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Dear Dr Starkey

I am sure you are aware of the problems that have been experienced on the West Coast Main Line over the last few days.

At Network Rail, we recognise that we provide a vital and important public service. With that in mind, it is clear the last few days have resulted in an unacceptable level of disruption to passenger and freight services. We have attempted throughout to get information to passengers about the disruption quickly enough to help them find a way to make their journeys.

There has, however, been a great deal of inaccurate speculation in the media about the problems, the causes and the impact. It is important to stress that none of the incidents of the past few days have happened as a result of the timetable changes on the West Coast Main Line. They are the types of issue which happen from time to time on an operational railway, and not linked to sites where project work has been completed.

We have been acutely aware how vital it is to manage these incidents properly and efficiently. Intensive investigations will continue to take place over the next few days. Our top priority must be to deliver rail services for our customers and to find the root causes of these problems to prevent them from happening again. Our investigations will be the basis on which we decide how best to proceed, in discussion with our customers, the train and freight operating companies. In the meantime, I thought it would be useful to let you know some of the technical facts about the incidents.

Firstly, on 2 January, a light aircraft crashed onto the railway, at Colwich in Staffordshire, with the remnants of the plane being strewn over the railway. Sadly, there were three fatalities. All rail services were suspended. As the site and railway were declared a scene of crime by the police we were prevented from getting access whilst the police and Air Accident Investigators undertook their duties. While we are, of course, extremely conscious of the tragedy for the passengers and pilot on the plane, and our sympathies go out to their families, we must also be thankful that there was no major injury or loss of life to rail employees or passengers as a result.

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The plane came down between the rail lines and although it took the overhead wires down, the overhead line stanchions unaffected. Network Rail's incident and repair teams worked flat out to return the railway to full service as quickly as possible. The main work was to clear up the debris and general repairs of the lineside and infrastructure, particularly the overhead lines. The railway was returned to operational service on Sunday afternoon, 4 January.

Later that day, however, there was an incident with overhead wires at Watford Junction. This caused trains from London Midland and Virgin to get caught up in the wires, pulling them down and causing very significant damage. Our maintenance teams worked hard throughout Sunday night and succeeded in getting the railway back in operational use for the Monday morning peak.

It is now clear that a unit securing a live wire to the side of one of the overhead line gantries failed. This wire (the "return wire") returns unused electricity to the national grid and is fixed to the side of overhead line gantries to one side of the track. This wire swung down, striking and disabling the mechanism that keeps the main contact wires above the track in tension and at the right height. As a result, this caused them to sag and then to become entangled in the pantograph of the next train passing through the area. This is a known, but very rare type of failure.

On Monday, whilst undertaking snagging works, a subcontractor placing earthing straps on one of the overhead lines near Rugby Station slipped and touched a nearby live line. Fortunately, the operator was uninjured. However, the live line shorted out and caused damage that made the line unusable. The relevant contingency plan was implemented and the line was repaired by mid-morning, but there was a degree of disruption to services.

Then, very early on Tuesday morning, at Bletchley, an overhead wire (the catenary wire, which is strung above the contact wire keeping it at the proper height above the track) snapped at a joint where two long strands of the wire were joined. The only known previous failure of this nature was attributed to installation error. In this instance, the installation was undertaken more than five years ago. The failed component is being sent to an independent testing company to determine if an installation error was again the cause or whether another issue exists. One line was lost to traffic and restored later in the day.

At about nine o'clock on Tuesday night, there was a further incident at Kenton in North West London. Every few miles in the overhead line system there are "neutral sections" that divide electrically separate sections. In 2006, one was installed at this location, and trains have been going over this piece of railway for over two years. However, it now appears that the installation of this neutral section was not properly done, resulting in larger than normal

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been going over this piece of railway for over two years. However, it now appears that the installation of this neutral section was not properly done, resulting in larger than normal impact loads being imparted onto the system. Eventually, the supporting mechanism failed, with the wires consequently being pulled down by a passing train.

This caused serious passenger disruption on all lines into Euston. The slow lines were brought back into service around 10am on Wednesday. Large numbers of people, in teams from across the business worked for hours until it was sorted out. A near-full service was available by 5am today (Thursday). We are now trying to establish why this had not been picked up over the previous two years, and have started a systematic inspection of all such neutral sections on the West Coast Main Line. These inspections will be completed over the next few days.

As we have said, we need to work with the facts, so we can decide how best to manage our railway. As you would expect, there is a major focus and attention on this area. In the meantime, whilst I recognise it may be of scant consolation to those who have had their journeys disrupted this week, it is important to remember that the completion of the West Coast Main Line project last month will enable a step change in services for passengers and freight users and bring benefits to communities the length and breadth of the country. There are over 60,000 more seats for passengers per day, and long-distance journeys are up to 30% quicker. I would reiterate that the introduction of the new timetable was in no way a causal factor in this week's problems.

Once again, we recognise that this series of unconnected events has caused unacceptable disruption to passengers and freight users for which I apologise sincerely. Everyone at Network Rail, including myself, my senior colleagues and the many people who have worked tirelessly to get trains running again recognises this, and is totally committed to making sure those using the West Coast Main Line have a service which they can rely on.

Yours sincerely

**Iain Coucher**  
Chief Executive