

South Western Railway – December 2022 timetable consultation

Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent watchdog for transport users. This paper sets out our response to the consultation on the proposed South Western Railway (SWR) December 2022 timetable. It is noted that SWR plan to implement some of the proposed changes in December 2021.

General Comments

Timetable proposals for Great Western Railway (GWR) and CrossCountry who also provide services on Network Rail's Wessex route are not known. Therefore, it is not possible to comment fully on the impact of the proposed reduction in frequency of services. In future major timetable rewrites, consideration should be given to a single, comprehensive consultation process that provides a full picture of the overall proposals.

The proposal outlines changes that will result in a reduction in frequency of services while delivering 93 per cent of pre-Covid capacity, against forecast passenger journeys of 76 per cent. The proposal states that this will allow SWR to meet expected demand and retain capacity to accommodate daily and hourly fluctuations as new travel patterns emerge. However, these figures apply to the SWR network as a whole and do not address the natural variations in demand that will occur based on time of day and route. The ability to deliver services at 93 per cent capacity will also depend on the successful and timely introduction of the new fleet of Arterio trains.

A more reliable train service

The core proposal is to deliver a more reliable train service that meets the new travel demand as we emerge from the pandemic, while leaving space for additional trains to be introduced to respond to future increase in demand.

The SWR research data indicates that commuter travel is likely to recover to 60 per cent of pre-Covid demand, with a similar return for business travel, and leisure travel is forecast to return to similar pre-Covid levels. The data is not broken down beyond predicting 54 per cent will commute 2.3 days a week and 60 per cent 2.6 days. It is unlikely that commuter demand will spread evenly over weekdays, especially in view of the fact that prior to the pandemic there was already a marked reduction in commuter travel on Fridays.

Transport Focus research¹ into rail passengers' priorities for improvement shows the top five priorities identified by passengers:

- 1) Reliability and punctuality
- 2) Price of train tickets offer better value for money
- 3) Passengers able to get a seat on the train
- 4) Trains sufficiently frequent at the times I wish to travel
- 5) Train company keeps passengers informed about delays

While it is noted that the proposals in this timetable consultation aim to address the top priority for improvement, it cannot be assumed that passengers will prioritise getting a seat or avoiding busier services, over the convenience of travelling into work on their preferred days, at their preferred times. It is therefore critical that sufficient flexibility is retained to allow SWR to respond to future, as yet unknown, commuter demand. This is crucial if rail travel is to be an attractive option for people.

We note that the Network Rail South West Main Line Study (phase one) forecasts that demand will be over pre-Covid levels by 2026. It is important that this demand can be met as it emerges. The process of recruiting and training drivers takes time and new rolling stock can take many years to procure; SWR must stay ahead of the curve and not constantly play catch up. We would like to understand how the latter will be avoided.

Specific comments on the route by route specifications

Main suburban routes

London Waterloo to Guildford via Leatherhead

We note that it is proposed not to reinstate certain services from Guildford via Leatherhead, due to the Epsom line being served by Southern services. Bookham station will be served by only one train per hour.

Is this adequate to serve the population of the two Bookham wards, which is 11,374? Particularly in view of the fact that leisure travel has seen the biggest surge in demand since lockdown ended. Consideration must also be given to the fact that the industry needs to ensure rail is an attractive proposition to both retain returning passengers and encourage new passengers.

Windsor routes

London Waterloo to Reading

We note the addition of a peak service between Ascot and Reading to meet demand to Reading.

It is not stated if this is the am or pm peak, we assume this is the am peak to cater for the commuter flow to Reading? It is disappointing to note there is no plan to provide faster journeys for Ascot and further west.

¹[Rail passengers' priorities for improvement - July 2020](#)

Mainline routes

London Waterloo to Alton

We note that the service levels reflect the May 2019 timetable.

It is not clear why Bentley is called at by only one of the two services per hour off peak.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke

We note that the off-peak service levels reflect the May 2019 timetable. However, it is proposed to withdraw some shoulder peak trains to reflect reduced commuter demand and to reduce costs.

At the last major timetable change concerns were raised over the number of peak hour trains, so we would question whether passenger numbers have really fallen to a sufficient degree to justify this reduced level.

London Waterloo to Portsmouth via Guildford (slow)

We note that the Waterloo to Haslemere stopping service in peak and off peak has been removed to improve timetable resilience. The Waterloo to Portsmouth (slow) service will now call at all stations south of Guildford incorporating stops that were previously in the Haslemere stopping service.

Only one train per hour serving all stations along this route does not seem sufficient to serve the population in the area. For example, is one train per hour adequate for Liphook, population 7,127, where there were 633,798 journeys in 2019/20?

West of England routes

London Waterloo to Salisbury and Exeter St Davids

We note that the service levels to Exeter itself reflect the May 2019 timetable with some changes to peak calls. The Honiton and Axminster shuttles have been removed to improve performance whilst retaining capacity.

The reduction in the off-peak service west of Salisbury from two trains per hour to a basic hourly service may not provide an adequate service for passengers.

Reading to Salisbury

We note that operating these services to Reading allows SWR to maintain crew competency over the route which can be used during disruption or planned engineering work to divert services to Reading.

While it is good to retain diversion capability to minimise disruption to passengers, it is proposed that the three trains to Reading replace ones to Waterloo on some days of the week. This would be very confusing for passengers – some days they run, some days they do not. We strongly encourage you to review whether this is a sensible proposal.

Salisbury to Bristol Temple Meads

Following a separate review by the Department for Transport, SWR intends to withdraw its current three daily services from December 2021; they are said to duplicate services offered by GWR and therefore not be good value for the taxpayer. *In the absence of any information about the services that GWR will run, it is not possible to fully assess the implications of this proposal. Furthermore, the proposal to withdraw services along key regional routes has upset many people, suggesting they are well used and are relied on by passengers. We believe you should carefully consider deferring this proposal to December 2022, to give time for proper consideration of passenger feedback and how needs can be met in future.*

Contact Transport Focus

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Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

Transport Focus is the independent consumer organisation representing the interests of:

- Rail passengers in Great Britain
- Bus, coach and tram users across England, outside London
- Users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network).

We work to make a difference for all transport users.