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Network Rail Representations for Grand Central's application to operate services between Newcastle and Brighton (via Gatwick Airport) – Grand Central Response

Dear Louise,

This letter provides Grand Central's response to Network Rail's Representations for our application to operate services from Newcastle to Brighton, via Gatwick Airport, following the letter you received from Network Rail on 30 January 2026.

Grand Central would like to thank Network Rail for their representations. It is, of course, disappointing that Network Rail are not supportive of Grand Central's application to run additional services from Newcastle to Brighton, via Gatwick Airport, our "proposed services", as set out in their response letter.

Grand Central would now like to take the opportunity to address several aspects that Network Rail have raised in their response, given the volume of comments in Network Rail's letter, I will structure our response against the categories highlighted in the summary of the letter received from Network Rail. In summary of their position Network Rail state the following *"based on the evidence and analysis provided throughout our representations, Network Rail cannot support Grand Central's Section 17 application. This application presents numerous, significant concerns relating to capacity, timetable robustness, performance risk, rolling stock and route compatibility, level crossing safety, and the management of engineering access."*

In the remainder of this letter we will take each of these concern areas in turn:

Capacity

Grand Central has carried out detailed capacity analysis across the route, using the May 2026 timetable as a base. All timetables are Timetable Planning Rules compliant and have been accompanied by a Timetable Report document which demonstrates how the proposed services will

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operate alongside existing services, and F3 timetable prints to show detailed timing, line, and platform use for all passenger and empty services.

Network Rail appear to have two areas of concern around capacity (1) Declaration of congested infrastructure between Northallerton Longlands Junction and Newcastle King Edward Bridge South and (2) conflicts with other operators, including aspirations of franchised TOC, covering sections of the route of our proposed services, or crossing the route of our proposed services.

In relation to point (1) concerning the declaration of congested infrastructure, Grand Central would like to take the opportunity to remind that a formal declaration of Congested Infrastructure does not prohibit the ability to run additional services over the affected routes.

Section 2.2.5 of the Management of Congested Infrastructure, Code of Practice of 2024 states that “a declaration of congested infrastructure does not suspend access-related or any other engagement between Network Rail and existing or aspirant users of the designated areas of the network” and the letter of 14 March 2025 declaring the above section as Congested Infrastructure state that “this declaration does not mean that all new requests for access on the designated infrastructure will be automatically rejected because the route is not equally busy at all times of the day or week(<https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Northallerton-Longlands-Jn-and-Newcastle-King-Edward-Bridge-South.pdf>).

Our proposed timetable has been developed, and is demonstrated in our supporting evidence, that it can operate alongside the May 2026 timetable whilst being compliant with Timetable Planning Rules and therefore conflict free. We will also largely avoid the busiest times of the day. For example, between Northallerton and Newcastle in the May 2026 timetable there are on average 14 trains planned per hour in the hours that Grand Central will not operate, and 13 trains planned per hour in the hours Grand Central propose to operate. Our additional services will therefore increase the planned service in line with what is currently proposed in other hours of the day.

Additionally, Grand Central will operate our proposed services following the commissioning of Platforms 5 & 6 at Darlington, which will unlock a key operating constraint between York and Newcastle, facilitating the operation of our proposed services.

Concerning point (2) and conflicts with other operators, Network Rail have identified concerns around the proposed Grand Central services seeking to use the same paths as other operators within the May 2026 timetable, specifically:

- Govia Thameslink Railway services between Copyhold Jn and Brighton
- Govia Thameslink Railway services between Redhill and Brighton
- South Western Railway services between Reading and Wokingham, and through Guildford
- CrossCountry services between Reading and York

As already noted, our proposed timetable has been developed against the May 2026 timetable, and we have provided an accompanying timetable report that demonstrates how our proposals will operate alongside the May 2026 timetable, alongside F3 Prints (timetable extracts) for all proposed services and accompanying Empty Coaching Stock (ECS) moves.

None of our proposal prohibit any May 2026 service from operating that currently has rights. Specific responses to each of the areas highlighted by NR are covered below.

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Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) between Copyhold Jn and Brighton and between Redhill and Brighton:

None of our timetable proposals plan to use any paths that GTR plan to operate in the May 2026 timetable, and our proposals will not inhibit their ability to operate services that they have rights for.

We have planned our services to have as minimal an impact on other operators as possible, however some flex is required, in line with standard industry timetable development flex.

Between Balcombe Tunnel Jn and Brighton in both directions (the two-track section), our services utilise gaps that exist within the timetable. For Southbound services approaching Brighton some additional flex is required, with up to 2 minutes flex to the following GTR service between Preston Park and Brighton. This is to maintain the required headway approaching Brighton. The image below demonstrates a typical Southbound path operating alongside other May 2026 services.

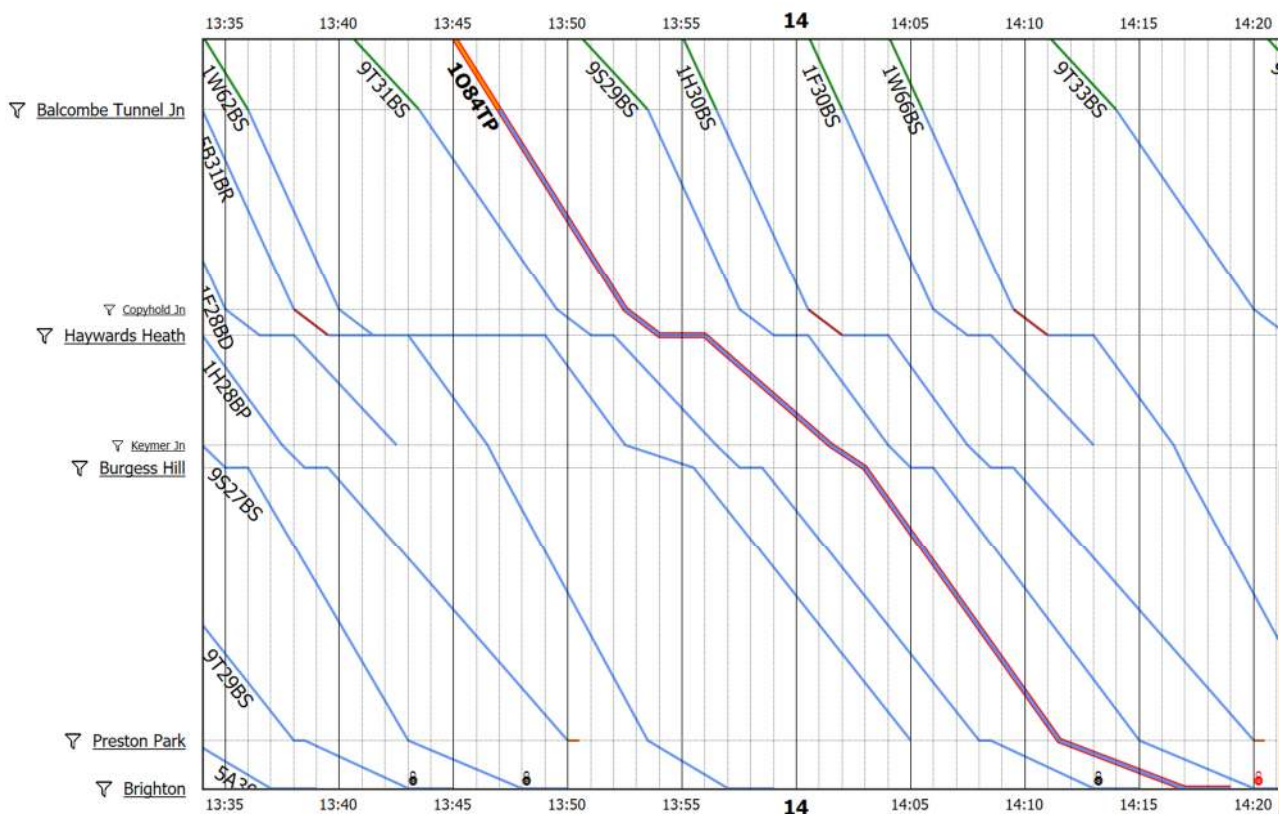


Figure 1: Timetable graph demonstrating a typical Down service on the Brighton Mainline between Balcombe Tunnel Jn and Brighton

Between Redhill and Balcombe Tunnel Jn, our services are primarily planned to operate on the Slow Lines. In order to create a path on this section, some flex is required to other operators, however this is primarily limited to platform alterations at Redhill to best maximise the use of capacity, some redistribution of dwell time and pathing allowances around Gatwick Airport, and some redistribution of dwell time and pathing allowances around Three Bridges for services towards Horsham. We do not believe these to be material changes, and do not impact the ability to operate services within the May 2026 timetable.

It should additionally be noted that independent, third-party performance analysis on our timetable showed that there is no material impact to the operation of other services between Redhill and

Brighton, with our services including sufficient recovery before joining the Brighton Mainline so not to transfer any disruption further across the network.

There is no publicly available record of GTR's 72nd Supplemental Agreement as referred to by Network Rail. We are therefore not able to comment on the content of this, however, we can re-confirm that all of our proposed services allow the continued operation of GTR's May 2026 timetable.

South Western Railway (SWR) between Reading and Wokingham, and through Guildford:

None of our timetable proposals inhibit SWR's ability to operate the timetable that they hold rights for, and we are not proposing to use paths which they will operate in the May 2026 timetable.

Our timetable proposals require no alteration to SWR at Guildford, and there are no timetable conflicts with SWR paths in the May 2026 timetable through Guildford. Between Reading and Wokingham we require 4 weekday SWR services to have minor modifications, which are in line with standard timetable development flexing rules.

CrossCountry between Reading and York:

Many of the weekday and Saturday paths do conflict with or directly use CrossCountry paths planned to uplift in the May 2026 timetable, however, we note that CrossCountry do not have the rights to operate these services, and have not sought such rights at this point. It is therefore extremely surprising that Network Rail are relying on this as a basis for its objection and Grand Central's position is that it cannot treat unrequested and uncontracted paths as constraints on another operator's application.

Grand Central proposed to use these paths because:

- a) These paths have been demonstrated to be compliant between Reading and York through the timetable development process and Network Rail's release of the May 2026 Offer timetable; and,
- b) These paths have not been operated since the timetable changes introduced following the COVID-19 pandemic. CrossCountry has had multiple opportunities since 2020 to apply for rights to run these paths at any time since and have opted not to do so. Therefore, Grand Central cannot be expected to assume that there will be an uplift in CrossCountry services at an unspecified date in the future and nor should CrossCountry be afforded any form of de facto protection for paths it has neither applied for nor secured. Treating such paths as if they were firm rights would be inconsistent with statutory duties and with the process for considering track access applications.

More generally, all conflicts with other operators have been resolved, with our accompanying timetable commentary report describing in detail how we have achieved a compliant timetable, with all changes to other operators in line with standard industry timetable development flexibility. This timetable commentary document also provides evidence of the level of robustness of our application, and the thought we have put into the timetable development to minimise impacts on other operators.

Addressing Network Rail's comments about the aspirations of other operators, Grand Central considers it inappropriate and irrelevant for such unsubstantiated conjecture to influence the

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assessment of Grand Central's application. Decisions and rationale must be evidenced-based, transparent and non-discriminatory. Treating speculative, unsubmitted or unassessed aspirations as relevant considerations would be inconsistent with these duties, as it would introduce uncertainty into the access regime, risk deterring legitimate applications, and undermine the principle that access rights are granted on the basis of transparent, evidenced impacts rather than conjecture. The Network Code similarly provides that capacity allocation and timetable development is undertaken on the basis of firm rights and established processes, not hypothetical future proposals. It is therefore wholly inappropriate for the infrastructure manager to rely on speculative aspirations of other train operators who have not sought, nor been granted, access rights across the paths in question. Future aspirations that have not been granted rights are, by definition, uncertain and cannot reasonably be treated as constraints on this application.

Grand Central is only able, and only required, to assess our services against operators with established rights. Any other aspiring open access operators are irrelevant until such time as applications are made, and such matters should not be treated as relevant considerations within Grand Central's application.

In relation to other aspiring open access operators who may be interested in sections of the network overlapping with our proposed services, we note that Grand Central's proposed services are planned to commence within PDC December 2026, whereas the proposed First Cardiff-York services are planned to commence in December 2028, and the proposed Alliance Rail Cardiff-Edinburgh services in December 2029. As potential interaction between Grand Central and these other services at a later date would therefore be addressed through future timetable development phases, for the respective timetable changes, during which Grand Central will continue to be flexible and accommodating within those processes to support the efficient use of the network.

Timetable Robustness

Our proposed timetable uses standard hour paths that are already in use in other hours. This de-risks the implementation of our proposed five services in each direction, with the interaction with other operators being known and repeatable from other hours. The new services we propose to introduce provide significant additional capacity to the network for the benefit of the travelling passenger, as we note in our form P, and over many key areas of the network, Grand Central already has experience of operating, such as Newcastle, York and Doncaster, with our drivers trained to operate as far as Burton-upon-Trent for class 5 moves.

We will have a total of 8 services passing through Birmingham New Street on a weekday, with 7 on a Saturday and 4 on a Sunday. 18 of these 19 services have been planned to have additional dwell time at Birmingham New Street to allow performance recovery, and mitigate performance spread either side of Birmingham. In addition, our proposed use of Birmingham New Street is in line with the CrossCountry May 2026 Offer timetable, which identifies no issues with reversals or platforming.

Additionally, as Network Rail will be aware, minimum dwell times in the Timetable Planning Rules are rounded up and therefore have some inherent recovery built into the values. In all cases, the proposed dwell times in our timetable are compliant with proposed TPR dwell times.

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Performance Risk

Between Newcastle and Reading, we have utilised vacant standard hour paths that are utilised in other hours, however these paths are unused in the hours when we propose to operate our services. This means our proposed service on this section is known and repeatable and is expected to perform in line with existing Newcastle to Reading services. Independent third-party performance analysis carried out by Ed Jeffery Ltd found that there was no material impact from the proposed Grand Central services operating.

We additionally propose to operate in the Southern Region, linking Reading to Brighton via Guildford and Redhill. Our analysis has shown that Guildford station has 7 platforms, which are not heavily utilised. There are typically 15 instances of platform occupation per hour (including dwell or turnrounds) across the 7 platforms – approximately 2 per platform per hour. Typical platform occupancy on Platforms 4, 5, and 8 (those planned to be used by Grand Central's proposed services) is between 13% and 15%. We have therefore determined that Guildford has the capacity, and on the day flexibility to act as a regulation point. We have therefore allowed additional dwell time (typically 10-15 minutes) to allow for recovery, and to ensure performance is not transferred across regions.

The independent third-party performance analysis carried out by Ed Jeffery Ltd, referred to previously, found that the proposed services were *'well placed from other services meaning there was limited performance risk, with good punctuality likely when presenting onto adjacent routes.'* It particularly noted the addition of regulation time at Guildford and on the North Downs route which *will limit the transfer of delay between the different routes.'*

As always, Grand Central is committed to engaging with Network Rail and other operators to explore opportunities for regulation statements; to assist in smooth & punctual operations on key lines of route.

Rolling stock and route capability

We have highlighted the potential to operate the proposed services with three rolling stock types. We believe all three will be available and off lease to select from, pending the progress of other track access applications currently with ORR for approval. In the event that we select a rolling stock type which requires route clearance, we will undertake this route clearance work and discuss any infrastructure changes required with Network Rail, as would be the normal process.

It should be noted that the areas not currently routed cleared are in the minority and the three rolling stock types are all based on a "go-anywhere" MkIII carbody shell, which reduces the risk of any material non-compliances in these limited remaining areas where route clearance is to be confirmed. Which implies that any areas of non-compliance are a matter of administrative close-out and not requiring of material changes to infrastructure. For example, the class 180 fleet, which is the current predominate rolling stock type operated by Grand Central is already route cleared for 65% of the route of our proposed services, with our driver team already having route knowledge from Newcastle to approximately Burton-Upon-Trent.

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Outstanding sections of route clearance should not preclude the granting of access rights and could be treated as a condition of operation if necessary. Grand Central will take responsibility for vehicle change and gauging work to ensure rolling stock will be cleared for operation on the route.

Level crossing safety

We note recent level crossing upgrades on the North Downs route completed in 2025. To de-risk excessive barrier time, we have sought to time our services to pass existing services (in the opposite direction) for the level crossings listed (Farnborough North, North Camp, Ash). This has been possible for 50% of our paths through these crossings, reducing the impact on barrier down time

Relating to the three level crossings north of Oxford (Sandy Lane, Yarnton Lane, Tackley) our analysis shows that the May 2026 timetable (including the proposed new Grand Central services) has 7% fewer planned services than in the May 2018 timetable through this area. We therefore believe the risk to be less than it was in May 2018 which was deemed acceptable by Network Rail at the time owing to the approval of the timetable and operation of the services at that time. Of course, Grand Central will work with Network Rail to implement any appropriate mitigations that are developed to improve safety of the level crossings listed as a whole.

Management of engineering access

We can confirm that we do not have plans that will impact EAS times or footprints. All our timetables are compliant with Section 4 and Section 5 times. Section 7 possessions will be dealt with through the standard industry processes, with our amended operating plan dependent on the possession time and footprint, however we would anticipate terminating at either Reading, Guildford or Gatwick Airport before continuing as ECS to Arriva TrainCare Eastleigh Depot in the event of infrastructure / network events that would require us to do so. Grand Central also has the appropriate measures in place for our existing services to deal with disruptions and to ensure the completion of passenger journeys to the minimum possible level of disruption, those processes and supply chain contracts will be extended to our proposed new services.

At the southern end of the route our regular stabling will be at either Brighton or Hove Yard, thereby providing flexibility during possessions. During disruptive maintenance that affect both, we will investigate stabling at Arriva TrainCare Eastleigh Depot, a depot operated by a Grand Central sister-company, this is a depot which is currently utilised by CrossCountry with their Class 22X fleet.

Additional points of note:

Corporate structure

We do not believe there is any ambiguity around company structure, as suggested by Network Rail. The proposed company structure has been explained during discussions with Network Rail during the development of our proposed services. For clarity, Grand Central Railway Company Limited (company number: 03979826) is seeking a new track access contract to operate these services, owing to their separate distinct nature compared to those operated in our current track access

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contract. It is believed that the most appropriate structure for both parties is to retain two separate contracts to facilitate appropriate contract management and claims between Grand Central and Network Rail across two very distinct service patterns. This was the arrangement put in place to deal with Grand Central's aborted Northwest Services which were approved to operate between London Euston and Blackpool.

Involvement in ECML ESG Timetable Development

Network Rail has questioned why Grand Central did not participate in the development of the ECML ESG timetable develop for Dec-25. A clear process was set out by ORR which requested operators seeking additional paths within the ECML ESG timetable being implemented from Dec-25 to respond and request access rights within May-25. Grand Central complied with this process for our 28th Supplemental application. However, noting that these proposed services are not intended to start until within PDC Dec-26, we were therefore not required to be part of that process or the ECML ESG timetable development. Noting this, we have developed our services against the ECML ESG timetable which was implemented in Dec-25 and have sought to update for May-26.

Service Management

Network Rail state, in the "Southern Region" section, sub-section "Service Management" that they "would like to understand the arrangements for managing trains to time, during disruption and for service recovery". Each of the areas of concern outlined in their document are covered below:

Plans for running fast/skip stops, curtailing short and diversionary route knowledge, e.g. via Horsham/Arun Valley or Keymer Jn/Lewes, noting that Class 220/221 are not currently cleared on either line

- Grand Central will develop a thorough, comprehensive set of Contingency Arrangements, which will address options for services running fast / skipping stops, potential (and suitable) locations to terminate services early / start services short and usage of relevant, and applicable diversionary routes.
- Grand Central are well versed on the creation, and implementation of, Contingency Arrangements given our existing operations on the East Coast Main Line operating two different routes (Sunderland-London and Bradford-London).
- Diversionary route knowledge is an area of focus for Grand Central on our existing routes; and this will form a key part of our proposed Newcastle-Brighton operation. As Network Rail note, options on the Southern region include (but are not limited to) via Horsham or via Lewes. Grand Central also note that other diversionary routes are available for other parts of the operation, such as in the Sheffield area (via Beighton / Old Road), in the Midlands (such as via Coventry, via Landor St Jn, or via Litchfield HL).

Plans for failed trains, including the nearest rescue set, assisting loco arrangements, fitter response, and emergency couplers

- The units proposed to operate the services will either; be fitted with an emergency adaptor coupling (for usage with a rescue / thunderbird locomotive), or Grand Central will ensure that suitable adaptor couplings are located in strategic locations along the route of operation – as is standard practice across the industry. This is, obviously, in addition to rescue via a train of the same type,

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which would be the first preference – depending on other unit locations across to the route (whether operated by Grand Central or another TOC).

Arrangements with other operators to conduct trains in emergencies

- It cannot be ascertained as to what is meant by the statement “arrangements with other operators to conduct trains in emergencies”, and we welcome clarification from Network Rail on this point.
- If Network Rail are referring to the usage of “route conductors” or “traction conductors”, Grand Central are well versed in the usage of both route conductors and traction conductors as part of our existing operations. This is covered in Grand Central Safety Management System (SMS) document GC/1020 “Hiring in Traincrew”.

In conclusion, after extensive engagement with Network Rail, in particular, Grand Central participation in the Southern Region timetable recast and TCRA processes we are disappointed to note that Network Rail have responded with several unsubstantiated comments, many of which are irrelevant or worse, not in line with the statutory duties of the infrastructure manager. We welcome further engagement with Network Rail to resolve any genuine points of contention following a positive decision from the ORR but would highlight to the ORR the significant volume of work undertaken by Grand Central to prove the viability of the proposed services we wish to operate and the robust application pack that we have submitted.

We welcome further discussion with the ORR and hope to demonstrate the significant benefits the travelling passenger will obtain from the introduction of our services.

Best regards,

Craig Nicolson

For and on behalf of Grand Central Railway Company Limited

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