**@swtrains\_watch**

In recent years, we have established an excellent working relationship with Jeremy Varns of Guildford who, with his former colleague Samantha Holmes, is founder of a group Twitter account, South Western Railway Watch (formerly South West Trains Watch), which campaigns on behalf of passengers. We routinely exchange news and views, and recommend reports of his tremendous work, as below.

**Introduction from Jeremy Varns**

Myself and Sam have used South West Trains services for a number of years and, along with many others have seen a gradual deterioration in all aspects of the service. As former colleagues, we decided to join forces and rather than simply continuing to write letters of complaint to our respective MPs in isolation, we also set-up a Twitter page in 2015 to draw together comments from other dissatisfied passengers and hopefully highlight the problems rail users face on a daily basis. Many, including ourselves, feel that passengers have been ignored for too long and that collectively our voice is stronger. In just two years we've become one of the most followed rail users’ groups on Twitter and with some of the highest levels of engagement and reach of comparable accounts.

We share the optimism of many of our followers, and other rail user groups regarding the change of franchisee. Stagecoach has badly let down so many rail users, and we feel that the past 21 years have been a missed opportunity especially in the context of ever rising fares revenue. We acknowledge the First MTR bid as being ambitious in scope and we hope this will be backed by a change of direction in responsiveness to passengers. We are especially pleased to hear that a stated aspiration is to offer 'a best-in-class travel experience' after the stripping away of all aspects of quality from the franchise by Stagecoach. In our opinion, the SWT network is in a very poor state.

After the news broke about the imminent change of franchisee, we contacted a number of our followers and asked them for their top three priorities. In order to get a comprehensive range of views including qualitative feedback we initially asked 50 of our followers on a forum to provide comments along with their top 3 priorities. We asked those within the industry as well as passengers who have engaged with us on specific topics or who may have specific needs. We then widened the question to our other followers, inviting them to contact us on and one-to-one basis to ensure everyone had a chance to contribute. In total we received comments from over 350 people and we have compiled our Action Plan listing the top ten improvements that our fellow passengers have told us they want to see. We have included further details on subsequent pages to hopefully contextualise where passengers feel we currently are now and where our hopes are for the future.

**Our Action Plan top 10 priorities are as follows (in descending order)**

**1 Increased capacity**

**2 Punctuality and reliability of the service**

**3 Better quality information on trains and at stations**

**4 Train cleanliness and presentation**

**5 Better value for money**

**6 Honesty and transparency when dealing with passengers**

**7 Better provisions for buying a ticket**

**8 More consistent delivery of good customer service**

**9 An enhanced station environment**

**10 Faster journeys and more services**

Before providing commentary on each of these priorities we have included some recent comments from our followers regarding their opinions of the current franchise and its operator, South West Trains.

'My biggest gripe is train length'.

'Outside of peak hours, full length trains are not common enough, resulting in packed services. This is counter intuitive, as longer trains outside peak hours would incentivise users to shift their commutes, in turn reducing pressure at peak time'.

'Ticket Office availability has been seriously curtailed. The machines are not suitable for everyone and every type of ticket'.

'The website is generally woeful, and is simply not fit for purpose when trying to book tickets'.

'450s on the Portsmouth Direct line are not suitable for long journeys'.

'The last decade and specifically the last 4-5yrs has seen much deterioration'.

'Response to customer service enquiries/complaints. SLAs are continually missed. There is no excuse for this and we always get the same answer of 'there's a backlog'. Why hasn't the backlog been addressed?'

'General cleanliness and up keep of both stations and trains. Locked toilets, over flowing bins, leaking roofs at stations. All very poor'.

'Staff availability during incidents - the email you get from customer services says all staff have iPhones and have access to the most up to date information. If you can find a member of staff they never know anything. Their attitude is to tell you something that will make you go away, regardless of how incorrect that information is'.

'I hate those narrow seats with no arm rests, always get some passive aggressive (or just plain aggressive) passenger sat next to you squashing you against the window. I actually had a shoulder problem caused by those seats! Filthy carriages and loos'.

'Keep ticket offices open and install PERTIS machines at every unmanned station'.

'Have more cleaners to hoover trains, pick up litter, and clean toilets regularly'.

'Refurbish stations that are in disrepair'.

'Punctuality; have you noticed the 'right time railway' posters have disappeared'.

'In 15 years I have never heard SWT admit to fault for ANYTHING'.

'When you have massive disruption use the RPIs to help passengers rather than intimidate them'.

'I would agree with being able to buy 10 tickets instead of being forced to buy a weekly / monthly ticket'.

'Trains on South Western are so dirty. I travel daily to Clapham Junction on Southern and then South West to Ashford. The differences between the two trains incomparable, the Southern Trains feel like new in comparison to the state of South West'.

'On three separate occasions this year Milford train station has been shut when I have tried to renew a season ticket. I don't know how many additional days it’s been shut when I haven't needed to use it, but shutting ticket offices due to not enough staff is not acceptable.'

'Most of the staff at Waterloo at the ticket barriers are surly, rude and have an air of not giving a damn about anything. Their body language shows their complete indifference and it is a completely different attitude to other train operators'.

'The guards on the trains also leave a lot to be desired'.

'The other infuriating thing I see on Twitter is people being advised to contact customer relations for compensation when clearly none will be given. It’s called passing the buck. At least be honest and tell people -because your train is less than an hour late you won’t be entitled to any'.

'During times of disruption and the network is going to hell in hand basket the marketing Tweets and other irrelevant information are exasperating'.

'A SW Rail Action Group to look after interests of passengers as MPs clearly not interested'.

'FAST-RUNNING HAS TO END. Time and again it has been shown not to be successful. In particular, Woking shouldn't be passed as it is a rail-air link station for Heathrow. Passengers do not deserve to miss long-haul flights to save SWT three minutes'.

'New waiting room door not working at Fareham station two days after re-opening of waiting room. Not fixed for weeks'.

'They could probably do with redefining the meaning of the word "goldcard", which implies a premium service. While the price is extortionate, their customer service department rarely answer the phone and were rude to me when I complained'.

'Overall, I think it's ridiculously overpriced for what we get'.

'For as long as I have travelled on SWT there has been a back log of customer complaints. The twitter team are guilty of repeating the lie that "We aim to respond within 20 workdays". I call it a lie because they say this knowing that no one gets a reply within 20 days and has been demonstrated for years'.

'I've only had a gold card once (circa £6,000), and was refunded around £35 for the year. It needs to be a lot fairer and the DfT shouldn't have such big goal posts for TOCs to do as they please. The system gets abused by TOCs'.

**Passenger dissatisfaction**

We want to be especially clear on one point given that a huge deficit of goodwill has built-up over many years. We have long wished for a new, customer focused operator to take-over and now change is happening, we want to be as supportive and helpful as possible. Despite the claims, even from Stagecoach itself, most passengers are not serial complainers. Often people feel that they have little choice in using rail over other forms of transport. But not only do the needs of current users need to be listened to and acted on where possible, we also need to expand the railways and make the train the first choice of transport for as many people and as many journeys as possible. Ever increasing inefficient road transport is not a sustainable solution in meeting the needs of our economy or our environment.

Over the next four pages is our crowdsourced Action Plan with a short explanation on each topic. We hope this information will be taken seriously and all efforts will be made to build a better relationship with passengers. We want our railway to be the very best it can be. Not an unreasonable request is it?

**Action Plan – First / MTR South West Franchise**

**1 Increased capacity**

Passengers want sufficient space in order to sit for their journey. While its accepted that for short-journeys having space to stand is a reasonable compromise for those who can, passengers travelling for 15 minutes or longer want to be able to sit down to read, work or simply relax. The promises of new rolling stock and enhanced peak capacity is therefore to be welcomed. However, far too many passengers using South West Trains currently face overcrowding outside of the peak periods due to the company cutting off-peak capacity to save money. If capacity was increased during off-peak periods, there would be a greater incentive for those who can, to switch to alternative services outside of the defined 'peak' periods.

**2 Punctuality and reliability of the service**

It is widely believed that performance levels have deteriorated in recent years and this is backed by official statistics on punctuality. However, a number of other measures utilised by SWT mean that a significant number of delays are not reflected in the statistics. While infrastructure faults are an on-going concern, cost cutting means there is less resilience now to deal with delays and that often the priorities of the company conflict with the need to keep passengers moving. It is also worth pointing out that delays due to train faults have increased by 5% in the past year. Much more could and should be done to run a reliable railway and one that balances the needs of the operator with those of the passengers they serve.

**3 Better quality information on trains and at stations**

Passengers understand that things go wrong, however frustrating that may be. But we all need information to make choices and for ourselves to keep others informed when we are delayed. Having pre-recorded messages playing continuously when there is disruption is not helpful and it adds to the stress of those waiting, often for long periods of time. It is especially unhelpful to have messages played each time a delayed service increases or decreases its arrival time by one or two minutes. The result is a cacophony of noise which does not assist passengers in any way. Less, but better-quality information is required both at stations and on trains. Staff should not disappear when there are problems but make themselves available to help, and they should be supported and empowered by the company to help passengers wherever possible.

**4 Train cleanliness and presentation**

One of the many cuts implemented over the current franchise was the reduction of deep cleaning carriages from monthly to once every 210 days which is the worse rate in the entire industry. Trains are mostly in a filthy and unhygienic state. Not only has deep cleaning been reduced but there are too few staff to empty tanks during the day or indeed clear litter. Trains are starting their journey with blocked toilets, no hand-washing or drying facilities, and bins full and overflowing. Despite the meaningless Passenger Charter 'promise' to 'clean ('tidy' by most people’s definition) trains every 3 hours, it’s not uncommon to find the previous weeks' Evening Standard newspapers on a train on Monday morning, or take-away containers and beer cans on a Saturday or Sunday morning. Every train should be clean, tidy and well presented. We also feel that passengers, who don't already, are more likely to respect their surroundings and use rubbish bins where available if the train is presented in a good condition at the start of their journey.

Generally the upkeep of trains is also in a poor state, even given the sparse nature of SWT's rolling stock. Broken doors (both external and in-between carriages) and taped-up windows are commonplace. On-board PA systems are often far too loud or too quiet and automated announcements are frequently incorrect. Worryingly many of the problems are repetitive in their nature and passengers have had to report nonsensical information such as moving forward to alight at the next station when in the first carriage. This information has consistently not been acted on by the company and the same problems are reported day after day, month after month.

Many units are also going into service with broken air-conditioning in the summer, and broken heating in the winter. It really is unacceptable that carriages are clearly either not being checked prior to going into service or the company is knowingly running services with faults day-in-day-out. In our experience at least 60% of the long-distance class 159 stock has faulty air-conditioning. The Desiro 444s and 450s appear to have a failure rate of around a third and of course, these units have no windows that can be opened for emergency ventilation.

**5 Better value for money**

The days of 9-5 working have long-passed for many and new flexible season tickets need to be introduced for commuters who do not travel every day but who need to be able to use trains at peak times. The new franchise pledge to offer 'flexible season tickets' is to be welcomed but we need to see what actual benefit this offers passengers. SWT has some of the highest per mile fares in the UK, which is of course widely regarded as having some of the highest fares in the world. While it’s accepted that regulated fares are controlled by the government, many off-peak fares are now within a matter of a few pence of regulated anytime fares. Off-peak fares should be reduced to encourage those who can to switch to services when passenger numbers typically fall. Passengers also want to see more promotional activity, seat reservations on long-distance services and a reversal of the weekend time restrictions (and accompanying price hikes for services towards London).

**6 Honesty and transparency when dealing with passengers**

The new, and long-overdue delay-repay scheme proposed for the next franchise has been warmly received by our followers. For too long passengers have had to jump through hoops to claim a refund which is then often declined on the most spurious of grounds. Furthermore, in many instances claims made by passengers simply disappear, including those that have been made through SWT's own website.

Another issue passengers face is the incomplete and inaccurate Journey Check facility. Ticket offices should be open throughout all advertised hours in contrast to the current policy of whenever it suits the company to open and staff them. It should only be in the most exceptional of cases that a ticket office has to close, and this should always be reported to passengers and staff (especially guards and revenue staff). SWT has consistently failed to adequately resource stations, maintain agreed ticket office opening hours, and report closures. Train formation information is also frequently found to be inaccurate with the under-reporting of short-formations. Can you see a pattern here? Passengers feel that they are being misled, and with good reason. We've still not had an adequate response from the Rail Minister, Paul Maynard, about checks on compliance, especially on unreported ticket office closures and whether the same misleading data on Journey Check is used in assessing compliance of section 17 of the TSA (Ticketing and Settlement Agreement).

As well as robust reporting, rail users want more reliable and easier to use ticket machines, barriers staffed at all times to reduce ticket-less travel, and a more honest and fair approach when dealing with passengers who have had problems buying a ticket. We would also like timetables to include the usual planned train length (e.g. 2-12 coaches). Not only will this assist regular passengers in knowing what trains they are more likely to have seats but any long-term changes to capacity are visible rather than the current policy of cutting train lengths and then trying to cover up this fact.

**7 Better provisions for buying a ticket**

Passengers want to see a much enhanced ticket buying experience, especially online. And for non-discounted turn-up-and-go tickets bought online, we want to see a fair refund system in place without an administration charge should travel plans change (as would happen if the ticket was purchased at the station prior to travel). We also want to see a simplified and reliable website where the cheapest fares are not hidden and the entire process can be completed online without the need to call to receive missing reference numbers that have failed to have been issued. Ideally, live chat should be introduced to help passengers who need a quick resolution or advice on buying a ticket.

TVMs are still not clear or easy to use, and with SWT resorting to sticking labels on the sides of machines in a crude attempt to advertise engineering work or ticket restrictions. Reliability of ticket machines is also a concern with payment taken but no ticket issued, or the machines running out of tickets and/or coins during a transaction. Debit and credit card payments often fail intermittently and inexplicably, and the company seemingly has no idea why. Other retailers manage to process transactions efficiently, there is no reason why a train company can't.

The significance of the queuing standards has long been ignored by SWT. The company had the dubious honour of being the operator with the most stations in the top 10 for lengthy queues when a spot-check was carried out by Passenger Focus several years ago (after lobbying by ourselves). Nothing has been done to improve the situation and passengers are still regularly queuing longer than 10 minutes and in some cases over 20 minutes to buy a ticket. SWT consistently fails to provide additional measures to reduce queues, and with barriers remaining closed, effectively locking passengers out of the station. The company has also consistently failed to inform guards or revenue staff where the queuing standards having been exceeded or where there are TVM faults. This has to change.

**8 More consistent delivery of good customer service**

Although acknowledged by our followers that many staff overall do a fantastic job, there is a significant minority who do not. At best, this includes mild indifference and a lack of empathy, at worst it is open hostility and/or prejudice and discriminatory behaviour towards passengers. Staff need to be properly supported and the delivery of customer service should be assessed as it would be in any other service industry. The removal of managers to save money had led to a further deterioration of standards and leadership. Staff have told us that they don't feel supported by management and that the limited way they are assessed conflicts with delivering a good level of service to passengers.

Complaints against staff should be taken seriously and not covered up as has been the case with the current franchisee. All customer-facing staff should receive regular training to help them to perform to the best of their ability. There should be adequate staff both at stations and in the contact centre to ensure all help-point calls and calls to customer relations are answered efficiently. Currently help-point calls frequently go unanswered or are transferred to National Rail Enquiries who may not be able to assist the passenger, requiring them to retry again and again. Ten to twelve weeks waiting times for replies to correspondence is unacceptable yet it has become the norm under the current regime.

**9 An enhanced station environment**

Over the current franchise, management bonuses have perversely been dependent on finding savings across the already decaying network. Not only are toilet facilities often locked out of use due to drainage or other plumbing problems, when they are open they are usually dirty and lacking basic working hand-washing facilities, including warm water and soap. Comfortable and spacious waiting rooms have been replaced by small, cramped rooms with metal benches to make way for catering facilities (which are often only open limited hours). It is not uncommon to find waiting rooms closed for weeks on end, and when they are open they are dirty and uncomfortable. Even large interchange stations such as Woking have facilities closed during the winter after 9pm (or whenever station staff choose to close them). Bird faeces are left for months on end on platforms and seating. Rusty metal benches at many stations have not been cleaned for weeks or months.

Passengers want to see clean and open toilet facilities and comfortable waiting rooms that can accommodate the number of passengers wishing to use them. Wi-Fi should be widely available at stations, and at larger stations there should be competition between catering providers, not simply different brands being operated by the same company (SSP). There should be more, comfortable station seating. There should also be much less noise; train door chimes that can be heard several platforms away are not safe and are unnecessary. Litter should be cleared and there should be sufficient bins for passengers to use.

Lifts should be in operational order at all times. Currently such facilities are often not working and most failures are unreported on Journey Check. It should not take weeks to repair faults, but hours. All passengers should have equal access to our railways and booked assistance should never fail to materialise. Equality for passengers with reduced mobility is not a choice but a legal requirement.

**10 Faster journeys and more services**

The promises of additional services and faster journey times by First MTR have been welcomed by our followers. Let's see real ambition in reversing timetable padding and introducing more services where track capacity permits. New rolling stock should speed up boarding and improve dwell times while better signalling could be used to reduce the spacing between services especially on suburban routes. Passengers want to see more competition and should Alliance Rail be successful in their bid this shouldn't be viewed as a threat to the new franchisee as overall standards will be driven up and passenger numbers increase across both operators.

**In conclusion**

Indifference and an acceptance of failure should be replaced by optimism and an emphasis on quality and to be the very best. While a number of people including a few of our own followers disagree, we believe that privatisation can be a real long-term success on the railways with the right balance of competition, regulation and a sustained drive to respond to, and meet the needs of passengers. The next 7 years gives your newly formed company the chance to prove the sceptics wrong and reverse years of under-investment and indifference towards passengers. Despite the challenges, there is much that can be done to make the South West franchise a positive example to other operators around the country, and make travelling by train a pleasurable experience once more. If train operators are to remain in the private sector and thrive, the industry needs to do much better. Let’s hope you can lead a new revolution in rail.

**SWT July 2017 - Letter to Anne Milton MP**

Dear Anne,

Congratulations on your re-election as MP for Guildford. Although unlikely, I hope to see a significant push from politicians from the newly formed government towards promoting sustainable transport and improving the quality of life for communities in all areas of the country. I hope, too, that lessons will have been learnt as to the lack of oversight of failing rail companies, something acknowledged by the cross-party Transport Committee and witnessed by passengers on South West Trains. I have not forgotten the promise by the then Major government of an expanded railway, cheaper fares, private capital for investment and rigorous competition leading to sustained improvements. Few, if any of these pledges have been realised and private monopolies have been created out of a state-run monopoly; hardly a sign of progress or ambition by successive governments and a complacent industry. Network Rail continues to perform poorly with delays exasperated by the manner Stagecoach operates SWT on a shoestring despite being widely regarded as having the highest per mile fares in the UK.

It is also clear that the company continues to utilise all possible measures to minimise its exposure to fines and artificially boost its appalling punctuality record. It does so regardless of the further inconvenience and disruption caused to passengers. What happened to the 'right time railway' we were promised at the start of the current franchise? The company is fifth from bottom for punctuality out of 23 operators (Network Rail website: 2017 PPM moving annual average). Annual recorded complaints have almost TREBLED in six years (ORR website: 2011-2017) and the number of train cancellations or significantly late services have more than DOUBLED in six years (ORR: 2011-2017).

Now, more than ever, we need our rail network to be promoted as an alternative to our congested roads and polluted environment. Year after year we have seen fares rise, and with unregulated ticket prices at SWT now at record levels and in many cases at near parity to regulated fares. Rather than managing demand, the company has deliberately cut off-peak carriage lengths to further disincentivise off-peak travel. More evidence of the company's policy on premium pricing its inferior offering can be seen when comparing other TOCs and their promotional activity to SWT's limited and highly restrictive advance fares.

Long-term growth in rail has been made possible by an over-reliance on London and other major cities in fuelling economic growth as well as an unsustainable housing market. It is remarkable therefore that South West Trains has, towards the end of its franchise, actually seen a drop in passenger journeys as the quality of the service has reached rock bottom. In fact, the 1.3% fall (ORR: Q1 2016/17) is even more remarkable when compared to GTR, which in the same period recorded an increase of 4.3% in passenger journeys despite its well documented problems. The independent 'Which?' 'Best and Worst UK Train Companies' currently shows South West Trains again rooted fifth from bottom of 23 rail operators in the UK; an awful performance given that the company has held the franchise for 21 years.

Although the news of First MTR taking over from an increasingly arrogant and complacent Stagecoach is to be welcomed I have two concerns; namely a continued lack of regulation and the absence of any meaningful competition.

The new franchisee will be paying a significant premium to the Department for Transport. Without regulation and enforcement of the agreed contractual and Passenger Charter standards, what protection will passengers have? The stated aspiration to offer the 'best in class travel experience' is of course a welcome sign after years of decline and the stripping away of quality by Stagecoach. But, this pledge alone cannot be viewed as protection for passengers in the absence of any meaningful safeguards. What additional efficiencies can be gained without further eroding service levels offered to passengers? After Stagecoach over-bid for SWT in 2006 we saw hundreds of job losses and train cleaning cut from monthly to ONCE every 210 days. Additional capacity raises the prospect of additional revenue, but revenue increases alone are unlikely to facilitate the agreed premium while meeting the expectations of shareholders of both parent companies.

The railways can only prosper long-term with significantly increased capacity and competition. Yes, this will of course lead to a reduction in premium payments to the government per franchise as monopoly operators will have to compete for business rather than finding new ways of exploiting passengers. We should also question the wisdom of endless fare increases while rail becomes less competitive within the transport mix and especially when compared to road transport as a per mile cost measurement. The government must consider the wider implications of having ever more cars on our roads and the effect this is having on society and the environment we all live in. We need enhanced capacity in the peak as has been promised by First MTR while utilising every possible resource to encourage leisure and off-peak travel, stimulating demand by reversing unregulated fare rises and bringing down the record levels of traffic on our congested roads. Joined-up thinking is needed now more than ever between the Department for Transport, politicians and the rail industry.

**Current state of the SWT franchise – issues outstanding from a lack of regulation and oversight**

For the purpose of clarity, I have highlighted below the following questions to Mr Maynard. These questions are a summary of those raised elsewhere within the letter, and where further detail is included to highlight the problems many SWT passengers continue to face. Myself and Sam have also sent examples of passenger feedback to @PaulMaynardUK related to many of these issues via our Twitter account, South West Trains Watch @swtrains\_watch; the social media campaign which is co-ordinated by ourselves.

**Questions to the Rail Minister**

Does the continued under-reporting of broken TVMs and closed ticket offices impact on data supplied to the DfT when measuring compliance of the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement?

Is there recent data on queue lengths for ticket offices at SWT managed stations? What department assesses whether the operator is implementing the agreed measures for mitigating queues which exceed the queuing standards?

Why are passengers, guards and revenue staff being misled about the availability of facilities at stations and with many issues such as closed ticket offices unreported on the Journey Check app?

What government body is responsible for ensuring that passengers are not overcharged when buying a ticket online using SWT's website?

What measures are in place to ensure that complaints or requests for compensation submitted through the SWT website are acknowledged by the company and with confirmation of receipt sent to the passenger?

Does the DfT or Rail Regulator check the accuracy of data supplied by SWT regarding complaints or claims for compensation, including where webforms have been submitted online?

Does the minister feel any sense of shame when seeing photos of passengers rammed into short formation services while spare carriages are parked up idle at weekends and weekday evenings? Should there be better protection for passengers regarding overcrowding both at peak and off-peak times?

What measures are in place at SWT managed stations to ensure intoxicated passengers are not able to board trains and commit crime or other disorder? Whose obligation does the minister think that it is for adherence to Byelaw 4 of the Railway Byelaws?

Are SWT employees required to disclose their employer when commenting on matters relating to SWT with passengers? If there is a policy in place, why is it not being enforced?

Why are staff able to sell off-peak tickets to passengers for routes where super off-peak applies for the remainder of the day?

What measures are proposed by the Rail Minister to ensure that money owed to passengers who have been overcharged by SWT at ticket offices or TVMs will be refunded? The above example is one such opportunity; e.g. the sale of off-peak tickets when super-off peak applies for the remainder of the day.

Can Mr Maynard please chase up a response from SWT regarding a guard attempting to charge a penalty fare on Wednesday, May 17th? What measures are supposed to be in place to ensure the performance of staff is monitored and that complaints regarding staff conduct are taken seriously? Does the minister agree that if such complaints are ignored by SWT then presumably the regulator will be publishing misleading figures which omit complaints data including those relating to staff conduct?

Whose responsibility does Mr Maynard think that it is to ensure that train companies such as SWT meet their obligations to sell the most appropriate ticket for each journey? Are spot-checks carried out at stations to ensure passengers are offered the cheapest ticket for their journey? If not, why not?

Will SWT be compensated by Network Rail or the Department for Transport regarding the part closure of Waterloo during August? If so, how much is the company expected to receive between 5th and 19th August?

Why has corrective action not been taken by SWT to repair known faults such as those relating to onboard PA systems and the customer information screens at stations? In many cases known faults have been left for several months.

SWT's most recent financial report published on the ORR website shows a cut of 32% in spending on maintenance and repairs. Can the minister ask SWT to confirm what specific budgets have been impacted by this reduction? The company has ignored our request.

Why are trains going into service with faulty air-conditioning? Is the company not logging faults and therefore claiming to be unaware of issues, or is there a policy of not repairing faults, as has been alleged? Why are passengers not being warned prior to departure?

Although the change of franchisee is to be welcomed, serious questions need to be asked now about the way Stagecoach has run South West Trains over many years, and how it will continue to do so until 20th August. What measures can be put in place in future to ensure passengers are protected from such exploitative behaviour?

**Non-compliance of agreed advertised ticket office opening hours and adherence to the queuing standards**

Having read through previous correspondence, I am still unclear as to who, if anyone, is checking compliance across the network. I will give one example. Ticket offices are closed on a daily basis during advertised opening times. I refer you to schedule 17 of the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement (TSA). Most of these closures are unreported on Journey Check. From the perspective of revenue protection inspectors, a ticket office is open if it is not shown as being closed on the Journey Check app. Presumably this is also true for data supplied to the Department for Transport? So the company is incentivised to under-report ticket office closures to give the impression that it is complaint within the TSA? Am I correct in this assumption?

It is also worth noting that the company continues to ignore the queuing standards and the significance they have with regards to a passenger's ability to buy a ticket. Does Mr Maynard have data on the queues at SWT managed stations, and if not, why not?

Ever paranoid about limiting negative publicity, SWT now appears keen to discredit passengers on social media who have reported lengthy queues at ticket offices or broken ticket machines. In such instances, the company will claim they have checked CCTV footage and that there are no problems, despite the fact this is often several minutes or even hours after an issue has been raised by passengers. It is also strange perhaps that the company is seemingly unable to check CCTV footage of unscheduled ticket office closures and update the Journey Check facility on their website accordingly. Does Mr Maynard have a view as to why this may not be happening and why passengers continue to be misled about station facilities and the ability to buy a ticket? I still have in my possession a letter from a former Managing Director of SWT who claimed almost TEN YEARS ago that there was a 'robust' reporting procedure for broken ticket vending machines. Yet still, the majority of faults go unreported and the company still refuses to update Journey Check even when passengers have uploaded pictures of broken facilities on social media.

Presumably in an attempt to appear competent and belatedly transparent, there have been recent examples of where even the smallest of faults will be reported, such as one cash TVM not accepting notes when others are still working. This information will often be left on the Journey Check app for several days while the majority of other faults, some significant, like an unscheduled closure of a ticket office will remain unreported for the entire duration of the closure. Passengers will then be subject to a penalty fare or threats of prosecution. Such misuse of the supposedly robust reporting procedures demonstrates the contempt SWT holds towards rail users as well as those who should be monitoring the company's performance; the very same people who have spectacularly failed to protect passengers.

**Website still not fit for purpose**

Most large companies now have a significant web presence, especially in the service sector for bookings and to communicate important information. However, the SWT website relaunch last year was met with almost universal condemnation for having poor accessibility, frequent glitches and the inability to easily find cheaper fares. Passengers have noted that 'upgrades' including off-peak travel (without any time restrictions on the return journey) have been priced at over £100 when the correct fare was £8, and a day trip to London was recently shown as costing £980. Why are Trading Standards or the Rail Regulator not intervening? When I made a complaint to Trading Standards regarding overcharging ticket machines in 2015 I was referred to the Office of Rail and Road who in turn referred me to the Department for Transport. No one is willing to stand-up to train companies such as SWT. Why?

Also concerning is the frequent omission to provide a reference number to passengers who have purchased a ticket from the website. Without this information tickets cannot be collected from the station. Most station staff will refuse to help unless there is a fault with the TVMs and passengers will be referred to the Customer Relations helpline, which earlier this month recorded waiting times of over ONE HOUR to speak to anyone. Of course, it goes without saying that payment is taken from bank accounts even when there has been a failure to issue a reference number and ticket.

Without exception, every day passengers are forced to contact the company via social media either because of a major failure of the website such as the inability book a ticket, issue a reference number, or because of multiple payments having been taken for one transaction. Even when a ticket has been successfully booked, many others report problems at the station where TVMs fail to correctly print all the required tickets. There is an endless cycle of failure at SWT which usually starts with a denial by the company and ends with a promise to raise the issue with a colleague. Never is any responsibility taken by anyone to personally resolve an issue or follow-up a complaint. The social media team's remit appears exclusively to be for damage limitation to the South West Trains 'brand'. Serious complaints such as those related to safety or staff conduct are always quickly taken off the public forum with passengers encouraged to contact the company via private messaging.

**Post-truth; manipulating the media**

South West Trains is known for rewriting history, through their shambolic first few years following privatisation, to the current franchise which was won based on significantly outbidding their competitors. The company then stripped away every remaining aspect of quality while simultaneously receiving public subsidy due to their deliberately overly optimistic revenue forecasts. We are now seeing the same at Virgin East Coast with the Chief Executive of Stagecoach, Martin Griffiths claiming that he 'wishes' the company had 'bid less for the franchise'. Perhaps Mr Griffiths is also a member of the 'hindsight club'; a term used by a former company Director to ridicule critics of SWT? It’s no coincidence that Stagecoach-controlled East Coast and 49%-backed West Coast lines have the highest recorded rate of complaints of all franchised operators (ORR: 2016-17). No doubt the DfT's tough stance on contract renegotiation will relent and the company will be offered the ability to renege on its agreed franchise payments. Of course, both East and West Coast franchises could learn a lot from South West Trains, where complaints just simply disappear.

**Incompetence or dishonesty? The complaints to SWT that never get acknowledged or reported**

Increasingly passengers are taking to social media to enquire as to why they've received no confirmation of 'contact us' forms having been completed on the SWT website. So, at 13:04 on 30th June I tested this for myself by chasing up a complaint I made earlier in the year on social media (as advised to do so by SWT staff on twitter) regarding a guard assaulting a 68-year old passenger. I did so, however, not by calling Customer Relations (and risk being put on hold for over one hour) but by initially completing a 'contact us' webform thereby initiating a new contact.

On the first attempt, after submission, all the fields in the webform went blank. Hardly reassuring. On the second attempt, the form itself disappeared and the mainpage reloaded. No reference number was shown or sent to my email address. I called Customer Relations who had no record of the webforms having been completed.

Could Mr Maynard please detail what, if any, measures are in place to ensure SWT takes responsibility for accurately recording all complaints sent via their website and that reference numbers are issued passengers? I have myself seen first hand the company claiming letters have been 'lost in the post' and now it appears webforms sent through their own website are disappearing. Is the regulator aware of these problems and the impact it will be having on the recorded complaint levels for this operator?

When challenged on Twitter, SWT's position is that it is up to passengers to re-contact the company to get a reference number if one has not been obtained and, if the complaint or claim for compensation has not been received, the subsequent contact will be recorded as a new complaint. In other words, if the customer forgets about the complaint or doesn't chase it up, no complaint has been recorded and the Rail Regulator will publish misleading data. Furthermore, compensation owed to passengers is clearly not being paid in such instances unless the passenger chases up their claim.

Does anyone from the DfT or regulator check the accuracy of complaints data? If not, why not? Does anyone check the reliability of the SWT website to ensure all seemingly completed contact forms are actually received by the company and recorded as such?

On the subject of the guard assaulting a passenger, I was informed over the phone that I would not be receiving a response due to 'employment law' which is, of course, complete nonsense. I can say this because I have a professional qualification in employment law. No wonder staff conduct remains such a significant concern for so many passengers. I wonder if the CCTV footage of this assault disappeared too like so many complaints sent to the company? Let’s hope this is something the new operator will address as a matter of urgency as there has been a sustained lack of transparency displayed by South West Trains over 21 years.

**Overcrowding**

The social media team at SWT also continues to mislead passengers about cuts to capacity. When images are sent of overcrowded carriages, especially at weekends, but also at other 'off-peak' times such as weekday evenings, a generic response of 'increased' or 'increasing capacity' is used. This, however, is not the case. The company has cut off-peak capacity by at least 37,000 seats per day since the start of the franchise (we believe this figure to be closer to 47,000). SWT attempted to hide this fact, but it was leaked to the media, to which the company responded that it was simply 'good housekeeping' and arrogantly claimed 'hopefully no one will notice the changes'. Well, people have noticed and overcrowding especially at weekends and during weekday evenings has got significantly worse. Hundreds of carriages are parked up across the network having no maintenance done, they are simply kept idle to save money. Yet another example of how the industry can exploit the lack of competition and regulation, and one that has been used by SWT for years.

Does Mr Maynard, as Rail Minister, feel any sense of shame when seeing photos of passengers packed tightly into short formation services? Does he feel that protection for passengers is adequate, and if not, why is he not doing anything to address a growing number of concerns from the travelling public? Even given the nonsensical structure of the rail industry in its current form, much could be done within the current limitations to provide a better level of service to passengers. Why has this not happened? Why has Stagecoach been allowed to run-down the service to its current appalling state?

**Security**

Despite the empty rhetoric, SWT is continually failing to keep passengers safe across its network with stations left under-staffed and with little or no presence of security. The latest figures from the British Transport Police website (BTP Crime Maps: 2015-2016) confirm what many SWT passengers will already know; large increases in crime and threatening behaviour across the network as staffing has been cut to the bone and most stations have no operational ticket barriers by 10pm or earlier.

Guildford station crime UP 25% (on-train UP 21%)

Woking UP 71%

Weybridge UP 62%

Surbiton UP 69%

Winchester UP 34%

Bournemouth UP 25% (on train UP 35%)

Staines-upon-Thames UP 66%

Windsor and Eton Riverside UP 67% (on train UP 50%)

Stagecoach is walking away from SWT leaving a terrible legacy of unsafe stations despite their claimed 'secure stations' status. The next operator must reverse cuts to station staffing as a matter of urgency and ensure that the station environment is as safe as possible for all passengers. I have copied the following from the Railway Byelaws (gov.uk website).

4. Intoxication and possession of intoxicating liquor

(1) No person shall enter or remain on the railway where such person is unfit to enter or remain on the railway as a result of being in a state of intoxication.

Could the Rail Minister please confirm what measures are supposed to be in place at SWT managed stations to ensure intoxicated passengers are not able to board trains and commit crime or disorder? Every weekend I see drunk passengers (usually male) board trains causing a disturbance and more often than not, harassing others including women travelling alone. Open drug dealing and substance abuse is also witnessed by many passengers travelling by SWT at the weekend. **After 10pm all barriers are open outside of London and there are no controls whatsoever on who can come and go**. While there has to be a sensible balance in ensuring people can enjoy themselves, the removal of all controls means that a sizeable minority of people are travelling free of charge and often in an intoxicated state. This has to change. People should not feel threatened when using our railways.

**Misuse of social media by South West Trains staff?**

Myself and Sam continue to get harassed by Twitter users, some of whom we believe to be SWT employees. For example, one unscheduled ticket office closure was met by an abusive tweet from an employee who claimed they were loading the ticket machines with paper. In another tweet, an expletive was used when we enquired as to why working lifts and disabled toilet facilities were unavailable. In both cases the tweets were deleted but there is a clear link between previous aggressive interactions and passengers complaining regarding a specific station or employee. My question to Mr Maynard and SWT is whether or not staff have to disclose their employer on their Twitter bio if they are going to comment on matters relating to the company with passengers. If not, why is there no policy in place? If there is a policy, why is it not being enforced by SWT? Can you imagine any other company knowingly allowing its staff to be abusive to its own customers?

I draw your attention to one account named 'sarcastic driver' and whose bio is 'to answer prat passengers who think they are forced to use trains'. This account targets passengers who complain about SWT services and justifies staff abusing members of the public because he or she has been sworn at (perhaps not surprising given the hostility they hold towards rail passengers). There are at least 17 other accounts which target passengers using SWT services and where there is a clear link of employment or other connection within the company. I am happy to supply these details should they be required.

One further such example is from an account called 'William Cobbett' presumably named after the 19th century journalist and former MP. This account has clear links to an employee working at Basingstoke station and who recently fabricated an assault on a member of staff by passengers at Basingstoke on 15th June. Aside from the unhelpful intervention by this employee who would have been of more use assisting passengers, the disruption at Basingstoke itself needs to be highlighted.

Hundreds of passengers were dumped at the station for 'onward travel' due to a track defect near Micheldever. Sadly, being in the evening most staff had clocked off, some earlier than normal, and as is common with SWT the promises of 'alternative transport' failed to materialise. So as more and more trains terminated with passengers off-loaded at this under-resourced station police were needed to ensure public safety. There were no reports of anyone having been assaulted, it was simply a case of SWT failing to properly manage the disruption and failing to adequately staff its stations. I know this because I was at the station and spoke to passengers and the police at around 21:00. This also provides more evidence of tax-payers funding security as the company absolves itself from any responsibility towards passengers and the wider community. Also, given the fact that the disruption lasted for several hours, passengers will want to know why staff were not asked to work later or why colleagues from other locations were not sent to the station to manage the situation.

**Seemingly continual disruption underscored by a lack of resilience**

The next operator needs to do much better at informing passengers when there are problems and building resilience into the service. SWT has consistently lowered the bar to which the company wishes to be judged. For example, it is now completely normal for one incident to plunge most of the network into meltdown for hours and for passengers to be denied basic information. Never will the company acknowledge that a continuation of disruption is due to their own lack of resilience, instead citing the original cause of any disruption hours after it has been cleared.

Recently a number of passengers have sent photos of empty trains leaving Waterloo during disruption as no announcements were made to advertise a platform of departure. Sounds familiar? If so, that's because this has been an on-going issue over many years. It is completely unacceptable to have trains leaving without providing sufficient time for already delayed passengers to board services. The fact that there are often thousands of passengers within the main concourse at Waterloo when there are delays should surely mean trains do not get permission to leave empty. Yet there are no controls whatsoever, and no management oversight.

There has been a continual omission of clarity during times of disruption throughout the company's history. The few remaining managers or station supervisors left following years of cuts are known for disappearing at the first sign of trouble. Passengers are left to fend for themselves as help-point calls go unanswered, ticket offices shuttered and all other channels of communication are either blocked or overloaded. Those able to reach staff before the organisation goes into lock-down will routinely be denied a refund if they choose not to travel, instead they are directed to a compensation form and told to send back their tickets.   
  
**Profiteering from passengers**

One of the first acts of the company having learnt of the loss of the franchise in August has been to ramp-up revenue checks (before 21:30) while barriers are increasingly left open. Hours for gate-line contractors have been cut meaning for more of the day there are no measures in place to stop people boarding a train without a ticket. However, revenue staff are increasingly visible in the daytime especially at large stations such as Waterloo while also targeting events including the Sandown races at Esher which conveniently for SWT is just outside of zone 6; something many passengers are unaware of. If the company wanted to reduce fare evasion it would surely operate barriers at all gated stations for all the hours of service? But of course, fines are a nice little earner especially when the company targets those willing to pay rather than those with no intention of paying, such as large groups of drunk (mainly male) passengers on a Friday and Saturday evening.

There has been a deliberate policy of ignoring certain types of fare evasion while honest mistakes by passengers who have not been able to buy a ticket are targeted by the company's revenue staff. With no controls in place, the company can do as it chooses. Another former MD of SWT said in a letter to myself that the company would only staff stations and gatelines if it was in their 'commercial interest' to do so. In other words, the obligation of SWT to reduce ticket-less travel for fare paying passengers and tax payers is irrelevant if it costs the company too much for additional staff and other security measures. Profit always comes first.

Let us not forget that SWT started the current franchise with threatening posters telling passengers; 'no ticket, no excuse' while simultaneously cutting ticket office staff, ignoring the significance of the queuing standards and failing to maintain their own ticket machines. Passengers were encouraged to report others suspected of ticket-less travel while the company itself sacked station staff, removed security from stations and removed all other measures for discouraging ticket-less travel later in the evening. This, being the time when the DfT's tax-payer funded research shows fare evasion to be at its most prevalent.

**Untrained ticket office staff or dishonesty?**

Whether a deliberate ploy to increase revenue, especially in the face of falling passenger numbers or the loss of SWT, the company continues to overcharge passengers. On 14th July, I witnessed a passenger with limited mobility being sold an off-peak ticket to Weybridge from Guildford at around midday when super off-peak applies. When challenged, the member of staff said that there were now evening restrictions on the return portion for stations south of Clapham Junction. Of course, this is not the case but the passenger was still overcharged 23%. Perhaps I should not be surprised when this passenger later contacted me on social media to inform me that their friend who they were meeting and who was travelling from Farnborough had also been over-charged and told the same about super off-peak restrictions. How many others have been fleeced in this way? I suspect such instances don't happen by chance and it should not even be possible to buy a more expensive off-peak ticket on routes where super off-peak remains valid for the rest of the day.

It is apparent that there are no controls or measures on ensuring passengers are not overcharged by station staff despite this being a legal requirement and an obligation of the National Conditions of Carriage. Perhaps Mr Maynard could explain what measures he proposes to ensure passengers are never overcharged? What justification does the company have to give staff the ability to sell a more expensive ticket for a journey where the time restriction is no longer valid for the remainder of the day? Once again, this demonstrates more than one individual failure; in this instance. the failure to properly train staff, the failure to have an IT system which offers the correct fares for each journey and a failure to sell the correct ticket for each journey as a requirement of the National Conditions of Carriage.

Of course, such examples also fuel the suspicion and a long-held view by many that dishonesty is at the heart of everything SWT does. The company has consistently pushed the boundaries and beyond to increase revenue. I cannot think of an organisation more ethically challenged. Just imagine how much additional revenue could have been obtained in this way? Much like the overcharging TVMs that for almost a year were only offering more expensive off-peak tickets long after 'super' off-peak became valid. During the current franchise the company has almost continually offered more expensive tickets from TVMs for journeys where a cheaper fare applies. Given the repeated nature of the long-term issues passengers have faced when buying a ticket, any possible explanation from the company should be viewed in the context that they have held the franchise for 21 years and have repeatedly failed to meet their obligations. Incompetence or fraud? In a way, its irrelevant as indifference and inaction by politicians, the regulator and the DfT have made it possible. Whose responsibility does Mr Maynard think that it is to ensure that train companies meet their obligations under the National Conditions of Carriage?

In the example I have provided, one of the two passengers went back to Guildford station and was told 'there is nothing we can do here, write to customer services'. Presumably then the complaint along with the tickets will be 'lost in the post' and any follow-up will have to be made with the new operators. Lets hope First MTR provide much needed transparency and honesty when dealing with passengers; something that has been absent throughout Stagecoach's 21 years of running SWT.

In a further worrying incident, a guard tried to charge me a penalty fare on Wednesday, May 17th on board the 15:34 Waterloo service from Guildford. As is often the case, the ticket machines at Guildford were not accepting card payments and the two cash TVMs that I tried would not accept notes or coins. The wide-gate was left open so I spoke to the gateline assistant and said that I would buy a ticket on the train to which they simply nodded at me. On reaching the guard and asking for a ticket they kept repeating over and over 'That will be £20'. Every time I tried to explain the situation they simply said 'That will be £20'. In the end I explained that I would buy my ticket at the destination to which they claimed that I would be 'kicked off the train at Woking'. It was only when I said that I would be calling the police to meet the train at Woking as I felt threatened did the guard relent and sell me a ticket. I wonder how many others have just handed over £20 and then had to buy a ticket anyway at their destination?

I wrote to the company on Friday, May 19th and explained that situation in full, as well as sending a Tweet just after the incident. In both instances, I received no reply from SWT. I am still in possession of the proof of postage for the letter that was sent, and the tweet can be viewed on our Twitter page @swtrains\_watch. Can Mr Maynard please chase-up a response from the company as to why the guard on this service did not follow the correct procedures and as to why they attempted to fraudulently obtain money from myself? To be clear, the incident involved a member of staff who was wearing a commercial guard's badge, not a revenue inspector.

**The big PR push that keeps getting undermined by Stagecoach's legacy of failure**

In addition to executive pay, the only things Stagecoach doesn't mind paying for is gaffer tape (this can be spotted at just about every SWT station in the absence of proper maintenance) and also on their PR machine.

Determined to go out on a superficial high, the company has been continuing to associate itself with just about every good cause and various public events in a desperate attempt to appear relevant. The company's official Twitter page changes its logo almost as often as Google's homepage. Other than the avoidance of tax however, that's where the similarities end. As well as being hopeless with technology, SWT continues to mislead its followers with incorrect information ranging from daily claims of increased capacity, when the complaint is related to off-peak travel to ignoring any questions that will portray the company in a bad light.

As of 19th July, the company has still not publicly confirmed that passengers will get no compensation for the significant disruption in August, instead citing its meaningless 'Passenger Charter'. The same policy of non-disclosure was in place at the start of the year when passengers faced huge back-door fare rises at weekends and bank holidays. The posters at stations are still, 6 months on, claiming '15% discounts' to; 'Get your weekend mojo back' yet most passengers starting their journeys in the morning have seen significant fare rises while many others are subjected to evening time restrictions.

Despite this significant fare hike, the company maintained that ticket prices were being reduced, and only when directly challenged with a comparison made between the current and previous year's fare did they admit some fares had been 'reset' or 'revised'. Links were also tweeted to unhappy passengers as well as a media press release citing an average fare increase of 1.5% which was deliberately misleading as this figure only applied to regulated fares. Unregulated ticket prices increased by over 30% on many routes in the new year yet this was barely reported in the media as the company successfully buried the bad news. With an inept regulator and an indifferent Department for Transport, it’s hardly surprising the company is able to mislead passengers and the wider public.

Further evidence that SWT primarily uses social media to mislead rather than inform, is when there is disruption on the network. Timed marketing tweets continue to get sent with the company spamming its own followers, often with dubious propaganda while questions sent from passengers go unanswered. The company will often resort to telling passengers they are 'too busy' to deal with individual requests for help due to the 'volume of tweets' having only managed to answer a handful of requests for help in the space of (in one recent example) an hour or more. The next operator needs to properly resource its contact centre and social media platform to ensure passengers get the help they need. It’s also worth pointing out that passengers increasingly turn to help online as the company is seemingly incapable or unwilling to offer useful and timely information at stations and on trains – an on-going problem throughout the company's 21 years of running the SWT franchise.

**Not-so-smart 'Smartcard'**

At the start of the current franchise, Stagecoach promised the 'roll out' of Smartcard use 'across the franchise area by 2009'. Another failed promise then, like 'cheaper' fares to encourage off-peak travel. The scheme was delayed by around 6 years, and in a press release with what appeared to be a Photoshopped train the background, the company claimed the roll-out was a 'new' initiative that was part of an 'ambitious investment' in SWT. Risible, yet unchallenged by the then Rail Minister Claire Perry who was pictured with now former MD Tim Shoveller on the company's website.

Fast-forward to 2017 and the scheme has continued to be plagued by problems ranging from passengers being unable to add a season ticket online with errors on the SWT website incorrectly stating that the 'route is not Smartcard enabled' rendering the card useless, to others being denied the advertised Network Card benefits of reduced off-peak travel. It has also been noted by many that guards have been issued with card readers that can only verify the date of validity on a Smartcard but no other details such as the route of travel. Often when scanned, gates will refuse to accept correctly loaded Smartcards at the beginning or end of the journey meaning longer queues to get in and out the station and more inconvenience for holders. Passengers have also reported gates failing to recognise a ticket on a valid route where a break of journey is being made; being doubled charged when swapping from a paper ticket to Smartcard and, the inability to add a ticket to a Smartcard on the company's website after 10pm for travel the next day, or when attempting to purchase less than two hours before departure.

**Waterloo upgrade**

In addition to the lack of an admission by SWT as to there being no compensation for the Waterloo works in August, as of 19th July there are STILL no timetables available for the West of England routes; Exeter, Bristol, Yeovil and Salisbury to Waterloo. How are passengers supposed to 'plan ahead' when they are not being given the most basic of information? Downloadable timetables are still not available for ANY routes over the weekends in August during the upgrade works and passengers are still getting conflicting information on route acceptance using other operators.

Mr Maynard will have hopefully seen our tweets regarding the lack of compensation for passengers and will also be aware that SWT, like other TOCs may be eligible to receive compensation in line with Schedule 4 of the Track Access Schedule. Our question to the minister is; Will SWT be compensated for the part closure of Waterloo during the August works, and if so, how much will they receive between 5th - 19th August?

**Continued disregard for passengers**

SWT gave up running a reliable weekend service long ago. In addition to short formations and reductions in service which fall below those set out in the franchise agreement, the company continues to fail to provide the most basic of information to passengers. I will give one recent example. On 15th July the 21:29 service from Woking to Portsmouth Harbour was not advertised at the station. The main platform indicator screens showed that the next departure was 30 minutes later and the screens on platform 4 were showing the next departure as being to Poole. There were no station staff present and no announcement to warn that the platform screens were displaying the incorrect information. In fact, automated announcements were repeating the same incorrect information as that displayed on the screens.

In the confusion, I witnessed a couple rushing to join a train on platform 4 that was advertised as the Poole service and one of the passengers, who was elderly fell into the carriage that they were boarding. Despite being in the next carriage and only two doors away from this incident, the guard still dispatched the train while the passenger was laying on the floor. Others including myself helped to assist the injured passenger while the train was pulling away. By the time this service got to Guildford, many realised that they were on the wrong train and would have to travel back to Woking. Not only was this an unnecessary inconvenience because of SWT's inability to correctly advertise its service but it meant that the couple, along with several others would be delayed by an hour or more. It should be noted that such a delay would not be reflected in any statistics and many others were left at Woking for at least 30 minutes as the 21:29 to Portsmouth Harbour was not advertised.

This incident provides a good example of how the company fails its passengers on so many levels. Failure to advertise the correct service, failing to recognise the problem and make an alternative announcement, failing to properly staff its stations in order to assist passengers, failing to delay dispatch until everyone knew where they were going and also a failure in allowing a train to leave the station while a passenger lay injured.

Worryingly, when I contacted SWT on social media to make them aware of this incident and the incorrect information at Woking, I was ignored. However, I later discovered that this was not an isolated incident as others had reported incorrect information being displayed at stations including at Clapham Junction around one hour earlier and with several services departing without any prior warning to passengers. No admission of any fault was given by the company so presumably no remedial action would have been taken, perhaps an indicator as to why such instances occur in the first place. At the very least, passengers should have been warned that screens were displaying the incorrect information and with live announcements made to correct any CIS fault. Sadly no one cares, and no one will take responsibility for anything. Failure is endemic throughout the organisation.

Six months ago, South West Trains was made aware of a problem with the information screens at Guildford on platform 4. This ongoing issue means that a delayed service will be shown as 'ready to leave' before the train has even stopped at the platform and all other information is removed from the screen. This is especially unhelpful to passengers who may be unfamiliar with the fact that two train companies have services that use this platform and that a GWR Gatwick service departs just minutes after a Portsmouth bound train. Providing departure information is one of the most basic functions of a train company yet SWT still appears incapable of reliably performing this task. The fact that it requires passengers to identify and report faults is worrying in itself, as is the lack of any corrective action taken by the company.

There are so many other examples, such as on-board announcements which claim the train is terminating at Sholing, when no services end their journey at this station. Or, on a Sunday when Worplesdon is announced as the next stop when this station is closed all day. Passengers using the Portsmouth via Eastleigh route continue to be advised to move to the front of the train when departing at Farnborough Main. This, inevitably leads to a rush of passengers who may be unaware that all train doors will open, as this station can accommodate all carriage lengths.

In addition to being pointless, and potentially confusing, such useless messages mean that passengers will increasingly distrust and ultimately ignore announcements, some of which may require action. I would like to ask the Rail Minister why South West Trains appears incapable of ensuring all trains have working PA systems that only announce the correct information; why faults are not identified by the company, and why, when problems are pointed out to them by passengers, corrective action is not taken? Furthermore, why are staff seemingly unable to turn-off announcements when they are providing the wrong information. Are they not able to do so? Or do they not feel the need to do this?

Worryingly, I should add that at several stations there is either a lack of announcement to warn passengers that a fast train is approaching, or a warning is played after the train has passed through the station, often at high speed. At Guildford, a message continues to been shown on screens at the main entrance claiming that any train shown as 'delayed' is in fact 'on-time'. For at least 3 months, however, this has not been the case, and any train shown as 'delayed' is indeed running late.

**Appalling condition of rolling stock**

It is surely bad enough that passengers have to sit or stand at uncomfortable, dirty stations and often with broken or filthy toilet facilities. But, cuts to cleaning and maintenance mean that trains are also frequently found to be in a terrible state. I would like to know if Mr Maynard looks at the images we send him on Twitter, along with those sent by fellow passengers of dirty carriages, worn and stained seat covers, heavily soiled carpets and blocked or leaking toilets?

We have been informed by an ex-railway driver that fitters at the Wimbledon depot have been told 'not to touch' the broken air-conditioning on trains. This would explain why so many units are in service without working air-con. It is even worse on Desiro stock which SWT procured on the cheap without any windows that can be opened for emergency ventilation. Many of these trains go back into service day after day with the same non-functioning air-conditioning rendering them glasshouses on wheels. The company's solution appears to be limited to telling passengers to drink more water, along with various GIFs used on social media to illustrate this rather patronising point.

Does Mr Maynard think that passengers should have to endure extreme temperatures and unsafe conditions on board services that have not been adequately maintained? Could the minister please ascertain as to whether trains are being checked prior to going into service and why faults are not being repaired? Is this because faults are not being identified by maintenance staff and information provided to SWT by passengers regarding faults are not being properly logged? Or, is the company knowingly running trains in an unsafe condition for other reasons, such as the cutting of maintenance spending? The most recent financial report (ORR website) shows maintenance spending has been reduced by 32% yet the company has failed to disclose what individual budgets have been reduced. Could the minister please get clarity on this issue? We also feel that passengers should be warned prior to boarding a train if the air-conditioning has failed. Does Mr Maynard agree?

**Neglected stations**

Stations are generally in an appalling state. Waiting rooms are locked, sometimes for weeks on end as are toilet facilities. When toilets are open, they are often found to be in a filthy and unhygienic condition and most look as though they have not been properly cleaned for months. Broken information screens are left for weeks or in some cases months without repair. What measures can passengers expect to be taken to ensure that the next franchisee maintains facilities to a good standard and that they are not left to decay has been the case with SWT? Even large stations such as Guildford have several broken or missing glass panels over the main entrance canopy. On July 18th rainwater was seen cascading through the ticket hall at Basingstoke and over the information screens and TVMs, which are of course supplied by mains electricity.

Every time it rains heavily at Woking, the main entrance and platform 5 is submerged by water. Guttering is broken or blocked at just about every SWT station that I've used. Hard metal benches on platforms across the network are, for the most part, filthy and at many, the once-white plastic covering is peeling away to expose rusty metal. Is it too much trouble for the company to ask staff to wipe the seats down once in a while? Does anyone care anymore? Hopefully the new operator has budgeted for the huge backlog in repairs that are required after the systematic running-down of the network by Stagecoach. And, unlike the incumbent, hopefully they will have a more productive working arrangement with Network Rail to ensure stations are well presented and well maintained.

**Weekend service**

Despite hiking fares at weekends and on bank holidays as well as introducing new time restrictions, the company continues to run-down the weekend service. Recent lows include passengers being told they would have to wait an additional 30 minutes while the rail replacement bus driver took their break, buses cancelled on one route for most of the morning due to one vehicle experiencing a flat tyre and another getting stuck under a bridge. Passengers continue to send SWT photos of rail replacement buses at weekends with bald tyres and prohibition notices stuck to them. The use of unroadworthy vehicles appears to be a common policy of SWT, presumably to save money and with the company increasingly appearing to have no sense of shame in the service offered to passengers. Every weekend brings more misery as trains are cancelled with recent examples including hour long waits due to an 'operational incident' which was in fact as a result of there being a shortage of drivers, while another significant delay was a result of the driver refusing to take the Salisbury service further than Woking due to the lack of air-conditioning.

**The future**

We remain optimistic that much can be done by the new operator to reverse years of indifference and contempt shown to passengers by SWT. So much could and should have been done by the outgoing franchisee and I hope that this will mark a further retraction from Stagecoach in the UK rail industry until there is a purge of the current leadership and subsequent cleansing within the organisation. The improper and unethical way the company has run SWT over many years and the lack of oversight or intervention by government departments shows why the industry and politicians must change. Stagecoach has, time and again, emboldened critics of the privatised rail industry who feel that TOCs get away with too much, while delivering too little. South West Trains and the service it leaves behind is emblematic of company that has remained out of touch with passengers and one that has been singularly focused on self-interest. First MTR must do better.