



## South West Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy

Consultation by Network Rail

A response by Passenger Focus

February 2006

Passenger**focus**   
putting rail passengers first

## **South West Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy**

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Passenger Focus welcomes the opportunity to comment on the South West Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS).

We support the broad objectives behind the RUS process and welcome the consultative approach adopted by Network Rail.

This response is split into two sections. The first covers general comments on the overall document and RUS process and the second addresses the specific proposals contained within the consultation document. References and page numbers quoted in this response refer to the original consultation document.

## General comments

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Passenger Focus was pleased that the consultation document contained a good assessment of existing services and, in particular, provided information on such things as overcrowding and performance on a route-by-route basis rather than as an overall average. Passenger Focus has long argued that access to disaggregated information is essential when discussing specific infrastructure proposals. Research conducted by the Rail Passengers Council in 2004<sup>1</sup> also confirmed that passengers wanted information that was relevant to *their* journey and not some broad average. If such information can be included within the RUS consultation then it begs the question of why it is not made available as a matter of course. Hence Passenger Focus reiterates its calls for performance and crowding information to be made available on a route-by-route basis.

Passenger Focus agrees that the two main challenges facing the South West Trains operation are capacity and performance and would endorse the summary of 'baseline gaps' identified in paragraph 3.71. We feel, however, that there are two additional gaps that merit attention: the North Downs Line and the Alton line. Both are covered in more detail later in this submission.

The extent of the challenge is shown in even greater detail when past and future demand is taken into account. Between 1997/8 and 2002/3 passenger numbers on South West Trains grew by around 22%. Between 2003 and 2016 Network Rail estimates further unconstrained growth of 23% between 2003 and 2016. This, coupled with the existing crowding levels highlighted in Tables C and D, makes it clear that doing nothing is not an option.

Indeed, the consultation document states that if nothing were done the increasingly overcrowded conditions would limit growth to a 19% increase (and potentially less within London itself) – a reduction of at least 4% points. This demand would either be lost completely or would be forced onto other forms of transport which, given the pattern of travelling in the South/South West, is likely to mean increased congestion on the roads or, in London, increased congestion on the Underground.

The area covered by the South West Main Line RUS also has a high commuter base (80% of journeys are between 07.00 and 10.00). Hence, increasingly crowded services with demand being 'turned-away' has implications for employment patterns and regional development plans throughout the South.

Investment in capacity is therefore seen as a priority issue and Passenger Focus is pleased that Network Rail has identified a number of specific options. As a passenger representative body Passenger Focus is naturally supportive of investment and enhancement proposals – which means that there is a lot within the RUS consultation that we support in principle. We are, however, unsure as to how these will be delivered. Passenger Focus understands that a RUS is not a delivery mechanism in its own right but is designed to inform other investment vehicles – notably franchise contracts. It is clear from parallel consultation conducted by the Department for Transport on the future South Western franchise that this may deliver some improvements in the short to medium term but will not address the fundamental need for investment in additional capacity outlined in the RUS. It is crucially important, therefore, that the RUS also identifies a mechanism through which these longer term requirements can be taken forward and does not just become another planning document that sits on the shelf.

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<sup>1</sup> Research into rail passengers perceptions of rail performance information. RPC. 2004.

Passenger Focus is pleased to see that engineering access is being considered as part of the RUS process. On behalf of passengers we understand that engineering work is a necessity if the rail industry is to deliver its promise of a safe, reliable and efficient rail network. The consequence, though, is disruption to services and inconvenience for passengers. The crux of the issue therefore is achieving a balance between engineering efficiency and passenger requirements.

Decisions on a future possessions strategy cannot simply be based on cost and engineering convenience, important as they undoubtedly are, but must be linked back to the ultimate customer – the passenger. For instance, a policy of decimating evening services may make routine maintenance work more efficient and cheaper but would not be acceptable to passengers.

Passenger Focus was concerned that little research had been conducted to determine how engineering work could be planned and managed to cause minimal disruption to passengers. Hence, together with Network Rail, the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) and the Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) we commissioned some research into passengers' views<sup>2</sup>. The report discusses what the rail industry could do when planning, managing or executing engineering work, to lessen the effects of disruption to passengers. Key findings of the research were:

- Passengers were more tolerant of planned works that will deliver long-term improvements than unplanned 'patch-up jobs.' Following disruption to services, passengers expect to be shown the benefit of the improvements (e.g. in terms of new platforms or signals or details of how punctuality or reliability has improved). One respondent commented: "They do engineering works all the time but it makes no difference." In short, passengers are willing to accept periods of disruption if they can be sure they will reap the benefits of an improved rail network afterwards.
- Although 'major' disruptions are rated as inconvenient, there was evidence to suggest that passengers would prefer work to be over as quickly as possible. If notified enough in advance, most passengers can plan around a longer blockades or weekend closures – although for commuters the absence of a viable alternative is a real issue.
- Passengers want to make informed choices about their travel plans. Information about alternative arrangements, length of disruption and increased journey time must be available well in advance. The provision and enforcement of T-12 is essential if this is to be met.

The key to all three points is good information – it is essential to tell people: what the work is going to deliver; how to plan alternative journeys in advance and/or on the day; and then explain what has been achieved (e.g. "for this disruption you have now got x)."

There is also a need to ensure that possessions are co-ordinated across regions so that adequate diversionary routes are available – passengers would generally rather stay on the train for longer than change to buses.

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<sup>2</sup> Passengers' attitudes towards engineering works - August 2003

## Specific comments on the gaps and options identified (chapter 6)

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The remainder of this submission concentrates on the specific proposals outlined by Network Rail.

### i) **Overcrowding (section 6.3)**

Passenger Focus agrees that this is the central issue that needs to be addressed.

Passenger Focus is aware of the thinking behind option 1.3 - peak management. Providing passengers with the incentive and the ability to travel earlier or later in the day could help to flatten the demand profile and reduce some overcrowding at the height of the peak. Passenger Focus is very clear, however, that this must be about providing incentives to travel earlier or later and not about disincentives for travelling during the 08.00-09.00 period. Commuters are a captive market and so Passenger Focus is fundamentally opposed to using fares to 'price-off' demand. The National Passengers Survey already shows that commuters are least satisfied about value for money – in the spring 2005 survey only 27% of commuters rated value for money as satisfactory or good, with 48% being very or fairly dissatisfied<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, research by the SRA in 2005 found value for money to be the second highest priority for commuters<sup>4</sup>.

Passenger Focus agrees that a peak management option must be part of an overall package of measures designed to address growth. As part of this there is a need for research to determine the extent to which passengers have the opportunity to travel earlier (i.e. do their employers provide the option of flexible working) and what would constitute an attractive incentive (e.g. discount, guarantee of a seat etc). Passenger Focus will be conducting research on this issue.

Notwithstanding such research it is felt that a peak management scheme would need to be flexible. What, for instance, would happen if the last train on which an 'early-bird' discount was valid was cancelled or was missed because of a late connection?

Passenger Focus would also agree that the implementation of such a scheme would be aided by a smart-card ticketing regime.

Passenger Focus does not, however, see peak management as providing a solution on its own. Whilst there may be opportunities to shift demand and squeeze more out the existing network, growth forecasts contained with the consultation document point to the need for investment in additional capacity to allow more trains to run and/or longer trains to be provided.

Hence Passenger Focus supports option 1.2 – train and platform lengthening. Based on the PIXC figures in Table C and the passenger loadings in table D, the most pressing need would appear to be in the London suburban area. That is not to say, however, that capacity constraints in the mainline area can be ignored. The regional growth figures in Table K clearly show that growth is generally higher in outer suburban and mainline areas. This too

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<sup>3</sup> National Passenger Survey. Wave 12 – Spring 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Prioritisation of required improvements. Paired preference survey. SRA. May 2005.

must be addressed – initially by utilising the potential for running 12-car services on certain routes and ultimately by investing in additional capacity.

Passenger Focus acknowledges that platform and train lengthening is an expensive option requiring work on the platforms, extra carriages and potentially further work to upgrade the power supply. We are mindful that Network Rail has recently upgraded the power supply – although questions must be asked why the opportunity was not taken at that time to allow for current requirements (i.e. ability to exploit fully the performance characteristics of the Desiro trains) and to allow for future growth. We are also mindful that the original order for Desiro included 120 additional class 450 vehicles that were subsequently reallocated elsewhere.

Nonetheless Passenger Focus believes that there is a case for major investment in capacity. The document itself recognises that capacity is the central issue to be addressed. Failure to do so could lead the scenario outlined in Table L whereby passengers are forced to stand from as far out as Southampton, Eastleigh and Andover on peak services to Waterloo. Demand management can only provide a respite – at some point additional capacity can only be provided by upgrading the infrastructure (e.g. new signal technology, track work or longer station platforms) in order to allow more and/or longer trains to run. Therefore Passenger Focus feels that this option *must* be considered further.

## ii) **Balancing performance, service level and capacity**

Passengers want improved performance. Research<sup>5</sup> by the SRA in 2005 asked passengers to list their priorities. The results in the table below show that punctuality and reliability are the highest priority across all sectors and regions.

Passenger Priorities - Factors	ALL	Long Distance	Regional	London and South East	Commuter	Business	Leisure
	rank	rank	rank	Rank	rank	rank	Rank
Punctuality/reliability (i.e. the train arriving/ departing on time)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
The value for money for the price of your ticket	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
The frequency of the trains on that route	3	3	3	3	3	3	6
Provision of information about train times/platforms	4	4	4	5	4	5	4

Passenger Focus acknowledges that SWT's December 2004 timetable has led to an increase in performance. However, the new timetable was not without its drawbacks in terms of restricted capacity for additional services and increased journey times. Indeed, in the spring 2005 National Passenger Survey passengers were asked about the impact of timetable changes on their route. In the SWT area 28% of respondents said that it led to increased levels of crowding and 35% that it had led to a longer journey time<sup>6</sup>.

Passenger Focus is, therefore, pleased to see this acknowledged in option 2.1 and welcomes proposals to review the existing timetable principles to see if there are opportunities to achieve a better balance between performance and capacity.

<sup>5</sup> Prioritisation of required improvements. Paired preference survey. SRA. May 2005.

<sup>6</sup> National Passenger Survey. Wave 12 – Spring 2005.

Option 2.2 talks of altering stopping patterns and service levels for certain stations. It is not possible to comment on this without specific details. For instance, some stations may have a low footfall but it may cause genuine hardship should they be closed. Passenger Focus is not opposed in principle to option 2.2 but must reserve judgement until specific proposals are announced.

### **iii) Car parking capacity**

Passenger Focus agrees wholeheartedly with option 3.1 (increase the capacity of certain car parks).

Rail passengers' journeys start from home, not from the station, and for many the only way to get to the station is by car, some to be dropped off, but some to park for the day. If passengers cannot park, whether because there is no space or it costs too much, they might choose to drive all the way to their destination, instead of just the few miles to the station. This is not to say that the Passenger Focus is against improving local bus links, cycle provision and pedestrian access at stations – we would like to see all of these improved. However it remains a fact that, for many rail passengers, car to station remains the most viable and practical means of travel.

We are aware that some local authorities have reservations about increasing parking provision in the belief that this will add to congestion on roads. Passenger Focus has, however, long maintained that the provision of car parking at railway stations should be seen as a separate issue in its own right and not part of wider discussions on car parking in general<sup>7</sup>. In many ways a railway station car park is the original 'park and ride' scheme and it is important that it is acknowledged as such. There is also the need to work closely with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on issues of regional planning and housing development. Car parks at stations are a prime example of where regional and local housing policy impacts on transport planning.

Research<sup>8</sup> commissioned for the Rail Passengers Committee for Southern England in May 2005 reported that most car parks in the South were operating at or near capacity with SWT in particular reporting waiting-lists for car park passes for season-ticket holders. The demand figures listed in Table K indicate that this problem will only get worse in the timeframe of the RUS.

Whilst commuters may be price-inelastic, and pay higher charges, it is unfortunately the later-arriving leisure passengers who are both less likely to find a space and more likely to be deterred from travelling as a result of there being no space (since road congestion tends to be less acute outside the peaks). Off-peak passengers are carried at a low additional/marginal cost but provide revenue which can make a huge difference to profitability, so the lack of car-parking spaces is also a potential constraint on the development of a TOC's business.

Hence, Passenger Focus believes that there is scope for enlarging existing car parks where required. It is also important that work at stations contains an element of 'future-proofing' (i.e.

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<sup>7</sup> Strategy to Reality: using Local Transport Plans to deliver on rail. RPC February 2005

<sup>8</sup> The Demand for Car Parking at Stations. Railway Consultancy. May 2005

the ability to extend or upgrade facilities in the future with minimal disruption). Consideration ought also be given to multi-storey car parking facilities at stations (even if on a pilot basis). To achieve this it may be necessary for Network Rail and the Department for Transport to consider financial mechanisms where any investment is discounted over the life of the car park rather than the short-term length of the franchise.

#### **iv) Capacity at Waterloo station**

Passenger Focus agrees with Network Rail's assessment of the problem at Waterloo. The personal experience of Passenger Focus staff confirms that the concourse is already congested, especially during the evening peak hours, and that even minor perturbation to services can quickly result in the concourse becoming uncomfortably crowded. Given growth projections of between 19% and 23% over the next 10 years there is clearly a need to address this issue – why spend £millions on increasing capacity along the route if passengers cannot get into or out of the key terminus?

Option 4.1 will help in the short-medium term but Passenger Focus would argue that there is a case for the major re-development of Waterloo station outlined in Option 4.2. The potential commercial development of Waterloo International provides an opportunity to lever-in external funding that could facilitate this development. However, in all such discussions it must not be forgotten that Waterloo is, first and foremost, a railway station rather than a retail development.

#### **v) Network capacity constraints at Clapham Junction**

It is recognised that an additional stop at Clapham Junction would increase journey time. The acid-test, however, is whether this is of benefit to passengers who are already on the train as well as those at the station.

Clapham Junction is an important interchange. It provides links to other services (e.g. to Gatwick Airport, South Coast and, via the West London line, to Watford) without the need to travel into Waterloo – and as a result can lead to much cheaper (route not-London) tickets. It also provides access to other London mainline termini and so can help to relieve/spread demand. Hence in this case it is felt that the potential benefits would outweigh the disbenefits.

Increased stops would, of course, lead to increased use of Clapham Junction. As the consultation document recognises, increasing the footfall of passengers may create a need for enhancements to station facilities, not least in terms of accessibility. In the longer-term, therefore, Passenger Focus would also support the complete redevelopment of Clapham Junction along the lines of Option 5.2.

#### **vi) Capacity constraints at Woking**

Passenger Focus understands that the December 2004 timetable eliminated some operational issues around Woking junction and led to greatly improved performance – albeit at the cost of some services that were removed from the timetable. We are pleased, therefore, that no further reductions in service levels are recommended (option 6.2).

However, the 'do-nothing' option is unlikely to suffice for too long. Predicted growth on the network will continue to be constrained at Woking until something like Option 6.1 (grade

separated junction) is considered. We are pleased, therefore, that further cost-benefit work on this option is to continue.

### **vii) Balance of services in the Portsmouth area**

Portsmouth Harbour is a popular tourist attraction in its own right and provides an important link with ferry services to Gosport.

The connecting ferry service to Ryde Pier Head is one of the main means of access to the Isle of Wight and, as such, direct and frequent onward rail connections at Portsmouth Harbour are important to both Islanders and visitors to the Island alike. There is also a need to co-ordinate ferry and rail timetables.

Passenger Focus would not want to see this integration jeopardised and is pleased that option 8.1 - altering the service provision to the Harbour - is seen as poor value for money.

While option 8.3 – infrastructure enhancement at Portsmouth Harbour – would naturally be our preferred option we do recognise the costs involved. So, if Option 8.2 – altering platform arrangements at Portsmouth Harbour – can deliver performance improvements in the short-term without the need for major infrastructure work, it makes sense that this be explored first.

### **viii) Capacity on the West of England Line**

Passenger Focus has long called for enhancements on the Waterloo-Salisbury-Exeter line. Passenger Focus research<sup>9</sup> has shown the importance of this line both as a means of getting to and from London but also for short commuter journeys based on the major cities/towns e.g. Exeter for travel to work and education from East Devon.

SWT services along this line also provide genuine competition with Great Western services to London Paddington – something that has provided passengers with a range of competitively priced fares. It also, however, provides an alternative route during periods of engineering work – something that would become even more valuable should the Crossrail project be approved. Passenger Focus research<sup>10</sup> into engineering possessions showed that passengers would prefer to travel by an alternative rail route even if it took longer than a replacement bus service.

As part of the 'Westcountry to Waterloo' report passengers were asked to prioritise a list of optional aspirations. The priorities were:

- a higher frequency service
- reduced overcrowding; and
- improved train performance

In an ideal world Option 9.1 – double tracking the entire West of England Line – would best deliver all three aspirations. However, Passenger Focus is aware of a series of previous studies and reports over the past 10 years looking at doubling the track between Salisbury and Exeter, all of which struggled to pass value for money analysis. Hence we would agree that Option 9.2 – additional passing loops - at a cost of around £25million is likely to be a

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<sup>9</sup> Westcountry to Waterloo: the real alternative. RPC Western England. June 2005

<sup>10</sup> Passengers attitudes towards engineering works - August 2003

more cost effective option. While this would not offer all the benefits of full double-tracking it would allow for an hourly service from Waterloo to Exeter supported by an additional hourly local service from Axminster to Exeter. This would provide real benefits to passengers and is something that the Passenger Focus strongly supports.

**ix) Balance of services in the Southampton area**

Passenger Focus acknowledges the importance of improved performance but again feels that this must be balanced against service levels, provision of connections and crowding levels.

Passenger Focus is pleased, therefore, that Option 10.1 cautions against a reduction in service levels on the grounds that it would lead to overcrowding and a reduction in the attractiveness of rail.

Passenger Focus accepts that timetables are not 'written in stone' and so is willing to discuss proposals under Option 10.2 – timetable change to re-organise the overall service level. However, any such proposals would need to balance the knock on effect of overcrowding both now and in the future, the loss of connections and through journey opportunities against any potential performance gains.

Passenger Focus is aware of specific proposals put forward by the Department for Transport in its consultation on the future franchise specification and will be responding on these in more detail as part of its submission to the Department for Transport.

**x) Capacity at Reading**

Passenger Focus would agree that performance and capacity on the Waterloo-Reading line needs to be addressed. This is an important and sometimes undervalued line that already experiences high levels of demand (e.g. 142% seated load factor in the morning peak – table D). It is also one of the highest areas of projected growth – 41% unconstrained growth in morning peak trips from Bracknell and East Berkshire into London and 38% from Wokingham and South Berkshire (Table K).

It also provides alternative access to London when there are engineering possessions on the Great West Main Line – the importance of which will again be magnified should Crossrail receive the go-ahead. Hence Passenger Focus welcomes the proposals and is pleased that option 11.1, 11.2 and 11.3 are all recommended for further consideration.

## Additional comments

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Passenger Focus would also like to comment on additional needs/gaps that the RUS should address.

### **xi) North Downs Line**

Passenger Focus is disappointed that no mention is made of the rest of the North Downs Line (Reading-Guildford-Redhill) when discussing options at Reading station (Gap 11 p65).

The 'North Downs Line' report<sup>11</sup> produced by the Rail Passengers Committee for Southern England demonstrates the importance of this route to passengers. The report analysed the results of a survey of some 3000 passengers and found that that the Reading to Gatwick Airport line was well used by both air travellers and a mix of passengers on shorter local journeys. Morning and evening peak-hour trains were often crowded to and from Reading, Guildford and Reigate/Redhill.

The potential of this line as an alternative to travelling through London has also been identified in many studies and planning documents – e.g. the South East Regional Transport Strategy. Hence Passenger Focus is disappointed at the lack of any reference to the enhancement of services along the orbital North Downs Line. Among the operational constraints on the line identified in our report are:

- Shared line between Reading and Wokingham
- Signalling limitations between Reading and Guildford.
- The layout of Redhill Station.

### **xii) Alton Line**

Passenger Focus has anecdotal evidence of specific performance problems on the Alton Line. Some would appear to be caused by stretches of single-track and others by trains entering/leaving the depot at Farnham impeding the basic passenger service. Passenger Focus notes that the Farnham area is scheduled to have its signalling and track assets renewed during 2007/8 (paragraph 5.2.3) with this being combined with significant sections of switch and crossing track renewal (paragraph 5.2.5). Passenger Focus believes that this provides a perfect time to address – and resolve - the fundamental problems facing the Alton Line.

Passenger Focus would like to see the North Downs line and Alton line addressed by Network Rail in the final South West Main Line RUS.

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<sup>11</sup> North Downs Line – Reading-Gatwick-Tonbridge. RPC Southern England. 2005



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