

First Great Western Coffee Shop passenger forum

Response to Network Rail Great Western Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation

[First Great Western Coffee Shop](#) is an online discussion forum, run by passengers, for the benefit of all those with an interest in the railways of the FGW area, and beyond. Our forum is acknowledged by First Great Western (FGW), but we are not part of FGW or their [official website](#), and the views of contributors to our forum are their own and are not necessarily those of FGW. However, we do have a number of members of FGW staff as contributing members on our forum, giving a good balance of passenger and staff points of view.

We currently have 718 active members on our forum, at www.firstgreatwestern.info/coffeeshop/index.php and the following response is based on their views, collated over the past two months.

Introduction

We welcome the generally positive approach contained in the RUS, although we do have some concerns over a few schemes which are apparently being discounted on cost grounds. We believe these areas of potential improvement have not been given fair consideration, in that low growth figures have been assumed for travel requirements by train. It appears that these assumptions do not take into account effects such as increased road congestion, rising fuel prices and an increasing desire by people to use public transport.

Electrification of Great Western Main Line

This announcement was welcomed by our members, as it provides the opportunity for the extension of Crossrail services west of Maidenhead – which would bring significant benefits. It would give the wider Thames Valley direct rail access to London and also create extra capacity at Paddington for longer distance services.

Growth in passenger demand

Bristol

The Bristol area has enjoyed a huge increase in rail commuting in the last few years. Some examples of the most recent 3 year growth are:-

Yate	68%
Bristol Parkway	30%
Keynsham	37%
Filton Abbey Wood	21%
Nailsea & Backwell	44%
Worle	47%

There are several reasons for this growth, the most significant of which is the development over the last ten years of a substantial amount of office space close to Bristol Temple Meads. For any commuter in these new developments who is within easy reach of a station, rail is the only sensible option given the traffic and parking issues in Bristol. It is worth emphasising this point as there is still a belief (repeated by Stuart Baker of the DfT at a recent TravelWatch

SouthWest meeting in Taunton), that Temple Meads is too far from the City Centre to attract local traffic. That belief is now outdated, as the dramatic increase in commuting has shown.

Other reasons behind the increase are the large amount of new developments in the Filton Abbey Wood and Parkway areas, providing a second commuting focus to the north of the city.

More developments are occurring in both these areas, so we can expect to see the recent trend for strong commuter growth to continue. We do not believe the estimate of a 3.2%pa growth over 11 years is realistic and as such the RUS recommendations will leave the railway unable to cope with the demand well before the end of CP5.

We note that the electrification announcement included cancellation of the new DMU order for 11x4 car trains. There was considerable disappointment at this announcement, as the prospect of four car trains for the Cardiff to Portsmouth route within a couple of years has been replaced by the possibility of cascading of turbo stock to the region in around eight years. Apart from the delay, and the implications for overcrowding in the Bristol area in the interim, there must be some doubt as to how much life will be left in a fleet of DMUs which will be then be approaching 30 years old.

We discuss specific issues at Weston, Parkway and Filton bank elsewhere.

Infrastructure

Bristol Temple Meads to Parson Street

The proposal to reinstate the fourth (southbound) track is welcomed, as it will give much more flexibility in the event of late running and in future timetable preparation.

Although the relief line is already in place northbound, the situation is far from ideal. Stopping services routed on to the relief line have to make their call at Parson Street first (and indeed have an additional delay before reaching Parson Street due to the approach control protection of the junction). We therefore believe that the relief line should be extended for a short distance south of Parson Street, to enable northbound local services to clear the main line quicker.

Bristol to Bridgwater linespeed improvements

This proposal to increase the linespeed to 125mph is welcomed - although elsewhere, the RUS discounts the reintroduction of a second hourly Cross Country service south of Bristol (which we disagree with), which diminishes the benefits of this investment.

Worle to Weston dualling

We fundamentally disagree with the proposal that this work is no longer justified since performance improvements have reduced delay minutes to the extent that the work is no longer justified. Our argument is that:-

The single track section is at full capacity for extended periods in both rush hours. Any perturbation will result in delays at these times, and it is unrealistic to base a 10 year plan on a relatively recent and so far short term improvement.

Failure to carry out the work will mean there will be no scope for additional rush hour services through Weston for the next ten years. This should be considered in the context of the general comments about commuting into Bristol.

The constraints of the junction and single line will also hamper any future changes to timetabling on both Cross Country and local routes, as the mixture of non stop and stopping services already constrains the slots available.

Bristol Parkway Fourth Platform

We disagree that this is unlikely to be cost justifiable. Again this must be considered in the context of growth in the Bristol commuter area, the proposal for an additional hourly London service to serve Parkway, and the benefits a fourth platform brings when services are running late. The fourth platform will enable a second service to enter Parkway when the platform is already occupied, and will also mean that connections that would otherwise be missed could be maintained, when trains arrive from the east in the incorrect order.

Filton Bank

We note the RUS's comments on the problems of Filton bank and acknowledge that full four tracking is likely to be very expensive. However, the mix of heavy freight, local and long distance services currently causes delays, and these can only get worse as demand increases. We therefore strongly believe that some enhancement to the infrastructure is necessary, with at a minimum 3 tracks from Narrowways Hill Junction to Filton, the middle one being bidirectional.

Swindon - Kemble redoubling

There seems to be universal agreement that this scheme should go ahead, and we support that view. In particular, it should be completed before electrification work in the Severn Tunnel commences, as like many observers, we suspect that considerable closures of the tunnel will be required.

Services

HSS East of Swindon

The suggestion that a fifth hourly service is introduced from London to Bristol is welcomed. It is hoped that this fifth service, together with the proposed hourly service from London to Cheltenham Spa, will enable the reintroduction of some limited stop services from both South Wales and Bristol Temple Meads to London, and a return to journey times that were available over 30 years ago.

Having said that, the current basic half hourly high speed service has built up large volumes of commuting traffic at most stations. Care will be needed to ensure that any recast does not significantly disadvantage these existing traffic flows.

Cross Country (South of Bristol)

The RUS discounts the reintroduction of the short lived 2tph south of Bristol, which was introduced in 2002 and withdrawn the next year. We oppose this view on several grounds. Firstly, the current service has many fewer seats per hour than the pre-Operation Princess service. Secondly, the existing service is known to be heavily overcrowded, which is hardly surprising given the previous point. And finally, the existing Cross Country franchise is predicated on a strong growth in passengers. It seems unrealistic to be able to expect the service to cater for passenger volumes in 2019 when offering substantially lower seats per hour than existed in 2001.

Bristol – Weston - Taunton

This route has enjoyed a dramatic increase in passenger volumes in recent years, and to date capacity has broadly matched demand. However, the RUS downplays the possibilities of making further increases in services, partly because of the cost of the infrastructure improvements at Worle. We believe the RUS should make a realistic assessment of the ten year demand on this line and plan accordingly.

Portishead Branch

We note the RUS's comments about the possibility of services being introduced on this branch. We actively support the reintroduction of services on this line. Indeed, as an indication of how bad the road commute into Bristol is, we note that, notwithstanding the challenging geography between the two towns, some commuters into Bristol drive to Nailsea & Backwell station rather than drive directly into Bristol. This service would at a stroke slash commuting times from Portishead and as well bring some relief to several heavily congested roads and junctions.

North Bristol (South Wales, Parkway and Gloucester services)

Many of the comments made about the line to Weston and beyond also apply here, with the exception that capacity has proved inadequate on several key services. The aspiration for a second tph to Yate should be implemented as soon as possible. Additionally, subject to the availability of paths through the Severn Tunnel, the option of a third hourly Temple Meads to South Wales service should be developed, maybe enabling the Cardiff to Portsmouth service to be speeded up.

Bristol – Bath – Chippenham

The discussion regarding an additional local service is noted. Our view is that the Chippenham solution is preferable, as it would enable the long held aspiration for a station at Corsham to be met. Additionally, a turnback/third line at Chippenham has other benefits, such as the opportunity for services to and from Westbury, discussed elsewhere, and the ability to hold freight traffic clear of the main line.

Whilst the option of a local service terminating at Bath is better than nothing, we wonder whether the performance issues of turning back services at such a busy location have been fully considered.

Swindon – Chippenham – Trowbridge – Westbury - Warminster – Salisbury (including services to Melksham)

We noted with strong approval the proposals contained in the RUS for a number of alternative improvements in this area. Several of our members live in Melksham (a town of 22,000 people, and growing) where they are presently served by just two trains each way per weekday. These services run on the Westbury to Swindon line, with intermediate stops at Trowbridge and Chippenham, and leave Melksham at 06:40 and 19:11 to Westbury, and at 07:17 and 19:47 to Swindon. We support the efforts of Wiltshire Council, 'Save the Train', the Melksham Railway Development Group and others to obtain an appropriate level of service for Melksham, and therefore welcome these positive points in the RUS. In particular, the options put forward in the RUS for providing an hourly service, including the fact that four out of the six are also strongly justified on a Benefit Cost ratio calculation, are very encouraging.

However, we do have some concerns over the increasing use of the single track section from Chippenham to Trowbridge, and we therefore recommend those options in the RUS that would add an extra track alongside the existing spare platform at Chippenham. Ideally, a loop (but even a bay platform) would allow for Westbury trains to

be turned back at Chippenham, and for trains waiting to go on towards Trowbridge to be held clear of the main London to Bristol line.

We also recommend that consideration be given to increasing capacity on the single line section, by adding a passing loop and enhancing junctions, to allow trains to be held clear of the main line without blocking the single track for services in the opposite direction. This should include signalling to allow multiple services to follow each other more closely – for example, for a freight train to follow a passenger train, without having to wait for the passenger train to clear the single track.

It is further recommended that it would be of some benefit for the Bradford North Curve to be reinstated, including resignalling. This would allow the line to be used for main line diversions during engineering works on the section through Box Tunnel, and would also allow strategic services from Bristol to Chippenham and Swindon to serve Bradford-on-Avon and Melksham.

Plymouth

The comments regarding the surveying of the current first service to Plymouth are rather bemusing. The fact that many passengers on this service are using it as a local service from Swindon to Bristol is hardly surprising, in view of its arrival time into Bristol at 9.15. Neither is the fact that not many passengers are using it to travel from London to Plymouth surprising, given the unattractive journey time and arrival time into Plymouth (11:15).

We therefore do not accept this as evidence that there is no demand for an earlier first service from London to Plymouth. All the evidence has shown is that the first service offered via Bristol clearly does not meet any need.

We note that elsewhere first arrivals from London on broadly three hour schedules are: Newcastle (09:36 and 10:02), Carlisle (09:21 and 10:46), Swansea (08:57 and 09:46) and, admittedly slightly shorter, Sheffield (09:04 and 10:04).

Conclusion

We welcome this opportunity to have input to the RUS, and hope that our comments and proposals are helpful in the production of the final document early in 2010. The generally positive tone of the RUS is appreciated, and we believe that consideration of the points made above will assist you in finalising a robust plan for the next ten years for the Great Western Route.

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