



WEST COAST PARTNERSHIP

31 August 2022

Anthony Smith
Chief Executive
Transport Focus

By Email

Dear Anthony

Thank you for your letter, 23 August. We value your feedback, as it helps shape our approach as we seek to deliver our shared objective of giving customers the best possible experience.

We reduced our timetable to four trains per hour to ensure a reliable service is delivered, so our customers can travel with greater certainty. As you note, there have been some immediate issues with the introduction of this timetable, causing disruption for customers. Please be assured, we are working hard to resolve these issues as soon as possible. The safe restoration of services is our top priority.

We understand and apologise for the enormous frustration and inconvenience felt by customers at the moment. This decision to reduce the timetable was not taken lightly – but was necessary due to the ongoing industrial action which has seen drivers no longer willing to work overtime. Although we have a sufficient number of drivers (585, more than in 2019), like all operators, we rely on overtime to operate our full timetable.

In the past few months, we have regularly and reliably seen around 250 rest days worked by drivers. This equates to approximately 400 passenger services a week. Literally overnight, the number of drivers working rest days dropped dramatically. For example, from 3 August, the previously consistent level of volunteers dropped by almost 90%.

When the pandemic took hold, aside from the volume of services being run each day, driver training was the next most impacted part of the business. It was suspended entirely in March 2020 which has seen a backlog of trained drivers. Training has now fully resumed, but we need drivers to work overtime to make up for those on training.

To improve the situation, we need to continue this training of more drivers, or see a return of current drivers on the overtime they have historically worked. We would urge the rail unions to engage in meaningful industry reform discussions around modernising working practices and developing a railway fit for the 21st century and we look forward to further talks to resolve this situation.

Our priority is to deliver a reliable and regular timetable, as well as an increase in services. We have a restoration plan, which we hope to share publicly no later than Thursday 1 September. However, as a critical and valued stakeholder, as we have agreed, we will meet before 1 September to ensure your expert customer-focused insight informs our restoration plan customer communications.

Please note that in both the four tph timetable and forthcoming restoration plan, we have intentionally focused available resource to target our capacity to support the busiest routes and services, as well as cater for significant events where possible based on demand - including Manchester and Birmingham.

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We acknowledge and take seriously the customer issues that you have shared in your letter. We're sorry for the inconvenience to our customers, and we are trying our best to limit customer inconvenience. We are actively exploring options with suppliers to improve how we introduce the reduced timetable into booking systems, mitigate reservations issues, and reintroduce the standard ticket fare structure. We are collaborating with Network Rail to ensure the end-to-end improvement of shared timetable systems process. We also continue efforts to enhance onboard and station processes to alleviate any instances of crowding. The team is meeting David Sidebottom and colleagues Tuesday 30 August, to discuss these issues and customer communications.

In terms of customer advice, we regularly update the information on our website (timetables page, pop-ups in homepage and booking engine, and homepage banner), social media, direct to customers, direct to media, with our staff, corporate and industry partners, and proactively align with Trainline. We continuously review and update our messaging including that we have incorporated numerous improvements you have suggested. We continue to welcome your constructive engagement.

We have reviewed the website collateral and comments you shared, and have identified and implemented some immediate changes to reduce any contradictory or confusing information. This includes better aligning wording between webpage and in table; 19-23 September are now available to view; and regular review of prices and tickets available for future travel dates. We are exploring options to add to our website frontpage focused to enhance customer support.

We understand and share your concern about these initial and temporary issues resulting from the timetable reduction. We are confident that our restoration plan will deliver a reliable service and customer certainty, with a minimal number of cancellations, which will overall deliver a better passenger experience.

We look forward to meeting you to discuss the restoration plan and customer communications.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Montgomery". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large loop at the end.

Steve Montgomery
CEO, West Coast Partnership