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Dear Mr Burden

Thank you for your letter regarding our special leaf-fall timetable on the Cross City Line; Patrick Verwer has asked me to respond on his behalf.

As you point out the issue of leaves on the line is very serious. Compressed by passing trains, the leaves create a thin, slippery layer of material that sets hard creating poor adhesion between wheel and rail. Its effect is similar to black ice on the roads.

Across the country, autumn costs the rail industry approximately £60 million a year, including: £10 million for vegetation management across 21,000 miles of track, £34 million for clearing operations, £5 million for extra staff and operational costs, £10 million for damage to trains and track from leaf fall. Weather and seasonal factors account for 10% of all delay minutes across the network in any one year.

Our trains are fitted with applicators to lay a special gel to create traction on contaminated rails this is in addition to the work that Network Rail undertakes to clear vegetation and to de-contaminate the rails using high powered water jets. Our drivers are specially trained to operate trains safely in these conditions, including practicing in our driver simulator. They slow down their trains sooner for stations and signals and move off again more slowly.

Due to the high service frequency and the number of station stops on the Cross City Line we've introduced a special timetable to take us through the worst of the leaf-fall season. Even minor delays of a few minutes can cause serious disruption as the day progresses. The special timetable creates gaps, or fire-breaks, if you will, that allow the service to recover from such minor delays.

We have consulted widely with the Department for Transport, Centro and Passenger Focus all of whom are supportive. This timetable change has been introduced outside of the usual timetable change process and therefore it must not adversely affect other train operators, hence the pattern and spread of train times.

Last year we didn't run a special autumn timetable and as a result a little more than half (55%) of Cross City trains were punctual. Passenger feedback strongly suggested that fewer trains and good reliability was preferable to trying to run the whole service with poor reliability. This is what we are delivering this year.

Despite some performance issues early on (unrelated to the special timetable), our punctuality is 16% better on average than the previous three weeks. It's still early days but we're confident that the special timetable will give us 20% to 30% better punctuality than the same period last year.

Our Head of Route, Mark Goodall is monitoring the situation closely and listening carefully to what passengers have to say. Based on what he is seeing and hearing it made sense to restore stops on two key train services to make journeys more comfortable while still dealing with the challenge of the leaf fall season.

The 07.52 Longbridge to Four Oaks service will have stops reinstated and will call at Northfield, Kings Norton and Bournville. The 08.10 Lichfield Trent Valley to Longbridge service will have stops reinstated and will call at Wylde Green, Chester Road, Erdington, Gravelly Hill, Aston and Duddeston.

I trust this answers all your questions, if you have any further queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Gerard Burgess  
Stakeholder Manager