



Greater Western franchise  
December 2006 timetable

Passenger Focus briefing document

## Summary

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Passengers and stakeholders across the new Greater Western franchise area have expressed widespread and considerable misgivings about the impact of the draft Greater Western Franchise timetable. The company has also received a large number of written representations. Together with the Department of Transport (DfT), its specialists are currently analysing these to identify possible changes to ease the situation in some areas before the new timetable is launched in December 2006. Passenger Focus has submitted a detailed response to First Great Western (FGW).

The draft Greater Western franchise timetable fails to meet long-established customer flows and to provide adequate peak-hour capacity in both the Bristol/Bath and Exeter travel-to-work areas. It also reduces commuter services in the Didcot, Twyford, and Maidenhead areas, and the number of faster, long-distance services between London, Exeter and Plymouth. Essentially, the draft timetable reflects operational constraints rather than passenger need, and as such, Passenger Focus has to conclude that it is not fit for purpose.

Passenger Focus has been assured by First Group that a number of issues can be dealt with through a slight adjustment to the rolling stock fleet allocated to the Greater Western franchise, whilst others can be sorted out through fine-tuning of the draft timetables.

We therefore strongly recommend that DfT urgently reviews its original franchise specification to

- examine the cause and effect of decisions made on the provision of future services within the franchise area
- enable the provision of an additional HST set. This would be a relatively low cost option which would have a huge impact on reducing the issues causing most concern across the region
- review its initial capacity specification for services in travel to work areas of major regional conurbations.

## Introduction

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The draft First Great Western (FGW) timetable for December 2006 has generated a great deal of anxiety in the region as passengers and businesses consider its potential impact, and particularly the prospect of reduced local commuter and London services. The draft timetable consultation resulted in a large number of responses to FGW voicing concerns. Passenger Focus submitted a detailed response to FGW.

Passenger Focus is concerned that passenger need appears to have been subsumed to meet operational constraints, partly dictated by the new franchise specification. Although it may be legitimate for DfT or FGW to seek third party funding for new services in the future, it is not acceptable that a change in franchise specification should result in an inability to meet existing demand.

### Main issues and recommendations

1. One of the principal issues of public concern, especially for the business community, is the diminution of the recently introduced, relatively fast services between London, Exeter and Plymouth. These services, with a headline journey time of three hours to Plymouth, were reintroduced as recently as December 2004, following sustained campaigning by stakeholders and the former Rail Passengers Committee Western England, who argued that connectivity to London was vital to the regeneration of Exeter, Plymouth and the South West peninsula. The allocation of an additional HST unit to the West of England fleet would allow the franchisee to build on this progress – enabling out and back journeys to be made comfortably in a single day, realising the aspiration for a morning arrival from London in Exeter around 09.30 and Plymouth by around 10.30.

The provision of the additional HST set would also allow the introduction of a pair of fast services each day between London, Exeter and Plymouth. This would have the further benefit of freeing those services where it is planned to have more frequent intermediate stops to provide adequate connectivity westwards from Westbury (where the West of England line provides a valuable intersection with the South Coast to Bristol and South Wales route).

*Passenger Focus recommends that there is an urgent need for the Department for Transport to review its original specification to examine the cause and effect of that decision on the provision of future services along that route. The provision of an additional HST set would be a relatively low-cost option which would have a huge impact on reducing the issues causing most concern across the region.*

2. Capacity on the South Coast to Bristol and South Wales route was also enhanced as recently as 2004 following various studies including a WSP report commissioned by the Government Office for the South West (The Bristol/Bath to South Coast Study) and the intervention of Dr Kim Howells, when Minister of State, following publication of the report *'The Mainline They Shouldn't Ignore'* by Passenger Focus, then the Rail Passengers Council. The reduction in capacity now planned for this route (six of the nine units allocated will revert back from three to two coaches) is likely to exacerbate the overcrowding issues associated with peak travel in the greater Bristol

travel-to-work area as well as the unusually large leisure, service and student flows to and from the South Coast.

The current planned deployment to Bristol area local services will not accommodate present demand. One of the advantages of ensuring that the cross-Bristol services are adequately equipped to deal with normal peak flows is that it would enable the traditional redeployment of commuter units in July and August to meet the seasonal needs of the holiday branches – thereby addressing a concern that has also caught the imagination of the passengers who use these existing services.

*Passenger Focus recommends that there is an urgent need for the Department for Transport to review its initial capacity specification for these services.*

3. The consultation has drawn attention to a host of other regional detailed timetabling issues, such as the time of the first arrival at Weymouth and the erosion of service provision from local stations in the greater Bristol, Plymouth and Exeter travel-to-work areas.

*Passenger Focus believes that, with careful timetable planning and stakeholder engagement, these matters should be largely capable of resolution within existing rolling stock allocations.*

## Specific passenger issues

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### Capacity

The timetable and associated draft train diagrams fail to provide adequate seating capacity at peak periods for customers travelling in the several key corridors, particularly

- Westbury – Bath Spa – Bristol Temple Meads – Filton Abbey Wood – Newport (South Wales) – Cardiff Central
- Exeter St Davids – Exmouth
- Exeter Central – Newton Abbot – Torbay

The timetable also fails to deliver adequate peak-hour capacity between Bristol Temple Meads and the fast growing station at Worle, which is not served by the westward peak-hour extension of high speed trains to and from Weston-super-Mare.

Specifically, in the Bristol area, there will be a major reduction in seats during the morning peak on the cross-city services (e.g., Westbury-South Wales, Gloucester-Weston super Mare). This may be as high as 40% given the reduction in the number and length of units that will be allocated to these services. Due to planned changes in the type of train unit used, evening peak seating capacity between Bristol and Worle will be reduced by over 50%.

Rolling stock economies and associated timetable revision will also result in the elimination of key commuter services. For example, the timetable revision will mean that there is no arrival at Exeter from Barnstaple between 07.50 and 09.48 – the former time being too early for the majority of commuters and students who currently use the service that arrives at Exeter Central at 08.23. The situation is even more acute in Dorset where the first train from Dorchester West, Yeovil and beyond has been retimed to arrive at 09.13.

A similar problem arises for people travelling to and from Ivybridge to Plymouth. It is planned to reduce this service from the current twelve trains to five trains in each direction (of which the DfT has indicated that it plans to withdraw a further two in the context of the new South Western franchise).

The draft timetable assumes a reduction in operating hours for passenger services throughout the region – first trains will run later and last trains will run earlier on almost all routes, including the Great Western Main Line to London. This will impact on regional mobility, accessibility and commuters into and out of London in the peak times.

Drastic service reductions for specific stations have received wide publicity elsewhere in the region, notably at Saltash, Hayle, St Germans, Umberleigh and Copplestone (intermediate stations on the Barnstaple branch), Melksham, Bedwyn, Warminster, Westbury, Cheltenham, Didcot, Twyford and Maidenhead.

The situation at Westbury is also critical in that the new timetable shows a complete lack of regard for issues of regional connectivity and inter-urban links, contrary to the Secretary of State's own Regional Planning Guidance. Westbury is a key hub for connections between the South Coast and the South West peninsula as well as providing essential links for passengers changing at Westbury for onward journeys into the West Country.

The failure to specify semi-fast services between London and Exeter will result in lack of connectivity from the peninsula with the busy South Wales-South Coast route at Westbury. The insertion of additional stops into long-distance services from Plymouth to cover some of the consequences of the withdrawal of the semi-fast services increases has led to the withdrawal of four of the existing five express services between Plymouth and London.

### **Customer flows**

The draft timetables fail, in many instances, to take account of long-established customer flows throughout the South West of England government region. The draft timetable totally fails to take account of the large customer demand for rail travel between Central Southern England and South West England via Westbury.

There are numerous examples of a 'resource-driven' timetable, rather than providing facilities to meet known customer demand – a few of the numerous examples

- no train arrival at Exeter St Davids from Barnstaple between 07.44 (far too early for both commuters and students) and 09.40 (too late)
- no train arrival at Weymouth from Bristol, Westbury and Yeovil before 09.13 – the current service is used by many Weymouth College students and other commuters
- no train departure from Keynsham to Bath Spa between 08.00 and 09.01 and no train departure from Bristol Temple Meads to Keynsham between 16.56 and 17.56
- no northbound train departure from Frome to Bath Spa and Bristol Temple Meads between 07.04 and 09.03
- no westbound train from Truro to Penzance between 16.24 (too early for Truro College students) and 18.04 (too late for commuters)
- the timetable on the Severn Beach line totally fails to cater for the current high usage of services by schoolchildren
- the service at the fast growing station of Ivybridge is largely destroyed
- no westbound train calls at Hayle for seven hours 27 minutes (11.03 to 18.30)

### **Connectivity**

A major benefit of the new Greater Western passenger rail franchise claimed by DfT Rail would be 'improved' connectivity between long distance 'inter-city' services and local trains – the connectivity in the draft timetable is 'far worse' than the existing service. The timetable does not reflect nationally agreed minimum connectional allowances which apply to interchange stations.

## Clock face timetables

Passengers generally prefer clock face timetables, but even where services are designed to operate every hour or every thirty minutes, the draft timetable fails to deliver a standard pattern timetable e.g. departures from Reading to Bristol Temple Meads at 10.26, 10.57, 11.26, 11.58, 12.26 and 12.56.

The late evening pattern of departures from London Paddington/Reading to Swindon is at 15 or 45 minute intervals, rather than every 30 minutes.

## First and last trains

The draft timetable will mean the withdrawal of many well-used first and last trains throughout the region.

The reduced levels of services are in almost all parts of the region of the following types

- substantial losses in local services, particularly in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire, failing to meet RSS or local needs or aspiration
- reduced services into the urban areas of the West of England, Exeter and Plymouth
- reduced seating capacity in peak hours for train services that are already overcrowded, particularly in the West of England, Exeter and Plymouth travel-to-work areas
- losses of interregional connectivity with the South Coast to Bristol and South Wales route at stations such as Westbury
- long gaps between services during the day at certain well-used stations, while first trains run later and last trains run earlier throughout the region
- reduction in the fast services that provide key headline journey times between Plymouth and London which will have a significant impact on the business commuters in each direction
- the withdrawal of semi-fast services between London/Exeter reduces the competitiveness, capacity, connectivity and resilience of the main line service which has shown significant growth of late
- the reduction of commuter trains between Didcot and Paddington during the morning and evening peaks will lead to increased capacity issues and longer evening journey times
- the Cotswold line will also suffer with the reduction of early and late trains from Cheltenham which will effectively reduce any opportunity for accessing the capital night time economy as there will be no effective return journey

This list is by no means exhaustive but does give an indication of the main issues which are evident across the region and new franchise area. For more information please contact:

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