

Ms Claire Mann
Managing Director
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please reply to:
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2021-08-26

Dear Ms Mann,

South Western Railway Timetable Consultation December 2022

Please find our response to the timetable consultation. In order that Railfuture has a coordinated response to this proposal, Wessex Branch is leading on this consultation for the organisation. We wish to be fully engaged with SWR going forward and in order to prevent any possible miscommunication, I would ask that all correspondence on this matter is sent via myself, either electronically, or in the post, to the address shown above. I will arrange to make sure it gets to the appropriate person in our organisation.

Yours sincerely,

Tony Smale

Tony Smale
Railfuture
Secretary, Wessex branch

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Railfuture Response to South Western Railway December 2022 Timetable Consultation

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Introduction:

Railfuture is Britain's leading, longest-established, national independent voluntary organisation campaigning for a bigger and better railway network for passengers and freight users. This response draws together the views of five Railfuture branches and affiliated Rail User Groups, as authorised by Railfuture's national Board of Directors.

This response has been framed around the statements in the Foreword by Clare Mann and Mark Killick (page 3), and the statements on page 5 and page 7 which both emphasise the fact that rail users are at the heart of this proposal and the stated determination to "build back better". Our comments have been tested against the extent to which the proposals meet those stated aspirations and achieve an appropriate balance between improving performance, reducing costs and increasing revenue.

Generic Issues:

Railfuture welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposals on behalf of rail users in the area served by SWR. We are however disappointed that the consultation appears to be limited to specific bodies (page 41 FAQ's), rather than all rail users. We believe that given the statement by Network Rail that "passengers are at the heart of our decision making" (page 7), this should be revisited as soon as possible. Whilst there are things that we support in the proposals, we have the following areas of generic concern and these are developed in the relevant sections of the document.

1. It is not possible to respond in detail on whether these proposals meet the needs of users, as no timings are shown. Journey times and the overall level of connectivity by using connecting services are therefore unknown. Whilst most journeys are on through trains, there are several key interchanges on the SWR network. In order to comment fully, more detail on proposed timings is required.
2. The document implies that the proposals relate to Monday to Saturday (page 14). However, the line of route proposals show peak services as well as off peak services. Urgent clarification on what is proposed on Saturdays is required. Is it the "off peak" pattern shown, or something else?
3. The document clearly states (page 14) that Sundays are not included. Given your own analysis that leisure travel is likely to recover most rapidly, and may well exceed pre-Covid levels, it seems bizarre that no Sunday proposals are forthcoming. SWR, and its predecessor, SWT, have historically had significantly lower frequency on Sundays compared to Saturday, and the Sunday offering compares unfavourably with a number of other LSE operators. Railfuture wishes to see Sunday proposals which, we suggest, should contain

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improvements over the pre-Covid Sunday timetable as part of supporting the “build back better” initiative and supporting growth in leisure rail use.

4. Railfuture is frankly surprised and disappointed to note the proposed off-peak train service reductions. It is an established fact that the costs of operating any railway are driven by the resources required for the peak, in terms of infrastructure, trains and staff. The delta of costs for off peak provision is small. Your own data forecasts a recovery above pre-Covid levels for leisure travel. We would therefore like to understand how your proposals meet the needs of rail users and equally make financial sense for the rail industry and taxpayers.

5. The information provided says nothing about first and last trains. It is essential that for meaningful consultation these are provided. Many key workers on shifts, including incidentally rail staff, cannot work from home and need to be able to get to and from work outside of “office hours”. In addition, the fact that leisure travel will become more important overall means that last services, particularly from London, will become an essential part of overall recovery. Railfuture wishes to see this information on first and last trains for all 7 days of the week and would expect to see no loss of the duration of services compared to the pre Covid timetable. The document quite rightly points out that any timetable is a compromise with various inputs to consider and balance (page 8). We accept that maintaining a safe, good performing railway is essential. However, this consultation must not be used as a cover for a curtailing of first and last trains to provide more maintenance opportunities. Railfuture would only support such a proposition once SWR and Network Rail have demonstrated that every other avenue has been explored to optimise use of the “White Periods” which were available in the pre Covid timetable.

6. Whilst there are a number of references to other operator’s services, there are no timings, or even indications of proposed frequencies for these. The importance of having this information available at key interchanges like Salisbury, Exeter St David’s, Southampton, Basingstoke, Guildford, Clapham Junction and the Portsmouth area is paramount if the overall assessment of the proposed pattern of service is to be constructive and meaningful. Users are not concerned with who the train operator is, they just want to get from A to C, changing at B. It is particularly disappointing in the aftermath of the recent White Paper, with the promise of greater cooperation between industry players, that this opportunity appears to have been missed. Railfuture would like to see the proposals from other operators at these key interchanges in order to assess the impact on SWR passengers.

7. Noting the proposed timeline leading to operation in December 2022, as set out on Page 43, it is very disappointing to see that after the present consultation, there appears to be no opportunity for further discussion on the detail of the train plan as it is developed. As you will be very well aware, a publication of the detailed timetable in September 2022 is far too late for any alterations to the December 2022 plan, as that date is purely driven by “informed traveller” timescales. Railfuture wish to work collaboratively with SWR as the detail develops and not be presented with a fait accompli in September 2022.

8. Railfuture has serious concerns about the way that peak hour capacity has been calculated (Table on Page 14). The justification of many of the peak hour reductions is driven by the argument that the proposed timetable delivers more than sufficient capacity. Railfuture believe that the whole methodology of calculating the capacity may be flawed. It is likely that peak numbers on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday will be significantly in excess of those on Monday and Friday. In addition, because of the very significant discount on longer distance season tickets, many such users were only travelling 3 or 4 days per week pre-Covid. Therefore, reductions in actual peak hour numbers may vary significantly by line of route, with longer distance numbers being much stronger than on shorter distance

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routes. Data from TfL taken from 15-minute gate entries at Vauxhall and Waterloo underground stations indicates pre-Covid that numbers on Fridays were lower than Monday to Thursday. In addition, that data records a peak of numbers between 07.45 and 08.00 with a second peak some 1 hour later. Please explain the basis on which the “Peak Hour” of 08.00 to 08.59 was selected? It may not represent a true measure of the needs of passengers, particularly on the likely peak days of the week. We need to understand much more about the methodology employed to be able to constructively comment on whether the proposals represent an acceptable level of peak service provision for users.

9. Equally significant in the table shown on Page 14 is the fact that for the high peak hour only some 33,000 people will have a seat. If one accepts your forecast of a return to some 76% of pre-pandemic journeys (remember that not all peak hour journeys are by commuters), then during the peak hour into Vauxhall/Waterloo many people will still be standing. We are unable to calculate the number standing from the data you provided, but believe that the estimate of numbers still forced to stand should be clearly shown. Given that the new Class 701 trains were ordered pre-pandemic, how can it be sensible to have new trains sitting in sidings during the peak hour, whilst many people are likely to be standing on SWR services in the peak periods? SWR need to attract people back on to trains, not start from the belief that users will accept what they put up with pre pandemic. Surely if “build back better” and “customer focus” is to mean anything, the provision of a seat for as many people as possible is a good place to start. We accept that people may choose to stand for a variety of reasons, but the provision of sufficient seating to meet demand is essential in a post Covid world if passenger confidence is to be restored. The use of the word “capacity” could mislead the unwary.

10. Whilst we accept that it is out of scope of this consultation, there is no mention of what is proposed in terms of train services between now and December 2022 (except the proposed withdrawal of the Salisbury to Bristol service in December 2021). The reality is that changes to travel patterns will evolve over time and it is essential for users to understand what is proposed in the intervening period. We would like to understand whether SWR propose to maintain the present pattern of service until December 2022, or whether there are going to be a series of incremental steps between now and that date as demand recovers. As an example, given what you assume about leisure travel, it is not sensible to only provide one train per hour (Monday to Friday) to and from Weymouth during the summer of 2022, but to provide two trains per hour from December 2022.

Specific Line of Route Comments:

1. Waterloo to Chessington South.

No comments.*

2. Waterloo to Dorking and Waterloo to Guildford via Leatherhead.

We do not agree with the train service reductions proposed for three reasons. Firstly, there is a loss of connectivity between Guildford and a large swathe of SW and South London suburbs. Yes, the level of use at Bookham is low, but that is not the issue. Secondly it is simply not user friendly to say that Southern will provide alternative services to Victoria and London Bridge. Users plan to live and work on the basis of where trains go. This will cause major inconvenience to many workers. Thirdly these changes will result in a significant loss of frequency at some very busy stations. Worcester Park for example had 2,359,004 entry and exit passengers per year in 2018/19 (ORR data) and will lose 50% of its off-peak service.

3. Waterloo to Guildford via Cobham.

No comments.

4. Waterloo to Hampton Court.

The detail on page 19 does not appear to correspond with the table shown on page 17. The latter shows 4 trains in the peak from Hampton Court. Page 19 says that these trains start from Surbiton. Assuming that the trains will run to Hampton Court for operational reasons, then surely these trains should run as passenger trains to and from Hampton Court, calling at Thames Ditton?

5. Waterloo to Shepperton via Wimbledon.

The reasons for these changes appear to be spurious at best. If performance of this service is a problem, then the answer is to recast the service to improve the turnaround. Not stopping at Earlsfield will do nothing to solve the problem, as the non-stop train will simply catch up the preceding train. At present all trains call at all stations on the Main Slow lines between Wimbledon and Waterloo and this is a pattern that maximises capacity and provides a simple “London Underground” type of offering to users.

6. Waterloo to Teddington via Kingston.

The reduction in peak hour services appears to be a “rob Peter to pay Paul” solution. Railfuture would only support such a proposal if SWR can demonstrate that this makes best overall use of capacity in rail user’s interest. Norbiton and Kingston are both very busy stations. Can you demonstrate a net overall improvement for passengers by starting these services from Surbiton/Hampton Court?

7. Waterloo to Woking (stopping service).

No comments.

8. Waterloo to Reading.

Railfuture welcomes the provision of an Ascot to Reading morning peak service. This has been badly needed for some years. However, this “improvement” is not what it seems. Pre-Covid there were 5 additional services towards Reading, over and above the standard off peak pattern, so the reality is that the contra peak service into Reading has lost 4 trains net when compared to the pre Covid timetable. This is not in user’s interests. We support the additional stop at Vauxhall in terms of connectivity to LUL. However, until we understand more about how SWR have calculated capacity, we are unable to comment on the peak hour reductions to and from Reading and Waterloo.

9. Waterloo to Windsor.

No comments.

10. Waterloo to Weybridge via Hounslow.

No comments

11. Waterloo to Waterloo via Kingston.

No comments.

12. Waterloo to Shepperton via Twickenham.

The main concern around this and other Windsor Line proposals is the loss of peak period frequency at Queenstown Road. To suggest that the opening of the Northern Line extension will reduce the need for services to call is misleading. The area around the station is developing rapidly and historically most users have come from the Clapham direction, not from central London. A reduction of some 50% in service levels at this station

is not in passenger's interests. Modern trains with better performance than class 455's, DCO, wider doors to reduce dwell times should all improve punctuality and all other avenues should be explored to meet user's needs before reducing the train service to this degree. These remarks apply to the following two service groups as well.

13. Waterloo to Hounslow via Brentford and reverse.

We have considered these two services as one entity as they are in effect one service. This proposal results in a major loss of connectivity between stations on the Hounslow Loop and the Richmond line. Richmond is an important retail and commercial centre. Forcing people to change will lengthen journey times and reduce the attractiveness of the service offering. These proposals will result in a major loss of frequency of service at several stations. We are particularly concerned about Mortlake with 1,803,324 entry and exit passengers per year in 2018/19 (ORR Data) which loses some 50% of its off-peak service. How can this be in user's interests, particularly when your own projections state that off-peak traffic may well exceed pre-Covid levels?

14. Aldershot to Ascot.

No comments.

15. Guildford to Farnham.

No comments.

16. Waterloo to Alton.

No comments.

17. Waterloo to Basingstoke.

No comments.

18. Waterloo to Portsmouth via Guildford (fast) and Waterloo to Portsmouth (slow).

We have considered these together as the issues are intertwined. We think the proposal to withdraw the Haslemere off-peak service should be reconsidered for the reasons outlined in the "Generic Issues" section. We are particularly concerned that the proposals as they stand mean that there is only one fast train from Clapham Junction to Guildford per hour off-peak. As a minimum, one of the fast Portsmouth services should call at Clapham Junction off peak to provide some alternative. This would of course mirror the pattern which applies on the Weymouth route.

19. Waterloo to Portsmouth via Eastleigh and Waterloo to Southampton semi fast.

We have considered these together as they form a combined service at present north of Eastleigh. Railfuture supports the splitting of the Waterloo to Poole service as outlined. It serves little useful purpose as a through service at present and is wasteful in terms of resources. We do not understand why your proposal shows 2 trains per hour in the peak from Shawford to Waterloo in the up direction, but only 1 train per hour from Waterloo in the evening peak. Is this a mistake? If not, perhaps you can explain the rationale behind this proposal. We do not think that the proposal to truncate the second peak service from Portsmouth to Waterloo at Winchester is sound. This will result in a significant loss of connectivity between Fareham (and other local stations between Fareham and Eastleigh) and north Hampshire and of course to Waterloo. Again, without seeing the proposed timings, it is not possible to assess the impact of this on overall journey times. In respect of the Waterloo to Southampton semi-fast service we would like you to consider stopping this train at St Denys in both directions, both peak and off peak. St Denys serves a large residential area in the suburbs of the city and at present has a very poor service.

20. Waterloo to Bournemouth and Weymouth.

Railfuture welcomes the restoration of 2 trains per hour to Weymouth. We also support the proposal in respect of Branksome and Parkstone, which will provide 2 through trains to London instead of 1 in effect at present.

21. Southampton to Bournemouth (slow).

As in our comments in respect of “19” above, we support this proposal. However, we would like an assurance that the resourcing of this “shuttle” will be such that it is self-contained in respect of crewing so that in the event of disruption elsewhere, a minimum service can be reliably maintained between Southampton and Bournemouth.

22. Portsmouth to Southampton.

No comments.

23. Brockenhurst to Lymington.

No comments.

24. Waterloo to Exeter St David’s.

Railfuture has grave concerns about the proposal to remove the additional peak hour services between Exeter and Honiton/Axminster. Exeter is a major regional destination in respect of work, education and shopping/entertainment. Peak services were often severely overcrowded pre-Covid between Exeter Central and Honiton. There is very considerable housing growth in this rail corridor. We will be interested to see how you propose to “retain capacity” on this section and at the same time “improve performance”. If this is at the price of only providing a 2-hourly service at certain stations in this section during busy times of the day, this is unacceptable. It is simply disingenuous to mention that the Devon Metro proposals will resolve this issue (Page 34). The provision of the infrastructure to make this happen is years away and will certainly not be in place by December 2022. Overcrowding on this route has been an ongoing issue for several years. Railfuture would like to see a clear commitment that all trains west of Salisbury will be formed of a minimum of 6 cars.

25. Waterloo to Salisbury.

We do not understand the logic of removal of the off-peak service between Salisbury and Yeovil. If the logic is about performance, then this should equally apply during the peak periods. If the reasons are about cost reduction, then we refer you to our generic comments. We would like you to review the fact that this service will call at Clapham Junction (off-peak) in the down direction only. This is confusing for users and it is our view that you should consider a call at Clapham Junction in both directions to improve connectivity, given that your overall proposals result in a lower off-peak frequency on the Fast Lines at Clapham.

26. Salisbury to Romsey via Southampton.

No comments.

27. Salisbury to Yeovil via Westbury.

The prime purpose of this service is to retain diversionary route knowledge for traincrew which Railfuture supports. Every station on this route is served by another operator (GWR). Can you please explain how this situation is therefore different from the reasoning you have employed to justify the withdrawal of the Salisbury to Bristol service? That said, we do believe that a regular service between Yeovil Junction and Yeovil Pen Mill should be provided to improve connectivity between the Heart of Wessex line and the Waterloo to Exeter line, with only a minimal level of service on the whole route, sufficient to maintain traincrew route knowledge.

28. Reading to Salisbury.

Railfuture welcomes the proposal to provide a robust diversionary point for West of England services in the event of engineering work or disruption and improved connections at Reading. However, this proposal appears to disadvantage passengers returning from London Waterloo in the evening who will see a reduction of 50% in through services to Andover and Salisbury. In addition, the proposed calling pattern in the down direction appears to withdraw any service from Overton, Whitchurch and Grateley in the evening. We do not support this change. We would like to see alternative plans developed which support the principle, but without the clear disadvantages to London Waterloo rail users. Perhaps this could be part of a weekend service improvement proposal?

29. Island Line.

No comments.

30. Salisbury to Bristol Temple Meads.

We note firstly that you propose to withdraw this service from December 2021 (page 37). This proposal will result in a significant loss of connectivity between Bristol and the other stations on the route and destinations between Salisbury and Waterloo, especially Clapham Junction. Many rail users wish to avoid cross London journeys and this provides an essential link for passengers with luggage, wheelchairs etc. As referred to in item 27, the logic of an alternative supplier appears to be applied selectively.

This route is very heavily used, especially between Bath and Trowbridge, with frequent crush loading. Given your assumptions about the return of leisure travel, we do not accept that these trains should be withdrawn without seeing precisely how GWR will “meet demand” (page 37) on this section of route. It seems ironic that the proposal to withdraw this service will result in Salisbury traincrew losing some 23 miles of diversionary route knowledge required as part of the proposals in item 27.

31. Heart of Wessex Route.

We note the proposal to withdraw this service and would agree that resources of both traincrew and rolling stock would be better employed on the West of England main line on Summer Saturdays.

* Where we say “no comment”, this means that we are satisfied that the frequency meets the passenger needs. We reserve the right to comment further once the detail required in the “Generic Issues” section is provided.

Feedback Responses:

Responses to the questions posed (page 42) should be seen in the context of the generic concerns that have been articulated above and the comments on each line of route proposal. They are not repeated for the sake of brevity but are particularly relevant to questions 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Q1. Passenger group

Q2. No, our interest covers the whole area of SWR operation.

Q3. The proposals result in a loss of overall capacity and connectivity. The aim should be to ensure as many people as possible have access to a seat. We are particularly concerned about the frequency/capacity reductions in the Epsom/Dorking area (See our comments on each line of route proposal).

Q4. We welcome the restoration of 2 trains per hour to Weymouth and agree that the Waterloo to Poole service needs to be revised both for resource reasons and passenger benefit. We are concerned about the loss of connectivity as a result of the proposed stopping patterns (See our comments on each line of route proposal). The reduction in both peak and off-peak frequency should be exploited to provide for more trains calling at Clapham Junction. The first priority should be that one of the two Portsmouth line fast services should call at Clapham, as of course happens on the Weymouth and West of England Lines. Clapham Junction has long required better connections to the SWR main line routes and this opportunity must not be missed to offset some of the other loss of connectivity.

Q5. We are concerned about the 50% loss of peak frequency at Queenstown Road. The idea that the opening of the Northern Line to Battersea will mitigate this is simply inaccurate. Much of the historic flow to and from this area is from the Clapham direction, not from Central London.

Q6. The overall package of proposals for the West of England line is very unsatisfactory (see our detailed comments on the Line of Route proposals).

Q7. Yes, we do. However, the long-term salvation of railway finances will be driven by passenger growth, not cost cutting. Railways have high fixed costs and relatively low variable costs. These proposals will make the total product offering less attractive than that which existed pre pandemic and will therefore inhibit passenger growth.

Q8. We accept that the proposal may provide 93% of pre-Covid capacity. However, the use of the word “capacity” is fundamentally misleading, as it assumes that in the peak roughly half of the passengers will be standing on the approaches to Vauxhall/Waterloo. We believe that the objective of the proposed timetable should be to ensure that as many people as possible get access to a seat, not just a space to stand in.

Q9. Train service reliability and punctuality is the end product of many factors and inputs. The timetable is just one element of that. We accept that there is trade-off between frequency of service and punctual operation, but only if all the other elements are in place (for example, reliable trains, sufficient traincrew with spare cover, robust diagramming to minimise reactionary delays, a performance “culture” etc). Your own information in the graph on page 9 shows that there has been a steady deterioration in PPM over many years, long before Covid. It is Railfuture’s view that a reduced train frequency will not on its own address the underlying issues of poor performance and proper attention to all the other inputs is necessary to deliver a reliable, punctual railway.

Q10. Yes, these are set out in the Generic Issues and the comments on each line of route proposal.

Conclusions:

The proposals as set out will result in a significant loss of connectivity and service frequency. Railfuture does not understand the long-term rationale for these proposals given the stated desire of “building back better” and meeting the needs of rail users. We fully accept that the rail industry finances need to be repaired, but focusing on cost reduction initiatives that will deter customers from returning to rail is counter-productive and seems to demonstrate a lack of joined up thinking given the very challenging carbon reduction targets that the Government has committed to. We wish to engage with SWR to help find solutions that deliver what rail users want, but still providing value for money to taxpayers.

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