

Stop blaming the weather for late trains, Network Rail told



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Chris Ratcliffe/Getty

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Train travellers who do not believe claims by ministers and the industry that they have never had it so good are right to be sceptical, according to a new report.

The Office of the Rail Regulator yesterday delivered a stinging rebuke to Network Rail, accusing it of poor management as services deteriorated over the winter.

In its latest report into the state-backed company responsible for track and signalling, the regulator said that Network Rail was well adrift of the targets it is supposed to meet in return for receiving billions of pounds a year in taxpayer subsidy. Blaming the weather, the ORR said, was not good enough.

The regulator said that despite 15 years of investment since privatisation, the resilience of Britain's railways during snow and floods was not up to scratch. It said Network Rail's performance during poor weather in Scotland has been good — making its multiple target-missing efforts south of the Border all the worse.

Punctuality on long-distance services in England and Wales has fallen to 88.3 per cent, against a target of 92 per cent. On commuter services in London and the South East, punctuality is down to 91.4 per cent, against a target of 93 per cent.

This, said the regulator, was not down to the weather or the state of infrastructure but poor management, pointing to problems that paralysed London Paddington over Christmas and halted the Heathrow Express on its busiest day of the year. "Passengers suffered from some substantial over-runs of engineering works during the festive period," it said. "There were also several instances of basic operational planning mistakes causing delays."

Richard Price, chief executive of the ORR, said: "Passengers need to be able to rely on the railways to get them from A to B throughout the whole year. Network Rail's operational performance on parts of Britain's rail network has been poor over recent

months ... passengers again suffered poor performance during challenging weather conditions.”

The regulator is responsible for signing off on £37.5 billion of taxpayer-funded investment planned by Network Rail between 2014 and 2019. “The ORR will be reviewing whether the company can currently work and plan better and deliver a railway that can stand up to conditions like heavy rain and snow in the future,” Mr Price said.

Network Rail blamed the weather and the age of the railway’s assets. “The damage that extreme weather can do to a Victorian rail network which was neither designed nor built for such challenges is clear,” David Higgins, its chief executive, said. Mr Higgins said that his staff had been under pressure because of flooded tracks and landslides, and added: “This has been a wake-up call for the whole industry which we ignore at our peril. We are playing catch-up on decades of under-investment.”

The rail industry and transport ministers have argued that record numbers of people using the railways is proof of the popularity of services. Consumer groups counter that the railways are too crowded and unreliable.

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The answer is simple, sack the whole lot of them and bring SBB Swiss Rail in to run it.

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