

GREAT WESTERN RAIL FRANCHISE – PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Response from Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

January 2018

Foreword

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group (BTPG) was formed in 2006 to represent the interests of all users of Bedwyn station. The group was formed initially to fight against cuts to services which were proposed as part of a new Greater Western franchise at that time. Having succeeded in that aim we have subsequently worked closely with Great Western Railway (GWR) and other parties in an attempt to maintain and improve all services for Bedwyn station. Although our focus is on Bedwyn station, most of the improvements which have been achieved have also been of benefit to Hungerford and Kintbury users.

BTPG are pleased to have the opportunity to respond in full to the Consultation Document. This response will focus on the series of questions posed in the above document and we set out our responses below. It should be noted that we have further detailed proposals to put forward in response to some of these questions and these are contained in Appendix One, which can be found at the end of this document.

Consultation Questions

Q1 Franchise objectives for the 2020s.

We do agree that all of the stated objectives should be pursued and, if possible achieved.

Q2 Should Great Western be retained as a single franchise?

The Consultation Document presents a list of potential advantages and disadvantages associated with a split of franchise or retention of a single franchise. Based on just these points, we feel that the benefits of retention of a single franchise far outweigh those of creation of two or more separate franchises. Equally, we feel that there are more disadvantages involved in a split franchise.

In addition to those listed we would like to put forward the following points with particular relevance to services between Paddington and Bedwyn, and between Reading and Newbury. The Consultation Document sets out one suggestion as to how two potential franchises could be formed. The diagram on page 26 suggests what appears to be a 'Main Line Franchise' on the one hand and a 'West of England/Regional Franchise' on the other. We are particularly interested to note that the

Paddington – Bedwyn service could be placed in either of the potential franchises that have been suggested by the DfT.

We understand that the diagram should not be regarded as 'set in stone', however, as shown we feel that Paddington – Bedwyn (and Reading – Newbury) services would be disadvantaged if placed in either of the split franchises. In particular, we would put forward the following points:

- I. We would ask the question as to how rolling stock would be allocated in the event of a split franchise. This would be particularly relevant should our services be part of a 'West of England' group. Some Class 387 EMUs would be required for Reading – Newbury services.
- II. All or most of the other Class 387s would be part of the other franchise as, we assume would be Reading depot. So, this could lead to problems with servicing and stabling. The same situation could apply in the event of a Class 165 DMU still being required for some fill-in Bedwyn – Newbury services. These potential problems would not arise if a single franchise is maintained.
- III. If we were part of a 'Main Line Franchise' we feel that we might be very much a 'poor relation', which could potentially result in our services being downgraded to that of a branch line and possibly cut back to Reading rather than Paddington. It could also reduce still further the chances of any meaningful links to the West Country from Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury in particular.
- IV. The franchise was previously split between First Great Western and Thames Trains. This resulted in: i) both companies blaming one another when things went wrong; ii) it being very difficult to claim compensation, with the companies blaming one another; iii) connections for Bedwyn not being held at Newbury as Thames Trains did not wish to be perceived as being 'late into Bedwyn' when the late train was actually a FGW train.
- V. As mentioned in the Consultation Document, creation of separate franchises would probably have a significant and detrimental effect on connectivity. This could result in poor, or non-existent connections for users between the different franchises. As a result, we feel that on balance the principle of a single franchise should be maintained

Q3 Transfer of some existing routes.

We do not have any particular views on this question.

Q4 What more can be done to promote better integration between 'train' and 'track?'

We would support any further integration between the Train Operating Company and Network Rail if it leads to fewer delays to services and better management and reaction at times of service disruption.

Q5 Future train service and timetable development.

Commuters have for many years advised us that a direct service arriving in Paddington between 8.30am and 9am is required. At present there is a two hour gap without a direct train between the 0645 and 0841 services.

We have an aspiration for an early westbound semi-fast train on the Berks & Hants Line to at least Westbury. The main purpose would be to allow commuting from Kennet Valley stations to Bath, Bristol and other destinations.

We have put together a detailed response to this question which can be found in Appendix One, which is at the end of this document.

Q6 Potential new stations.

There have been several good suggestions put forward for new or re-opened stations in the franchise area. We understand that Wilton Parkway, Corsham and Royal Wootton Bassett have been proposed by TransWilts CIC as having a particularly strong case, with Wilton Parkway being well advanced. On the Berks & Hants Line we feel that Devizes Parkway should be considered, with the town of Devizes being part of a wide catchment area. On the Berks & Hants Line, Langport and/or Somerton might also be considered.

It is likely that there would be a requirement to have a regular service (hourly or better) in place in order to make any new or re-opened station viable. With regards to the latter three potential stations above, the provision of an hourly Paddington – Exeter service would make their case much more realistic. As stated elsewhere in our response, we feel that provision of such a service should be treated as a high priority for the next franchise or earlier, if possible.

Q7 Reducing journey times.

For some time there have been calls from users of stations in Devon and Cornwall for some intermediate stops to be removed from the hourly services between Paddington and Plymouth/ Penzance. We assume that they are referring to stations east of Taunton such as Castle Cary, Westbury and Pewsey. However, at present these stations are only served by the aforementioned services, apart from a small number of semi-fast trains.

The promised additional two-hourly trains between Paddington and Exeter St David's from January 2019, which will include stops at these stations and others should allow some or all of the Plymouth/Penzance trains to omit these stops. There may be some understandable opposition from users of intermediate stations as their trains will only run as far as Exeter.

We feel that the situation would be much improved if the recommendations of the Network Rail RUS of 2010 for an hourly Paddington – Exeter service were implemented.

Q8 Direct links and connections.

We have again put forward a detailed response to this question which can be found in Appendix One at the end of this document.

Q9 Seasonal and other exceptional demand for travel.

Obviously there is a particular demand for extra services to holiday resorts such as Paignton and Newquay during the summer months. We would assume that providing extra stock to operate these services would be less of a problem at weekends. Finding stock for Monday to Friday services may be more problematical. We would hope that the Train Operating Company would take this into account, and in particular would not facilitate it by reducing other regular services.

Q10 Other train service enhancements.

We would ask that GWR find a solution to the issue of 'train association', where the outbound Bedwyn train is shown as 'on time' despite the fact that the inbound train is delayed, which impacts upon the outbound service.

We cover other potential service enhancements in Appendix One, which can be found at the end of this document.

Q11 Freight operation.

We do not have any particular views on this question.

Q12 Rolling stock provision.

The provision of new rolling stock such as Class 800/802 Bi-mode and Class 387 EMU should bring a much needed improvement in many areas and in capacity in particular. The resultant cascade of other stock from the Thames Valley should also bring improvements further west. We would be interested to know if there would be any effect on these cascades in the event of the franchise being split.

We understand that the stock used to operate services on the Berks & Hants Line will, as a rule include first class accommodation. This should be welcomed, given that these trains often travel over fairly long distances where having a first class option is desirable. We also feel that the proposed split of first and standard class on the Class 800/802 trains is more appropriate than on the HSTs.

The development of battery and hydrogen as means of propulsion should be welcomed. There would be obvious environmental benefits from the operation of such technology. With further electrification seemingly on hold these alternatives become even more attractive. They would appear

to be most suited, at least for the foreseeable future for use on branch lines or short stretches of track beyond the current extent of electrification.

We are aware that IPEMU trains were initially considered as an option to maintain through services between Bedwyn and Paddington. Although this option was not pursued at the time, a route with similar characteristics would appear to be an ideal candidate for such operation in the future.

Q13 Accessibility improvements.

Bedwyn station is unmanned and has fairly limited facilities. We feel that the passenger numbers would justify an additional waiting shelter on the eastbound platform.

Q14 Stations and co-ordination of transport modes.

We feel that more could be done to encourage passengers to use public transport to and from stations. We have a particular problem at Bedwyn which has a sizeable catchment area which includes Marlborough. Car parking continues to be a serious issue despite provision of additional parking spaces in recent years. A bus service to Marlborough is provided through the local council, but requires a subsidy. This has been recently reduced, resulting in some services being withdrawn.

Unfortunately, there is not now a connecting bus to serve the main commuter trains at Bedwyn either in the morning or evening peak periods. This inevitably leads to more people travelling to and from the station by car and thus adds to car parking problems. We feel that there would be great benefits from provision of a separate bus service to and from Marlborough to specifically connect with the key commuter trains.

As the local council has made it clear that they are unable to fund early morning and later evening bus services, an alternative would have to be found in order to provide such links. We feel that it might be in the interests of the Train Operating Company to look at this matter.

Q15 Fares, ticketing and marketing.

We feel that Day Return tickets to Hungerford and Newbury are uncompetitive when compared to other forms of transport. We would welcome a price review, with research to see if rail use could be increased at these stations.

There are individual issues concerning the ticket machine at Bedwyn station. It is sited in such a way that leads to difficulty in reading the screen during periods of bright sunlight.

Q16 Community Rail Partnerships.

These partnerships clearly perform a valuable service for rail users in areas which they cover and should be supported and expanded where appropriate.

Q17 Investing in the workforce.

We do not feel that we are able to add anything to this subject.

Q18 Other priorities.

We do not have anything further to add.

APPENDIX ONE

Future service patterns on the Berks & Hants Line

In November 2011 BTPG produced *A Review of Train Services on the Berks & Hants Line*. In this document we attempted to analyse the situation as it stood at the time and to put forward our aspirations with regards to future service patterns and other matters of relevance. The timing of this was such that it followed the Network Rail Route Utilization Strategy (RUS), published in 2010, and preceded the Franchise Replacement Consultations in 2012 and 2014, which were subsequently abandoned.

We now have another Franchise Consultation, so we will again attempt to put our views and aspirations forward. As before, these represent our position and are confined, mainly to the Berks & Hants Line, though we hope to find some sort of consensus with other users and groups on the West of England Main Line where possible.

The current service patterns

The current off-peak service patterns, as of January 2018 are broadly as follows:-

Paddington – Plymouth: 1 train per hour (with alternate hour extensions to Penzance).

Paddington – Bedwyn: 1 train per hour (semi-fast).

Reading – Newbury: 1 train per hour (all stations).

Westbury – Weymouth: 1 train approximately every two hours (all stations).

There are also a small number of additional trains between Paddington and Paignton, Paddington and Taunton/Exeter St David's, Waterloo and Westbury, via Yeovil (SWR).

As a rule, these off-peak patterns are in operation Monday to Friday and Saturday. We have not included other services operating west of Exeter.

Future service patterns – January 2019

It is known that a major timetable change will take place in January 2019. This should coincide with the completion of the delivery of the Class 802

bi-mode trains, which will be used on the West of England Main Line. Full details of the actual timetables are not yet in the public domain, but we do have some idea of the basic service patterns which will apply from that date.

In general terms, all of the above service patterns are likely to remain. In addition, there will be one train per two hours Paddington – Exeter St David's (limited stops). Indications are that these trains will include stops at Reading, Newbury, Pewsey, Westbury, Castle Cary and Taunton. It would appear that the inclusion of these calls on the new two-hourly services will in turn allow most of the Paddington – Plymouth/Penzance hourly trains to run faster by omitting the above calls. Whilst users of Pewsey, Westbury and Castle Cary should enjoy a more frequent and regular interval service, it must be noted that most of their trains will terminate at Exeter St David's, as opposed to Plymouth or Penzance at the present time.

Services to Plymouth and Penzance will be operated by Class 802 bi-mode units running in nine-car or double five-car formations. It has been stated that splitting and joining of five-car sets will take place at Plymouth for many of the Penzance trains.

With electrification ending at Newbury, the original plan envisaged Class 387 EMU working from Paddington to Newbury with Class 165/166 trains continuing to Bedwyn. Thanks, in part to widespread local opposition, we are pleased to note that five-car Class 800 bi-modes are now scheduled to form most services, thus preserving the long-established and much valued through links to Paddington.

We assume that most all-stations Reading – Newbury services will be EMU-operated. We also understand that cascaded Class 166 units will be used on the Westbury – Weymouth line. There has been a longstanding aspiration for a better, more frequent service on this line. If this is not achievable at the January 2019 timetable change, it is hoped that something can be done, either at the time of the franchise extension, or whenever the franchise is renewed. We have some suggestions on this subject later in this appendix.

It is not clear as to how the Paignton trains will fit into the timetable. They may operate as extensions to the scheduled Paddington – Exeter two-hourly trains, or possibly as separate services. We are also unsure if the small number of SWR trains will continue to run between Westbury and Yeovil.

Future service patterns from 2020 onwards

The current plan envisages a probable two-year extension from March 2020 until March 2022. Then it is likely that there will be a new franchise from that date, or possibly from 2024. There is also a possibility that the franchise could be split, which would inevitably lead to major complications with regards to service patterns and connectivity between

different operators. As previously stated, it is our view that a single franchise should be retained and our suggestions here are made under that assumption.

We are aware that the changes from January 2019 are based on certain levels of rolling-stock that will be available at that time. It is clear that any aspirations for enhanced services from that time will, inevitably require additional units and incur considerable extra expense. However, we feel that this should not prevent us, or any other interested parties from putting forward any such aspirations for serious consideration. After all, decisions taken in the next few years are likely to have huge effect on services on the West of England Main Line for many years to come. This consultation, therefore gives us the perfect opportunity to set out our thoughts.

We would contend that one of the biggest improvements to service patterns on the West of England Main Line would be the implementation of an hourly service between Paddington and Exeter St David's, (and possibly further, in time). This would be in addition to the existing hourly service between Paddington and Plymouth/Penzance. We have learned that there is widespread agreement with this aspiration from users and user groups within the franchise. Furthermore, Peninsula Rail Task Force and TravelWatch SouthWest have both expressed aspirations for such a service to be extended to Plymouth. This improved service level would give real benefits all down the line, increasing capacity and, if handled wisely, improving connectivity for as many stations as reasonably possible.

But this should be far from a hopeful aspiration. It should be noted that, following a thorough consultation in 2010, the Network Rail Route Utilization Strategy clearly recommended the implementation of an hourly Paddington to Exeter service. However, as part of the ill-fated Franchise Specification in 2014, this had been down-graded to an hourly service between Paddington and Westbury with two-hourly extensions to Exeter. Finally, we have arrived at the proposed two-hourly service to Exeter from January 2019.

So, assuming sufficient rolling-stock availability, we could foresee the following potential service patterns (again, off-peak Monday – Friday, and Saturday).

Paddington – Plymouth/Penzance: 1 train per hour (to Plymouth), with alternate extensions to Penzance. Some splitting/joining of five-car units at Plymouth. Departure time from Paddington assumed to be xx03. Standard stopping pattern east of Exeter would be Reading, Taunton and Tiverton Parkway only, with a small number running non-stop between Reading and Exeter.

Paddington – Exeter St David's: 1 train per hour. As a starting point, could include extensions every two hours to Paignton or Plymouth (or

possibly both via splitting and joining). Departure time from Paddington assumed to be xx33. Standard stopping pattern east of Exeter would be Reading, Newbury, Pewsey, Westbury, Castle Cary and Taunton. Various additional calls could be added to these trains in order to improve connectivity. For example, Frome and Tiverton Parkway might be added to some Plymouth/Paignton services whilst other occasional calls on the eastern part of the line, such as Thatcham, Hungerford or Bedwyn might be added to the Exeter trains. These latter stations, amongst others now have almost no connectivity to the West Country. It should be noted that potential new stations such as Devizes Parkway, Somerton/Langport and Cullompton could also be included in the above service patterns.

Paddington – Bedwyn: 1 train per hour, semi-fast. Stopping pattern, Reading, Theale, Thatcham, Newbury, Kintbury and Hungerford. Departure time from Paddington assumed to be xx06.

Reading – Newbury: 1 train per hour, all stations.

Westbury – Weymouth: 1 train most hours.

As stated, these suggested service patterns would apply on Monday to Friday off-peak and Saturday. Peak period services would probably follow a similar pattern as at present, though it may be possible to add a small number of extra trains in some areas, for example EMU 'peak-busters' between Paddington and Newbury.

The pattern for Sunday trains seems much more difficult to predict. Regular engineering work and diversions result in variations in services and often differing destinations. The Bedwyn service is a case in point, with trains running through to Paddington in some timetable periods, but terminating at Reading in others. Irrespective of the destination, we feel a modest increase in frequency is called for from 2020. Also, the current situation where two-hourly Bedwyn trains arrive in Newbury just minutes after the trains to the West Country have left is far from acceptable. A few extensions of Bedwyn trains further west on Sundays would be welcome, as would an earlier first departure to Reading/Paddington.

Further improvements in connectivity

The aforementioned amended service patterns would undoubtedly lead to an improvement for most users of stations all along the West of England Main Line. However, in order to offer improved connectivity we would like to suggest some other changes.

The continuation of through trains to and from Paddington for Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury using bi-mode traction has been widely welcomed. The situation for users of these stations with regards to journeys further west however, is very poor. Over recent years, a small number of trains to Taunton or Exeter were provided, but as of the January 2018 timetable these have effectively ceased to run. Indeed, the first train further west from these stations, Monday to Friday currently

leaves Bedwyn at 1826 (to Frome). In the other direction, apart from early morning trains from Bristol and Frome, there are no other trains from further west and there are no weekend services at all in either direction!

There have been some calls for Paddington – Bedwyn trains to be extended to Westbury. We have always supported some extensions, but we feel that any such extensions should allow robust onward connections further down the main line, as well as other destinations that can already be reached by connection at Westbury. If the suggested additional hourly semi-fast services to Exeter and Plymouth/Paignton were introduced, then Westbury (with an hourly service) could become an even more important hub and connection point.

We therefore would suggest that consideration is given to a small number of Paddington – Bedwyn trains, perhaps at three or four-hourly intervals, being extended further west. In addition to the occasional Taunton and Exeter extensions in recent years, there are precedents for such suggestions. In around 2004, Jacobs were asked to carry out a study which looked at possible extensions of four existing trains between Paddington and Bedwyn to and from either Taunton, Exeter St David's or Bristol Temple Meads. At the time, it was decided that the case was not strong enough, but that the Bristol option should be given some consideration.

In a subsequent study by Wiltshire Council, *Wiltshire Rail Study: Strategic Analysis Report 2013*, extensions to Bristol Temple Meads were suggested, though no indication was given as to the proposed frequency of any such extensions. It was pointed out that such an extension would be beneficial to the prospects of a re-opened Devizes Parkway station.

But our attention has been drawn particularly to a recent paper produced by TravelWatch SouthWest entitled *Connecting the Dots*. In it they also call for an hourly semi-fast service from Paddington – Exeter, however they suggest that in alternate hours trains should run as far as Castle Cary, then be routed to Weymouth, via Yeovil. This would help boost connectivity between London and West Dorset, increase connectivity at Westbury and provide extra stops at Frome, Devizes Parkway (new station) and also possibly Bruton. It might also help to boost Bristol – Weymouth to something near an hourly service (at least over the Westbury – Weymouth section), which is another well-supported aspiration.

However, there may be some problems relating to the timetabling of such trains, particularly from Paddington. We have assumed that the two-hourly Paddington – Exeter trains from January 2019 would most likely occupy the xx33 slot from Paddington. Based on current HST timings, this would result in arrival at Westbury at around xx55 – xx00. As all current Westbury – Weymouth trains depart Westbury between xx32 – xx46, this could lead to pathing difficulties.

But the aforementioned paper also suggests that these additional services might be operated as an extension of certain Paddington – Bedwyn services. We feel that serious consideration should be given to this idea as part of the extended or new franchise. If Bedwyn departures leave Paddington at xx06, any extended trains should arrive at Westbury at around xx40, thus allowing a much better alignment with existing onward services.

We have produced a suggested draft timetable for potential services on the eastern section of the West of England Main Line. We should point out that it has been produced using information entirely in the public domain, and represents our thoughts and aspirations. We have included possible extensions to Weymouth, for instance of the 1006 and 1406 Paddington – Bedwyn, and 1807 Paddington – Frome trains. There would be return workings to balance up the timetable.

We have already suggested an early westbound train on the Berks & Hants Line, calling at intermediate stations. A Paddington departure at 0600 should allow an arrival in Westbury just ahead of the existing 0633 fast train to Penzance. If one additional call was inserted on the latter train, this would allow all Kennet Valley users (as well as those from stations such as Trowbridge, Warminster and Melksham, amongst others) to have a connection to a service all the way to Penzance. Furthermore, the former train, having been overtaken, could then proceed to Weymouth.

These suggested enhancements would both improve connectivity by using Westbury much more as a hub, and lead to a more frequent service on the Bristol – Weymouth section which, we understand has been a long-held aspiration for local users. In the event that this option was not taken up, we feel that some extensions to Bristol Temple Meads would provide a beneficial alternative.

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On behalf of Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group, January 2018.