacceptable. A lot of this is down to the current work to rule by drivers. A large part of our rail system depends on driver overtime to operate a full timetable – something which is not acceptable and which needs now to be addressed. But the ban on rest day working on Southern is having a significant effect on the timetable at the moment, as is the continuing high level of sickness and the poor performance of the infrastructure which suffers breakdowns on a daily basis. As I have said before, I think this franchise needs very significant remedial work and it will get it as soon as the strikes are over.

Most immediately, though, along with our efforts to find a resolution to the strikes, we are working with GTR and across Government to provide the best possible support for your constituents during the strike action next week.

The advice for those affected is and will remain that people should work remotely if they possibly can. But we are putting in place some transport alternatives for those for whom travel is essential and remote-working not an option. There will be limited train services from Brighton to London, from Gatwick to London and on the Caterham line. These services are likely to be very crowded and those intending to travel should expect delays.

In addition GTR will be providing some localised bus services to connect towns affected to neighbouring rail lines. National Express will be providing some additional services between Brighton and London, and demand for these is expected to be high. Although the National Express services are commercial, your constituents will be entitled to claim delay repay on strike days.

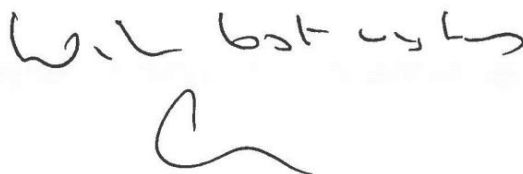
There will be additional parking available at those points where transport is available, and there will also be a lift sharing operation available. Despite all of this we want to avoid overcrowding on these additional services and we urge people to work remotely if it is possible to do so.

Where people cannot get to work, but need access to a workstation, the Government has contacted businesses and local authorities across the affected region, and a number of organisations will offer access to workspace. Schools and colleges affected have been contacted by the DfE or by local authorities and most are making their own arrangements. However if you are aware of any particular concerns in your constituency, please let me know.

Full information can be found on the Southern website:
<http://www.southernrailway.com/your-journey/strike/aslef-strike>

I am really sorry that this dispute continues to disrupt your constituents. I have suggested a whole range of different ways to resolve the dispute to GTR and the unions, but so far the unions have refused to accept any of them. The fact that this is a strike that has been ruled as legal by the courts also makes it difficult to force a resolution.

Since the independent regulator has now stated that there is no safety issue, and since no one is losing their job or losing any money, the unions really now need to explain properly to everyone why they are causing so much damage to so many people's lives.

Handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Grayling" with a stylized flourish below it.

Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT