

Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP
Secretary of State
Department of Transport
Great Minister House
76 Marsham Street
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4 January 2011

Southeastern Trains Punctuality Figures

You will be aware from media coverage over the New Year period that Southeastern trains managed to pass its annual 82% punctuality target by a tiny 0.4%.

Many of my constituents who use Southeastern trains on a daily basis, and especially those who were severely affected by the appalling service during January and December's adverse weather conditions, will not be surprised that the punctuality figures are so low. However they will share my concern that such a tiny margin of error is not independently assessed, not least because Southeastern has had the highest train fare increases and continues to score extremely low on value for money in the national passenger surveys.

I would therefore urge you to consider appointing an independent adjudicator to look at these punctuality figures so that I, my constituents and the hundreds of thousands of commuters who use Southeastern trains across Kent and Sussex can be assured that the statistics have not been manipulated for financial purposes and that passengers can begin to regain some confidence in the service they pay a high price to use.

TRACEY CROUCH MP



Department for
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From the Minister of State
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Our Ref: PH/TV/000472/11

31 JAN 2011

Dear Tracey

Thank you for your letter of 4 January, addressed to the Secretary of State about Southeastern Passengers' Charter punctuality figures. I am replying as Minister for Rail.

Under the terms of the franchise agreement, Southeastern is required to have its Passengers' Charter independently audited on an annual basis to verify the accuracy of the performance data, including punctuality figures. I therefore see no reason for the appointment of an additional independent adjudicator.

However, it is vital that lessons are learned from the two extreme weather episodes before Christmas. Although some disruption is inevitable with such severe weather conditions, it is important that those in charge of our railways and train services do the very best they can to minimise inconvenience for passengers, by keeping services running where they can and keeping passengers properly informed.

Philip Hammond will be assessing advice from the Government's chief scientific adviser, Professor Sir John Beddington, on the longer-term implications of the changing climate and the way in which this should influence our investment decisions across the sector in relation to winter resilience.

Philip required all train operators to take part in an urgent audit of how transport systems coped with the adverse adverse weather. This was carried out by David Quarmby CBE and the results were published on 21 December 2010.

Mr Quarmby concluded that the rail industry must improve its performance when it comes to keeping passengers informed during periods of disruption. He was very clear that disseminating information via electronic means is not sufficient, on its own, to give passengers the help and support they need.

Responding to David Quarmby's findings, the Secretary of State has called on the rail industry to formulate proposals on contingency timetables, real-time information and third rail alternatives. He has also asked them to conduct the review of their operational performance recommended in the results of the audit.

The Secretary of State has emphasised that the industry must improve the quality of the information it provides to passengers when disruption occurs. The Office of Rail Regulation is currently undertaking a review of communications performance during the severe weather disruption.

I recently met with senior representatives of the rail industry to assess the performance of the railways during November and December.

Kent services were discussed specifically, and I emphasised to Network Rail how important it is for them to improve the performance of the rail infrastructure used by the Southeastern franchise.

As a result, the rail industry's National Task Force will be reviewing operational performance by Southeastern and Network Rail in Kent. This will not be limited to the adverse weather episode. It will also cover general performance levels.

I will then expect senior figures from the train operator and Network Rail to discuss their findings with me.

I should also mention that Network Rail is looking to extend the trial it has been running in Kent to heat the conductor rail at key locations. They are also working with Southeastern to trial the use of de-icing equipment on passenger trains. I hope that these initiatives will help improve the resilience of rail services in the South East in the face of severe weather conditions.

In closing can I emphasise how seriously the Government takes the issues you have raised? Thank you for taking time to draw the concerns of your constituents to my attention.

*Regards
Theresa*

THE RT. HON. THERESA VILLIERS