

Great Western Rail Franchise Consultation

Response from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership

Introduction

The Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership is part of the Peninsula Rail Task Force (PRTF) and we fully endorse the submission to the franchise consultation which has been submitted by the Task Force.

The Local Enterprise Partnership is submitting this supplementary response to draw out the relationship between the rail franchise and our Strategic Economic Plan and Growth Deal submission.

Improving transport and connectivity is a high priority for the Heart of the South West Strategic Economic Plan, reflecting the challenges for economic development posed by our peninsular geography. In addition to specific bids for Local Growth funding for transport projects, our Growth Deal submission included significant asks of government agencies and Network Rail to improve resilience, speed and capacity of our transport networks to act as an enabler of our predicted and planned economic growth. Another key ask of Government related to the ability to influence the future patterns of train services. This consultation is a timely response to our request and we are grateful for the opportunity to respond.

Transport is fundamentally important to two aspects of our growth strategy. The first relates to strategic connectivity, where it is crucial to bring the Heart of the South West closer to key markets in the rest of the country by reducing journey times. We set a headline target of reducing the journey time by train from Plymouth to London by 45 minutes by 2030. This initial franchise from 2015 offers the potential for a first step towards that overall target.

The second element of transport need, to help deliver our growth strategy, is the improvement of local and regional train services within the Heart of the South West, and within the South West peninsula more generally, where we share common ambitions with adjoining local enterprise partnerships. In the Heart of the South West the growth in housing and employment is concentrated in settlements along our key transport corridors. The experience of the last decade shows that rail travel is a key enabler to accommodating this growth. Our highway networks alone do not have sufficient capacity to allow development to come forward and rely on use of the private car. Local and regional rail patronage has been growing strongly for the last 15 years and we believe this pattern is likely to accelerate as access to the rail network is improved with additional stations. The new franchise offers scope for additional rolling stock which is very necessary to accommodate this growth.

The Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership and Local Transport Board have already shown their strong commitment to improving the rail network through supporting projects in the Local Transport Board program and Growth Deal bid.

The Local Transport major schemes programme includes three significant rail infrastructure projects for delivery in the period from 2015 to 2020. These are for:-

- New railway stations at Marsh Barton (Exeter) and Edginswell (Torbay)
- Reinstatement of the railway from Bere Alston to Tavistock
- Provision of an additional passing loop between Exeter and Honiton

In addition, a program of interchange projects is planned, including significant enhancements and capacity upgrades at a number of key railway stations. Stations are both access points for the rail network and gateways to our cities and major towns. It is vital that they have the capacity to accommodate, and encourage, an increase in passenger numbers, including sufficient car parking, circulating and waiting space and facilities for purchasing tickets.

It is equally important that they offer the quality of environment which enables passengers to feel secure, to wait in comfort, to provide them with up to date travel information, and enable them to purchase items they might need on their journey.

The priority locations for enhancement, as identified in our Growth Deal bid, are listed in the response to question 19.

Franchise length

The franchise consultation document outlines the significant changes which will be taking place over the Great Western network during the period from the end of the current franchise in 2015 to the introduction of the full Crossrail service in December 2019. The challenges include:-

- completion of the new layout at Reading
- electrification of the main line to Bristol and South Wales and Thames Valley lines
- introduction of IEP
- cascade of the Thames Turbo diesel train fleet
- securing appropriate trains for long distance services to the South West peninsula
- Crossrail implementation
- preparation for HS2

Each of these challenges will have implications for services to the Heart of the South West area. We support the view that they will be best addressed through continuity from an operator which is well versed in these issues and aware of our needs and aspirations. **We therefore support the principle of a direct award.**

While the consultation does not specifically seek views on the length of the franchise, it is clear that the challenges listed above will occur throughout the 2015 to 2020 period and will overlap with each other, such that there is no obvious intermediate break point.

Furthermore, the very process of preparing for a series of short franchise awards is destabilising; it diverts attention and effort away from operating the franchise, and reduces the potential for investment by the operator.

We therefore strongly support the adoption of a five year period for the new franchise. We believe this will offer the most certain prospect of delivering an enhanced railway through the above challenges, and would offer the best prospect of securing further benefits from a competitive franchise to run from 2020.

Responses to the specific consultation questions

Q1. Should any additional objectives be reflected in the franchise specification for the 5 year period from September 2015?

We support the objectives, particularly the inclusion of an objective to support economic growth (bullet point two).

The South West Peninsula is, in aggregate GVA, the largest economic area served primarily by the Great Western Franchise. It is also the area which is lagging behind in terms of GVA per head, and therefore most needs the economic support which improved transport connectivity can facilitate.

However, it is the area in the franchise that will benefit least from the committed major infrastructure investments listed above. Hence it is important that supporting economic growth is set as a primary objective for the franchise operator.

Q2. Consider and identify any specific local factors that might influence the future level of passenger demand, which should be reflected in the specification of the new franchise.

The appetite for growth in the Heart of the South West is set out in the LEP Strategic Economic Plan, and is matched by the housing and employment proposals embodied in Local Plans across our area. Strong growth in housing during the last decade, despite the recession, has fuelled increasing demand for rail travel, both locally and to locations outside the South West. For example, from 2006/07 to 2012/13 patronage grew by 82% between Exeter and Barnstaple, 65% between Exeter and Plymouth/ Paignton and 85% on the Bristol to Weymouth route

The specification needs to reflect this growth in demand for rail travel. As well as catching up with past growth, the railway needs to cater for the significant growth which will take place across the Heart of the South West to 2020 and beyond. This needs to be accommodated by frequency improvements supported by sufficient and suitable rolling stock, for both long distance and local services.

Q3. Interfaces with any other schemes that are likely to be delivered during the next five years, which the operator may need to consider.

Notwithstanding the advent of Crossrail, sufficient capacity needs to be maintained at Paddington and on the Paddington to Reading corridor for services to and from the South West peninsula, both during and after the Crossrail works. A minimum of two fast lines train paths per hour must be secured for services to the South West.

Q4. Identify any changes or re-organisation to the routes served by the Great Western franchise, and explain their rationale.

At present all local services from Exeter to Honiton and Axminster are operated by South West Trains, under the South Western franchise. The geography of the Great Western franchise should be extended to include additional local services between Exeter and Honiton/ Axminster. It is understood that a two hourly local service is possible on the current infrastructure (in addition to the hourly London Waterloo service operated by South West Trains): an hourly local service depends on the provision of an additional passing loop, which as noted above is a project supported by the LEP and included in the Local Transport Board programme.

Given the relatively self-contained nature of local and regional train services in the South West peninsula, and the willingness of LEPs and local authorities to contribute to the development of rail transport, there could be scope for a partnership approach with DfT to operation of the franchise.

Q5. Respondents who wish to promote service changes should clearly identify these in their response to this consultation, as well as any supporting business case or value for money (VfM) analysis.

See response to Q7 and PRTF response

Q6. Respondents are encouraged to bring to our attention research, evidence or publications which they believe should be considered in the development of the franchise specification.

We refer you to those referred to in the PRTF response.

Q7. Respondents are invited to propose any changes to the current service pattern which they feel should be considered and to explain their rationale, for example by identifying specific local factors which might influence the future level of passenger demand which they consider should be reflected in a revised specification.

The trend of increasing rail patronage both to and within the South West peninsula has been evident for the last 15 years, and was reflected in the Regional Planning Assessment (RPA) and in the Great Western Route Utilisation Study (RUS). The anticipated continuation of the growth trend is embodied in the ongoing work by Network Rail in its Western Route Study, with is part of the Long Term Planning Process. The new franchise provides the opportunity to move towards the service levels envisaged in the existing RUS and the LTPP.

In addition to the service level enhancements envisaged in the RUS, a particular priority for the Heart of the South West LEP is the strengthening of services on the Exeter to Bristol route through provision of an hourly stopping service within this franchise (existing stopping services between Exeter and Bristol are not to a regular pattern), to complement the services operated on this route through the Cross Country franchise. This requirement is of particular prominence with the development of the Hinkley C power station at Bridgwater, and the consequent need for enhanced connectivity during the construction phase – workers are expected to be drawn from locations up to an hour's radius of Bridgwater – including Exeter and Bristol. Settlements along this route and the parallel M5 corridor are expanding and the longer term demand for connectivity on this corridor is expected to grow significantly. Our aspirations for an Exeter to Bristol stopping service are shared by the West of England LEP.

It is acknowledged that the ability to enhance services, in terms of frequency or capacity, is currently constrained by the shortage of rolling stock. However, the introduction of IEP and Thames Valley electrification will enable the cascade of stock in a series of stages throughout the period of the direct award, as set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Step Changes to Improved Services

	Change Date	Timetable Requirement	Rationale
Franchise Core Specification	Dec 2015	<p>Base</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current timetable plus: • GWML RUS recommendation 2tph Exeter – Paignton (delivered by 2tph Newton Abbot – Paignton service and becoming 2tph Exeter – Paignton as soon rolling stock is available) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RUS recommendation
	Dec 2017	<p>Cascade Step Change 1 (CS1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Base timetable plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Devon Metro Phase 1 (7 day railway 2tph Exmouth – Paignton and 1tph Barnstaple – Exeter Central) → Bristol – Exeter regional service (1tph Bristol – Exeter potentially extending present Taunton stopping service) → Selective capacity enhancement (train lengthening where appropriate) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivers RUS recommendation above and builds on investment in new stations at Newcourt, Marsh Barton and Edginswell • To improve connectivity to Bridgwater for Hinkley Point workforce • To meet demand growth across Peninsula
	Dec 2018	<p>Cascade Step Change 2 (CS2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CS1 timetable plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Cross Cornwall (2tph Plymouth – Penzance with additional local services to plug existing gaps) → Tavistock Railway (approx. 1tph Plymouth – Tavistock with Bere Alston – Gunnislake shuttle) → Bristol to Weymouth (approx. 1tph Westbury – Yeovil Pen Mill - Weymouth) 	
	Dec 2018	<p>IEP Step Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEP + CS2 timetable plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 2tph London Paddington – South West Peninsula (providing fast / semi-fast service pattern) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To improve connectivity to Peninsula alongside IEP improvements planned for Bristol / South Wales / Cotswold routes

Local Increments	Post Dec 2018	Additional Increments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devon Metro Phase 2 – 1tph Exeter – Honiton / Axminster 	
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The above service increments respond to the existing trend of passenger growth and the anticipated impact of planned development through to 2020. The ability to deliver these changes is contingent upon decisions about the quantum and type of trains available to the operator.

Given the capacity pressures already experienced on local and regional services both in the South West peninsula and other parts of the franchise area, and the need to replace the Pacer fleet, it is our view that the whole of the Thames Turbo fleet released by electrification of the Thames Valley routes should be secured for the Great Western franchise. DfT is urged to give early confirmation that the whole of the existing Thames Turbo fleet will be retained for this Great Western franchise, and cascaded to operate local and regional services in non-electrified parts of the franchise area. DfT is also urged to confirm that the existing Great Western franchise resources for local services of trains from classes 150/153/158 will be retained for the new franchise.

With regard to main line services between the South West peninsula and London Paddington the introduction of the IEP will result in the release of existing train resources (primarily HSTs) which could provide the capacity to operate the additional services identified above. However, given the fact that these trains will already be over 40 years old it is not clear whether they offer an appropriate solution for services to the South West Peninsula.

The indicative IEP diagram in the consultation document suggests that the bi-mode IEP trains will be deployed on routes to Worcester and Cheltenham rather than to the South West, though the reasoning behind this is not clear.

This franchise should include a requirement to identify and secure appropriate train resources for operating services to the South West peninsula which offer the characteristics necessary to deliver the requirements of:-

- Faster headline journey times
- Operational characteristics (acceleration, door opening times, boarding times) suitable for serving the intermediate calling points (see Q8) efficiently
- Given the relatively long journey times, offering an appropriate working environment for business travellers and suitable catering facilities
- Given the importance of the tourist economy of the South West providing suitable accommodation for the carriage of luggage, bicycles etc

Q8. Do you value a faster headline journey time, or more intermediate stops, on a particular journey?

Both faster headline journeys and retention of intermediate stops are important to the economy of the Heart of the South West. We believe that both are possible once the IEP fleet has been delivered.

Within this direct franchise award period we believe it should be possible to secure headline journey times throughout the day of 3 hrs from Plymouth to Paddington, and 2 hrs to Exeter.

It is important for the economy across the Heart of the South West that accessibility to direct London services is maintained from key access points, as well as from the major cities.

We therefore seek, from as early in the new franchise as possible: –

- 2 Paddington trains per hour to/from South West Peninsula
- 1 Paddington train per hour to/from Totnes, Newton Abbot, Tiverton Parkway, Castle Cary
- Retention of at least the current quantum of direct trains from Paddington to Torbay

Q9. Should any elements of the indicative modelled intercity service pattern be mandated, and can it be improved? What should be the priority for intercity services where IEP trains are not planned to operate?

We believe that such a pattern of services as set out in response to Q7/8 should be mandated for delivery once the IEP fleet has been introduced. First and last train times should also be mandated, and the opportunity taken to remove some current anomalies, such as the lack of evening trains from Plymouth to Exeter, and the lack of down trains to the South West peninsula on Saturday evenings. Timetables should therefore be planned to contribute to economic growth, both enabling the working day and supporting the night-time economy.

Q10. What do you feel the Great Western operator's priorities on the suburban network should be once it is electrified in 2016 e.g. for additional higher capacity, fast commuter services, or improved journey times?

We believe that on electrified suburban routes the opportunity should be taken to maximise the capacity of trains operating on short and middle distance routes, for example Oxford and Newbury. This would avoid travellers from stations within the suburban area using seating capacity of long distance services to the South West. Such outer suburban services should be operated by trains with at least 100mph capability, to minimise the risk of delays to main line services.

Q11. After the electrification to Newbury, expected in 2016 would passengers' needs be best served by a diesel service from Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury to Newbury connecting into a fast service to London Paddington, or a diesel stopping service from Bedwyn to Reading connecting to a fast service from Reading to London Paddington, or other options? The former would give faster journey times to London but add a change at Newbury for passengers to Reading.

We do not support either of the diesel options set out above, neither of which would serve well the communities of Bedwyn, Hungerford or Kintbury, or those of the Heart of the South West.

Diesel shuttle trains from Bedwyn to Newbury would mean passengers having to change at Newbury, which we understand is not ideal from a disability standpoint, and would impose a performance risk on the whole South West peninsula timetable with the prospect of such diesel trains impinging on the paths of longer distance services and delaying them.

A diesel service from Bedwyn to Reading could impose an even greater burden on the timetable, with attendant performance risk, while running Bedwyn Thames Turbo trains all the way to Paddington would avoid passengers

changing but maximise the adverse performance impact, and would mean that these were the only remaining local diesel services operating into Paddington.

We would oppose imposition of station calls at Bedwyn, Hungerford or Kintbury by main line services to the South West, as this would run directly counter to the objective of supporting economic development by reducing journey times.

In our view it is clear that electrification should be extended at the outset from Newbury to Bedwyn, so that all the Thames Valley services on the Berks and Hants route are electrified and can be operated by stock that is at least 100mph capable. That would minimise the performance risk and it would also maximise the number of Thames Turbo units available for cascade. We understand that the benefit to cost ratio for extending electrification to Bedwyn is strong.

Q12. How could Community Rail Partnerships deliver more of the beneficial outcomes for passengers achieved so far?

First Great Western have a positive record of working constructively with Local Transport Authorities, Rail User Groups and the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership.

The franchise operator should be required to continue with this approach and to ensure that Community Rail Partnerships are adequately resourced, both in terms of information and financial support, in order to continue this work.

Q13. While maintaining end to end service frequency, could the needs of passengers be better met by providing the operator with some flexibility over calling patterns on branch lines?

In general it would seem logical that any change in calling patterns is a matter which ought to be determined jointly by the operator and relevant Local Transport Authority.

However, on busily used services, there must be caution about a reduction in intermediate station calls which might impact adversely on established journey to work movements, etc. Also, when patronage reaches an agreed threshold, calls at intermediate stations should be mandatory, rather than by request.

Q14. Respondents are asked to suggest what mitigating actions and steps the GW operator should be expected to take to meet the needs of its passengers both during the planned disruption to the GW franchise as a result of planned upgrade works and when 'force majeure' events such as extreme weather, impact the network.

With regard to planned works, the aim should be to keep passengers on trains (rather than buses) as far as possible. The current franchisee has responded to pressure from Rail User Groups to limit closures to part of a branch rather than the entire line, and this should continue.

Pressure from Network Rail to increase the length of Saturday night / Sunday morning possessions should be resisted where possible. The current franchisee has been effective, for example, in achieving earlier Sunday services on some routes in response to requests from Rail User Groups, and there should be no regression from this.

Resilience is a key issue for the Heart of the South West, given the disruption of the last two winters. Even with the investment Network Rail are making to enhance resilience of their Western Route it is clear that closures of the main line east of Exeter might be expected from time to time. While the provision of infrastructure is a matter for Network Rail, the franchise operator should have an obligation to plan for resilience in their services, to join with LEPs and local authorities in making the case for capacity enhancements on the diversion route via Yeovil Junction and Castle Cary, and to regularly operate trains (such as the sleeper) via this route to retain driver route knowledge.

Q15. Where the provision of temporary, alternative service is unavoidable, respondents are invited to suggest what alternative provisions they would prefer the GW operator to put in place.

Whatever alternatives are provided, real time information needs to be improved, particularly at unmanned stations.

Q16. Respondents are encouraged to consider what steps the GW operator should be expected to take when reacting to changes in passenger demand, and what targets for capacity should be set.

Local services in the South West are not a captive market for rail, and hence the operator should maintain a travelling environment which is attractive to the passenger. Research from Passenger Focus has shown that a prime concern for passengers is that they should get a seat; if passengers have to stand this reduces the train's competitiveness with other modes, particularly the car. It also prevents passengers being able to use their journey time productively.

Hence there should be a requirement and incentive within the franchise agreement for the operator to deploy additional train capacity to mitigate regular overcrowding. There should be capacity metrics in relation to cities such as Bristol and Exeter as well as for commuter journeys into Paddington.

Q17. Respondents are invited to highlight if there are specific stations or services where they feel particular attention should be paid to reliability or punctuality.

Reliability of the ageing train fleet, particularly on local services in the South West peninsula, is of concern. Pacer and Sprinter type stock is thirty years old, and even the Thames Turbo class 165/166s have seen over 20 years' service.

Where older stock is utilised for the new franchise it may need to be refurbished, not only to bring the passenger accommodation up to modern standards, but also to achieve optimum mechanical reliability.

With regard to reliability of service operation, the practice of terminating services short on local lines should be avoided wherever possible (e.g. the practice of terminating Exmouth line trains short at Topsham when behind schedule) and if such practices are going to be needed then information systems should be upgraded so that all passengers on a route (both those waiting at stations and those on the train) are kept up to date with real time information.

Q18. Are there any areas of the GW franchise where you feel cost savings could be made?

We would support an alliance arrangement between Network Rail and the train operator, especially if it would deliver benefits to passengers through a joined-up approach to management.

While not specifically a cost saving, we would support increased efforts on revenue protection to reduce ticketless travel.

Given the significant number of unmanned stations within the Heart of the South West we would support wider deployment of ticket types such as carnets which do not require purchase at the point of travel.

Q19. Respondents are encouraged to consider which locations merit consideration for future improvement under these schemes.

Ease of transfer and an attractive, safe and comfortable waiting environment are essential attributes of a modern transport system. Many of the existing stations in the Heart of the South West area fall short of these criteria. The case for investment is even stronger given the significant increase in travel by rail over the last decade which has seen footfall increase at major stations by over 50%. The potential exists for some significant station improvement schemes, which will not just serve existing local travellers but also act as a gateway to the city or town for inbound business travellers and visitors.

The availability of adequate parking at railway stations is a particularly important point, given the longer distance nature of some rail journeys. The certainty of being able to find a parking space at the station can be a crucial factor in deciding whether to undertake a journey by rail; given the significant increase in rail patronage and the enhanced service frequencies which are being sought a significant increase in station parking should be made at many stations.

The LEP and Local Transport Board are keen to work with the rail industry, and to leverage external funding in addition to the National Stations Improvements Program and Access for All.

As an indication of locations where we believe that the franchise operator should work to achieve significant enhancement of facilities, our Growth Deal bid includes:-

- Taunton – major improvement in station concourse, forecourt and parking enhancements
- Exmouth – Station enhancement and interchange
- Newton Abbot – Forecourt enhancement and pedestrian/ cycle bridge
- Torre – enhancement of station facilities
- Paignton – enhancement of station facilities
- Castle Cary –enhancement of parking capacity and waiting facilities
- Totnes - enhancement of parking capacity and waiting facilities

- Bridgwater - enhancement and improvement of pedestrian/ cycle access
- Exeter St Davids – forecourt and parking enhancements
- Plymouth – major station gateway proposals

Q20. Respondents are encouraged to consider how best to communicate information with passengers across the franchise and how best to keep passengers informed during times of disruption.

The franchise operator should be required to set out proposals for:-

- Improving information to passengers, such as extending the coverage of real time information displays, coupled with making the most effective use of staff resources and help points. As a minimum, current levels of help point and RTI provision should be maintained.
- Improving the supply of prompt and reliable information to passengers during times of disruption, through conventional means and social media, including advice about alternative travel options.
- Maximising the potential for Community Rail Groups to disseminate information

Q21. Rail Executive is considering what the appropriate approach for monitoring and improving service quality in the new franchise would be. Respondents are invited to say what matters most to them (for example, cleanliness of trains and stations, or the helpfulness of staff) in terms of the service quality they receive.

The key issue expectation is that the timetable is operated without delays and cancellations, followed by achieving high levels of customer satisfaction. The franchise needs to include some clear targets and require bidders to demonstrate how they plan to ensure they are achieved.

Monitoring of satisfaction levels should not be limited to existing passengers, as that risks excluding the views of people who have ceased to be rail passengers, for example because of dissatisfaction with reliability or inability to pay the fares.

Q22. Please indicate if there are any additional areas that you think Rail Executive should consider consulting on and that have not already been addressed during stakeholder engagement.

The consultation document posed no questions specifically about ticketing.

The franchise operator should be required to set out proposals for ensuring that all travellers have a ready means of securing a ticket before they travel, for example through installation of more ticket machines, widened availability of carnet tickets, and cashless purchase through mobile phones.