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The Gibb Report – An Assessment

by

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Background to the Gibb Report

In September 2014, a new company, Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), was given the contract to run train services operated over the Thameslink, Great Northern, Gatwick Express and Southern Railway. In the year leading up to the summer of 2016, the performance of the Southern Railway, the part of the Govia Thameslink Railway covering the suburban and south coast services between London and a large section of the southern coast of England, deteriorated to a level where passenger dissatisfaction was leading to public demonstrations and persistent media criticism. Eventually, the government was forced to act and they decided to commission a review of Southern and its service performance. The result was the Gibb Report[2].

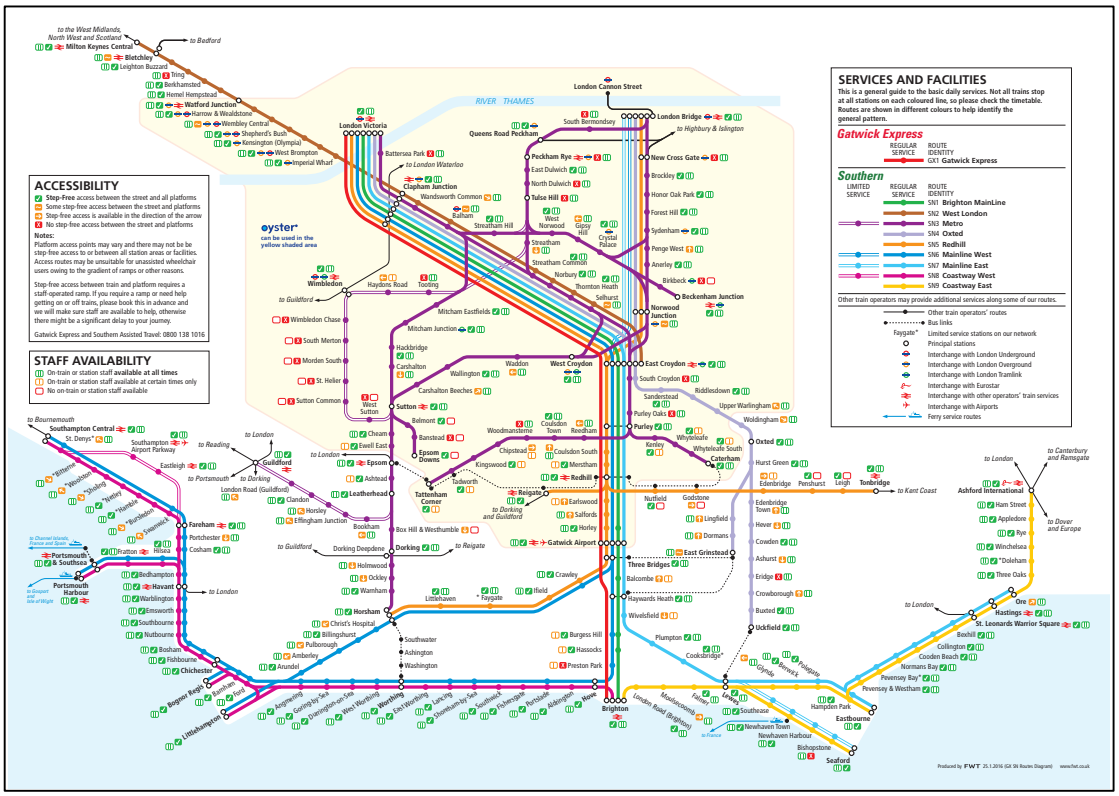

Figure 1: Schematic map of the Southern rail network. Source: Southern.

Introduction to the Gibb Report

The Gibb Report was prepared by a well-known and experienced British railway executive, Chris Gibb. The report was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Transport, Chris Grayling and was begun in September 2016. Although it was completed in December 2016, it was not published by the government until 27th June 2017.

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[1] PRC Rail Consulting Ltd.

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/southern-rail-network-gibb-report

Terms of Reference

Chris Gibb was asked by the Transport Secretary to investigate the situation on the Southern Railway in the following terms:

"To ensure all possible steps are being taken to improve performance of Southern rail services and to introduce a new and fully aligned approach to the management of GTR rail services in order to improve performance and passenger experience."

He was also asked to:

"Identify…actions to ensure closer working and more effective alignment between GTR and NR [and] ensure those actions are implemented with immediate effect".

He was asked for an:

"integrated approach… including in relation to:

- Objectives, incentives and performance metrics
- Improving the overall passenger experience
- Leadership, management structures and accountabilities
- Work processes and team design and culture
- Contract specification and design
- Future franchise specification and design"

And to "Chair a Project Board" that would get stake.

All this might seem comprehensive but there was a significant directive that said,

"The management of industrial relations remain [sic] a matter to be managed by Govia Thameslink Railway Limited."

In other words, 'Don't investigate the strike issues. We don't want to go there.' This was rather a 'cop out' by the government. They put it in the 'too difficult' box but this was partly due to the fact that there was a wish not to interfere with on-going negotiations. In fact, the industrial relations issues were actually a large part of the reason for the troubles on Southern and were caused, in the first instance, by the government forcing GTR to impose Driver Controlled Operation (DCO) and the associated changes to working practices over those parts of the operation which didn't already have them.

Figure 2: Selhurst Depot, the largest on the Southern rail network. Gibb recommends a wider distribution of crews and trains around the fringes of the network to aid service performance. Photo: Press Association.

Southern's Problems

Southern's problems were encapsulated in their poor service with an average 11% of trains cancelled or delayed (compared with 3% on SWT) in 2016. The situation was exaggerated by a number of factors:

- The nature of the GTR franchise - a huge network of complex, interworking services previously run as four different operations;

- The DfT influence – a not always benign interference factor with a combination of embedded bureaucracy, political dabbling, opportunist spin and weak system knowledge;
- Staff dissatisfaction – a long held suspicion and contempt of management, fed by openly political union action determined to "bring down this…government"[3].
- Network Rail – trying to rebuild London Bridge and its environs whilst running train services (the road to hell is paved with good intentions);
- Upgrade programmes – new trains, new signalling, ATO;
- London Overground – running their own frequent services over one of the Southern's trunk routes.

Project Characteristics

The upgrade programmes for GTR in general and Southern in particular had a number of unfortunate characteristics. I summarise Gibb's findings as follows:

- Complex project with many participants and stakeholders;
- Unlinked goals and purposes;
- No guiding mind;
- Easy to blame others;
- Interference from government;
- Poor staff relations;
- Hostile customer base;

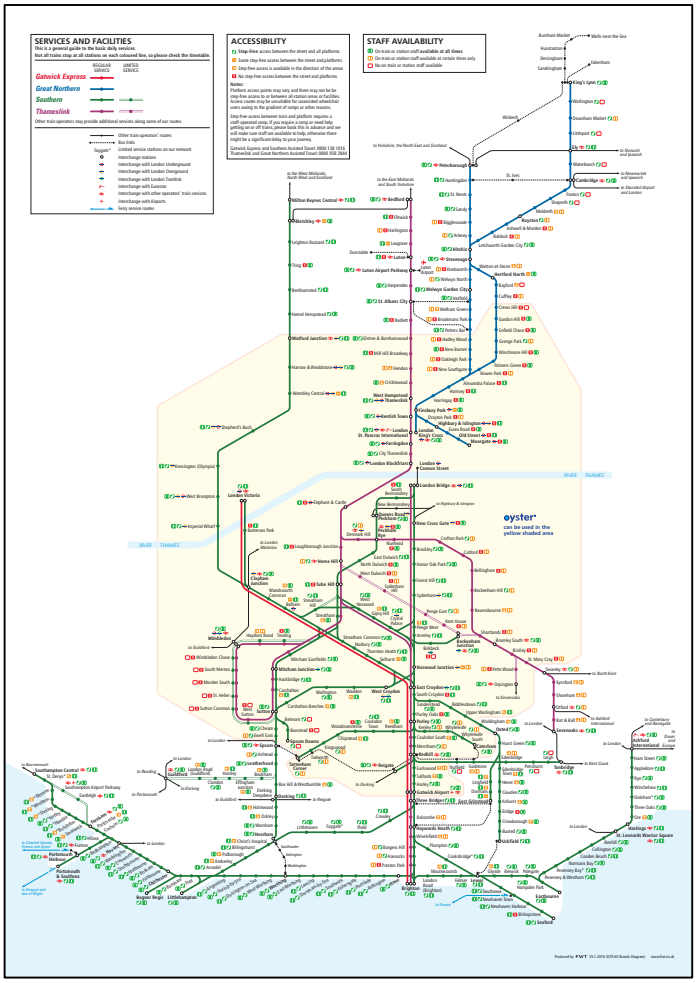

Figure 3: The larger network generated by the grouping of the systems to make up GTR. The challenge of making this network work effectively has not been fully appreciated by all the sectors of the railway industry. Source: GTR.

[3] Independent Sunday 18th December 2016.

These issues provided a lethal cocktail of issues leading to a high number of train delays and cancellations.

Figure 4: Rebuilding work at London Bridge. The work started in 2012 and is expected to finish in 2018. The reduction in platforms for train services has caused serious timetable reliability issues. Source: London Reconnections.

Outstanding Issues

The Gibb Report highlights a number of outstanding issues. The main problems are:

- Lack of common goals
- The 2018 timetable
- ATO implementation
- Staffing disputes
- Stock and crew distribution
- Training
- Lack of System Operator
- Poor integration
- Poor maintenance planning

There is a total of 19 recommendations, some covering more than one area or involving subsets of recommendations. Not all of the recommendations meet all of the issues, particularly those relating to staff because of the DfT's refusal to investigate industrial relations. I examine the major points in the following paragraphs.

Gibb's Recommendations

First, this list shows the major recommendations in the Gibb Report.

- The 2018 timetable – get a move on (p. 4);
- Have a system operator (p. 4)
- Improve maintenance planning now & in the future (pp. 5-6);
- GTR & NR to have same objectives (p. 18);
- GTR & NR to use same performance metrics and incentives (p. 18);
- Monitor customer time as a performance metric; (p. 11);
- Don't blame the signallers (p. 16);
- Improve train crew duties, depots and supervision (p.15);
- Manage ATO engagement & training (p.15);
- Introduce timetable firebreaks (p. 17);
- Run a Right Time Railway (p. 13);
- Manage suicide prevention (p. 14);
- Electrify Uckfield at 25kV (separate report).

I deal with some of the major points of this list in the following paragraphs.

System Operator:

Gibb suggests that GTR needs a system operator. He writes that it would have to be someone who was "empowered and trusted" (p. 4). The problem is that, first, no one trusts Network Rail and, second, that the train operators are constrained by their contracts and the associated incentives. Also, operating companies come and go. If you are buying (specifying or leasing) an asset that has a life of 40 years or more at the beginning of the seven-year franchise, what incentive is there to worry about what happens to it when it needs an overhaul in eight or nine years' time?

I agree that the appointment of a system operator who is empowered to ensure that the railway is managed and functions in an integrated way is essential. Network Rail and the incumbent franchisee would be required to satisfy the system operator that both long-term plans and day-to-day solutions are workable and that they provide the passenger focus that's needed. I think the "Alliance Board" approach is a good idea that needs to be strengthened and mandated into CP (Control Period) and franchise agreements. There need to be incentives to enforce it.

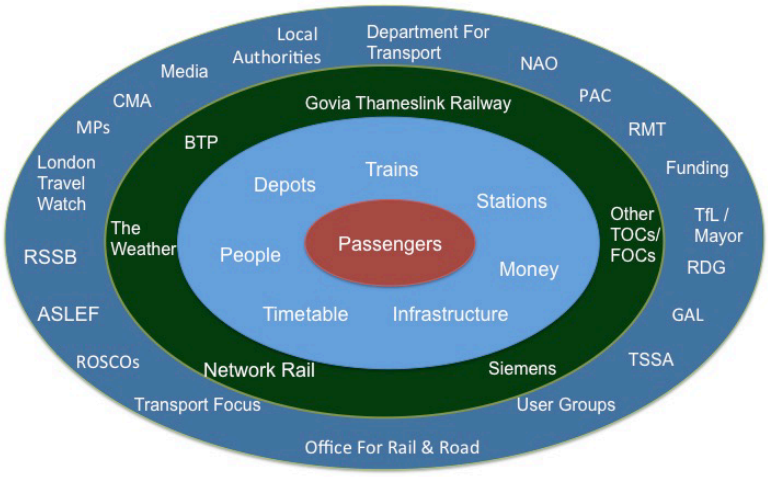

Figure 5: A diagram of the systems and interfaces affecting the operation of GTR. The same or similar interfaces apply to all railways in one form or another and must be properly understood by all the stakeholders. Source: Gibb Report.

2018 Timetable

The original 24tph originally specified for the 2018 timetable is not sustainable with the infrastructure in its current condition. Gibb recommends (p. 6) that the current 12tph for peak periods remains until other problems are resolved. In effect, he is saying 'Don't run before you can walk'.

In my view, there needs to be at least six months of the existing timetable while ATO beds down. When the issues are resolved, increase services in steps and don't move to the next step until all issues have been sorted out with the existing.

I am not convinced that timetables need firebreaks – where services are radically reduced d for two hours in the midday off peak. I prefer the idea of fall-back timetables or 'emergency' timetables that are introduced in the event of a major disruption.

One final point on timetables. The media needs to be managed skilfully to maximise public acceptance. It is distressing to see how the RMT has hard-hitting rhetoric that effectively tells passengers that they are being exposed to less safe operations and ripped off in fare increases (Figure 6). The GTR media management is less effective. More attention needs to be paid to stakeholder relations so that a modern, positive message is put out.

Figure 6: RMT strikers demonstrating outside the DfT offices in London with placards designed to appeal to passengers. Photo: RMT.

Right Time Railway:

This is a no-brainer. If there is one thing that annoys me more than anything else when travelling by train it's an announcement from the conductor who says the train will arrive at its terminus at "approximately 13:48". This shows a complete lack of understanding of one of the main quality drivers of the railway service - on-time performance.

It is instructive to see how, in some places, new staff are inducted into the railway timekeeping philosophy. They are told to arrive in the lecture room at 9 am. They do. They then sit chatting or fidgeting with their phones for 10 minutes until their instructor decides to turn up. By now it's too late, the critical induction into railway timekeeping has already been lost. And, timekeeping at railway management meetings drives me to despair.

In practical terms, on-time train dispatch is essential. Staff should be trained and supervised to maintain it. It should be standard practice to provide rolling stock with countdown timers in all cabs and they should be installed on platforms too. After all, modern platform train describers are perfectly capable of providing countdown indicators for dispatch staff.

Platform dispatch discipline must also be maintained to a high-level. At St Pancras, whistles start blowing two minutes before an EMT train is due to depart, depending on which clock you look at. Gibb's reference to clocks telling slightly different times (p.13) is unfortunately all too common. Perhaps too, we should be looking at the idea that passengers need to be educated to arrive at the platform at least five minutes before the train is due to depart. After all, no one would dream of turning up for a flight a minute before the plane is due to leave the stand. We must educate people to think of a train in a similar way: time to park, time to get your ticket, time to get some coffee and time to get to the platform.

Hearts and Minds

This is a rather formulaic expression but I make no apology for it as I think it is relevant here. There is no doubt that the GTR management (and its predecessors) have lost the hearts and minds of its staff. It is easy to forget the people at the heart of your operation when you have management issues, new contracts, big regeneration programmes, new stock to get into service, poor performance stats, financial targets to meet and numbers of vociferous interest groups to deal with.

It is easy to forget too, that the front line staff and their supervisors and controllers get up early in the morning, when you are still in bed, and that they have already got half

way through their working day when you arrive at the office. Others of them will be at work when you get into bed at night and they are running your trains when you tuck into your Sunday lunch, probably wishing they were at home with their family rather than copping a long late turn doing Epsoms.

From my own experience, there are two main issues for staff: boredom with a repetitive job and a feeling of being ignored by the boss. Thus, any excuse offered by the union to make life more interesting, whilst getting a chance to air real or imagined grievances, will be welcomed. The unions know this and lose nothing by making trouble to score political points and increase membership at the same time.

The increased sickness noted by Gibb is another sign of motivation problems. If you are enthusiastic about your job and believe you will be missed if you don't turn up, you will make the effort to overcome your man-flu, get up and go in at 04:00 in the freezing cold or pouring rain. If you realise that a spare driver (whom you probably know and respect) has to run for you, instead of getting a bit of time in the warm messroom, it will also help get you out of bed. If these things don't matter to you, you will take your day off sick. In big depots, the camaraderie of the small depot community is missing and the respectful approach to work and colleagues is lost.

So, the idea of using "sickness" as an informal method of registering dissatisfaction with one's employment is a sure sign of something wrong. One way of helping this in the short term is to place a limit on uncertificated sickness per year. If there is a limit already, the policy should be enforced.

One qualification a good manager will use is not their MBA but "MBWA" - Management By Walking About. Managers should regularly ride with crews (drivers and conductors), visit stations and spend time in control rooms showing staff they are interested in what they are doing and learning about what really goes on in front line jobs.

There is no doubt in my mind that the GTR troubles would have been much reduced had the staff been "on side". The poor planning at London Bridge and the rapid realisation that the timetable wouldn't work only gave the staff more ammunition of the, "if the management didn't realise it wouldn't work why should we help them sort out the mess?" type. It went downhill from there.

Figure 7: The train depot at Littlehampton. Gibb suggests that some smaller depots for trains and crews at remote locations should be developed to allow more effective train service management. Source: M. McDonald geograph.org.

Crew Supervision

Gibb offers sensible ideas for improving crew utilisation and timetable performance (pp. 14-15) that are, in my experience, well founded. After their "Company Plan" of 1992, London Underground reduced train crew depots on some lines from six to two and on

all lines by about 50%. As a result, some depots became too big and there has been a move to distribute crews back to being closer to stabling points. The Piccadilly line now has four depots instead of two.

Something that Gibb didn't mention but I'm sure he knows, is another factor, often forgotten, is that a small depot offers informal advantages. At a small depot, everyone knows everyone else and there is a sense of community that is absent from the larger depots like Selhurst and Brighton. If there are problems, the community tends to come together and help each other. In my experience, a good on-site supervisor will often provide the glue that binds the community. None of these will show up in official statistics but they will contribute to the effectiveness of the service and thus to improved passenger satisfaction. The railway cannot always be about numbers.

Crew Case Study

In a case study of London Underground train crew statistics and usage, I think the following may provide a useful yardstick against which to compare Southern.

- LU's Metropolitan Line has 49 trains in peak service.
- There are 319 drivers including trainees on the line;
- There are 284 driver duties including RDCs, rostered spares and leave covers;
- A typical depot (Harrow) has 58 train running turns.
- There are 15 rostered spares (including a night spare);
- They have 17 leave covers; 20 RDC turns, 9 pool drivers;
- Staff are on a 36-hour, 7-day week. No overtime.
- Salary is £49k/year so Sundays compulsory.
- Average LU sick days per year 10, national average 4.

The sickness rate is interesting. In my view, it reflects the stress and unsocial hours features of the transport industry. I wonder if further research would provide data to aid solutions. I wonder too, if this has some connection with the IR problems.

Train Crew Requirements

My view is that, for a railway to operate effectively, the following is essential:

- There must be a full establishment of crews;
- There should be at least 20% spare crew duties;
- Must have full rostered annual leave cover;
- Must allow for 5 working days training per year;
- Rosters should assume no overtime;
- Sundays must be part of the working week;
- Should offer family-friendly links

It is said that the winning of a franchise may rest on the number of train crews factored into the business case and thus the Train Operating Company may lose the bid competition because they have too many train crew in their proposal. If this is the case, the DfT should assess the level of crewing proposed in relation to the train service requirements to ensure the bid is really operable.

ATO

ATO will deliver benefits if used correctly. ATO and ETCS will also deliver benefits but these benefits are unlikely to be any different than could be obtained with any of the current designs of ATC. In practical terms, I calculate that ATO can provide up to an 8% improvement in train throughput but only if all trains perform identically and train braking is improved to 9%g.

What is more important is the approach by engineers and operators to the testing and commissioning of the system. Nothing should be assumed. Each item should be tested under all conditions, each location tested individually (what works in tunnel may not work the same way outside) and a complete set of rules introduced for each normal, failure and emergency situation. Training is crucial and it should allow signallers and drivers to get hands on (sorry, hands off) experience.

Finally, it must be understood that there will be problems. Any experienced railway person will tell you that when a new system is exposed to the staff and passengers "under fire" there are always things that weren't planned for or understood as an issue during testing, e.g. how does the new track circuiting behave under push out moves? There will also be software problems. These are always difficult to sort out - you can't see them like a broken rail, you can't smell them like a gassing battery and you can't hear them like flats. You have to rely on and help your software engineers as much as you can.

Stabling

In the enthusiasm for buying new trains, where to put them is sometimes forgotten or, at least, not enough attention is paid to the most effective places to stable them. Gibb covers this and suggests small stabling sites at places like Littlehampton (where there is a set of sidings and there used to be a crew depot) and Crowborough. As I suggested for small crew depots, small stabling sites show similar small community benefits.

Uckfield

Gibb presents a good, if lengthy and detailed, case for the electrification of the Uckfield route using the 25kV AC system. Perhaps it would add to the business case if it was also presented as an alternative route to Brighton during Brighton Main Line maintenance possessions. However, I do have my doubts about the arguments concerning flexibility of rolling stock at London Bridge during disruptions as only dual-equipped trains could run to Oxted. How many are there as a percentage of the Southern fleet?

My own feeling is that putting a short section of 25kV AC in the middle of 750V DC territory suggests a need for a small specialist maintenance team that would be unproductive for most of the time. Alternatively, engineers would have to be sent from north London to fix a fault. I wonder how a life cycle cost analysis would show up against the reduced capital cost of 25kV installation, if indeed that cost is so much less than DC installation. Or is there an alternative maintenance proposal?

I would also prefer to see provision for future double-tracking. The masts for OHLE should not prevent additional track laying when required - which history tells us it will be.

Gatwick

I do not think that anything could be added to the Gibb studies on Gatwick, both from the point of view of the suggested sale of the station to Gatwick Airport Ltd. and the need to get the fares strategy under control. His recommendations stand on their own merits.

However, something needs to be done about luggage. Perhaps the Gatwick Express should be marketed on the basis of a good train for heavy/large bags. Ticket marketing for Gatwick passengers should be linked to destination and bag size. This might help to reduce excess dwell times.

Marketing

There is a lot of work to do here. I agree with Gibb's proposal to re-market Thameslink under a new name. The current name has a largely negative public image. That said, should we change the name of London Bridge station too?

Customer Time

This is simply a version of the Lost Customer Hours (LCH) metric used by London Underground since the start of the PPP days in the early 2000s. The delay is registered in minutes, times the number of passengers estimated to be using the services at that time and location. Put simply, a delay of 30 minutes at Oxford Circus on a Monday morning at 08:30 might affect 15,000 people and thus generate 7,500 LCH, whereas a similar delay at 20:30 at Epping on a Sunday evening would only generate, say, 750 LCH. The issues come in delay attribution and, more importantly, in the follow up. Follow up for every delay is essential.

DCO

Much has been discussed on the pros and cons of DCO. I wonder if it is time for a review of the whole question of DOO. I think it is worth looking at DCO in the context of the present-day railway operating environment. Things have changed since the first full scheme for DOO was introduced on the St Pancras - Bedford route in March 1983. In those days, ttraffic levels were half what they are today. The trains operated were no longer than 8-car. I those days too, there was a much more relaxed safety culture. There was no social media, very little CCTV and no OTMR. Many problems didn't get noticed and didn't get the public exposure they get today.

In 2017, there is serious overcrowding in some stations. For example, East Croydon requires a total of 24 platform staff for six platforms in the peaks. Now, 12- car trains are common and there is a strict safety culture. Passengers are all connected through social media and messages and rumours spread very quickly, often more quickly than information gets to staff. There is CCTV everywhere & on trains and OTMR is watching too.

For staff, incidents where passengers have been killed or injured due to door trapping issues do nothing to inspire confidence in the operating system. Regardless of studies by the RSSB that show more platform/train interface problems with conductor controlled door trains than on DCO trains, crews are not convinced. Encouraged by their unions, they continue to vote to strike against DCO.

Looking at it from the train crew's point of view, I think it is about fear. It's about the fear of being one your own in a crisis, the fear of being accused of doing something wrong and the fear of ending up in court because of being in the wrong place at the wrong time – when a passenger does something silly and hurts themselves and you get the blame.

Business Objectives

Finally, we must not forget that the primary purpose of a railway is to transport passengers and freight safety and efficiently. All the goals of the businesses should be directed towards this goal. As Gibb identifies, the goals of different stakeholders should be aligned. In the same way, incentives must be aligned too.

One of the means of obtaining the business goals is right time operation. The right time principle needs to be set at 15s (10% of 150s headway). Anything that exceeds this level should be investigated so that delay causes are always be followed up. TOCs/NR must educate staff to the Right Time metric at every station and on every train. Staff need to be given incentives too.

Conclusion

The Gibb Report provides a good summary of what has gone wrong on the Southern and GTR network and it offers a sound and achievable set of solutions for most of the problems. There are some areas which might have better solutions - Uckfield electrification for example but these are for further development.

Perhaps the biggest omission is the question of industrial relations but this wasn't in Gibb's remit and could only be mentioned in passing. However, Gibb rightly notes the issue and we can conclude that the staff management of the railway certainly needs urgent attention.

It is comforting to finish this assessment by reporting that of the 38 recommendations made by Chris Gibb in his report, the government has agreed for 34 of them to be implemented.