



Department for Transport

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From the Minister of State
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Dear Cllr Geoff Brown,

Congratulations on your recent appointment to the role of Chair of the Peninsula Rail Task Force and thank you for your letter dated 6 February. Like you I look forward to continuing the positive dialogue between our respective organisations.

I am grateful to the Task Force for continuing to work so effectively to make the case for investment in the southwest region, particularly in the light of the important role that the region plays in the nation's economic growth. I recognise and wholeheartedly support the need to ensure that this growth is supported by suitable transport links. This is why the Government's strategy to create better links in and to the South West involves investment of in excess of £5bn.

The Department has recently been asked by southwest MPs and stakeholders for a formal response to the strategic blueprint "Closing the Gap", therefore I would like to take the opportunity to set out the Government's position, particularly in the light of recent announcements.

Context

Making rail journeys on the Great Western Railway the best they can be for passengers is a task I am committed to. Network Rail and the current franchise holder are delivering the most substantial upgrade to the Great Western network in its 175-year history. In November 2017 we announced that we intend to negotiate terms to enable the current operator to continue operating the franchise until April 2022.

We have also carried out a public consultation on the priorities for the franchise from 2020, both during the two year continuation period and beyond. The consultation represents a real chance for passengers and local

stakeholders to help shape their communities' rail services and I am grateful for the contribution of the PRTF and its members to that process.

During the continuation period we expect GWR to deliver further enhancements for passengers and to drive forward a process of future service development with Network Rail and other partners. This will take account of priorities identified by the PRTF and other interested parties across the southwest.

On the same day as launching the consultation we also published our new strategic vision for the railways, "Connecting People". Our vision is for a revitalised railway used to its full potential, and we have a bold plan to get there. Connecting People sets direction for the sector, and our reforms will help the network deal with the challenges it faces.

This includes a new way of operating train and track, bringing them closer together, exploring opportunities to increase railway capacity to drive housing and economic growth, and modernising the railway by bringing forward digital technologies to dramatically improve services for passengers, all with the aim of providing a railway fit for the 21st century and the huge volumes of passengers it now carries.

The vision is consolidated by the Statement of Funds Available for the railway for Control Period 6 (covering the years 2019-2024), which was set out in October last year. This continues funding for the biggest railway modernisation programme since Victorian times, with investment continuing at record levels. It will see around £47.9bn spent on the railway during the period. We expect that this funding should be used to deliver what passengers and businesses want: a dependable railway, with an increased focus on punctuality and reliability.

Resilience

For the southwest in particular this means greater service resilience. Protecting the line at Dawlish is a national priority and I am determined to find a permanent solution for this vital connection. £15m funding has been provided to Network Rail to take this forward, and planning and development work is well under way. Network Rail is focusing on the three most urgent elements identified within their resilience study, in order of magnitude:

- the soft, steep high cliffs between Teignmouth station and Parsons Tunnel, which are at risk from a significant landslip that would block the adjacent railway line;
- the rocky cliffs between Kennaway Tunnel and Parsons Tunnel, which are at risk from rock falls; and
- a section of sea wall opposite Marine Parade at Dawlish where the metal railings adjacent to the track provide very little protection of the railway from large waves.

This is a highly unique and complex terrain and in order to deliver the best solution it is critical that the resilience study is comprehensive. Contracts will be awarded in Spring 2018 to undertake ground investigations, option selection and outline design for all three areas. These are expected to be complete in 2019 to enable the next phase of work to begin in the new funding Control Period. The development work also includes the preparation of the necessary Transport and Works Act application for the work on the Teignmouth cliffs.

Elsewhere in the southwest, culvert works at Cowley Bridge will be completed during summer 2018. Flood resilience work has also been completed at Whiteball and is planned to be completed at Axe and Broom in September 2018, and at Hele and Bradninch by February 2019.

Providing diversionary capability is an essential element of the resilience programme. As part of our planning process for Control Period 6, we will start development work for a package of infrastructure enhancements to deliver greater capacity for diversions between Castle Cary and Exeter along the West of England main line through Yeovil. We are prioritising the development of a plan for a new passing loop at Whimple, to enable early delivery of more frequent local train services between Axminster and Exeter.

Journey times, connectivity, capacity and comfort

In addition to delivering greater resilience and reliability, the Department is continuing to invest in other key projects highlighted by the PRTF for reduced journey times, improved connectivity and increased capacity and comfort.

The most significant change for passengers will be realised with the Hitachi AT300 trains being delivered as the next tranche of new intercity trains following the IEPs. The first have already been delivered and are under test on routes in the southwest.

The AT300-based timetable will substantially reduce the differential between the fastest and slowest trains, providing more regular fast journeys prior to any infrastructure works. This will build on timetable improvements already implemented by GWR, which are now providing an early-morning three-hour journey from London Paddington to Plymouth.

Our immediate priority is to ensure the successful and reliable implementation of the new AT300 timetable next year, to ensure the south west enjoys the fullest possible benefits from the Government's investment in the new trains.

In addition, we are already delivering:

- re-signalling of the main line in Cornwall to allow a two-train per hour service between Plymouth and Penzance instead of the current irregular service;
- progressive cascade of rolling stock that will culminate in the withdrawal of the “Pacer” trains from the southwest;
- refurbishment of the Night Riviera trains and investment in new maintenance facilities at Long Rock, Penzance. The refurbishment scheme will be complete in 2018;
- Wifi available on all GWR trains (other than those to be withdrawn). GWR wifi is free for passenger use. I am aware that Cornwall Council is working with GWR to install wifi at all stations in Cornwall, which will be welcomed by passengers;
- substantial car park extensions at stations across the peninsula including a completed scheme at Tiverton Parkway and further schemes at St Erth and Taunton;
- joint work between GWR, NR and Plymouth City Council on an LGF-supported locally-promoted station improvement scheme at Plymouth including improved parking; and
- development of proposals to reintroduce regular services between Exeter and Okehampton, as referred in the Rail Strategy.

Beyond this, the Department is keen to identify options and business cases for further interventions to reduce journey times, building on the “Speed to the West” work undertaken jointly by Network Rail and GWR last year. While that work focused on the potential for targeted infrastructure improvements to support faster journeys, there may also be opportunities to improve both journey times and connectivity through changes to the structure of the timetable for services operating between London, Newbury/Bedwyn, Westbury and the south west peninsula.

These opportunities are best explored in close collaboration between Network Rail and the train operator, but will require funding to take forward. Development funding for the remainder of Control Period 5 is now largely committed but over the coming year we will work with PRTF, GWR and Network Rail to develop the case for allocating development funding to this issue as an early priority for Control Period 6.

In addition to this, we will continue to advise and support local partners and stakeholders as they develop the case for new station proposals, including Edginswell and Marsh Barton, and local service improvements, such as regularising calling patterns and investigating the case for further frequency enhancements on the Exmouth branch as part of the longer-term development of Devon County Council’s “Devon Metro” concept.

A new process for enhancements

Looking forward, new enhancements will be taken forward through a new process in accordance with the recommendations of the Bowe Review. This will build on the process set out in the Memorandum of Understanding between Department for Transport and Network Rail for rail enhancements.

The process for determining new enhancements will take the form of a pipeline of potential schemes, designed to ensure investment best addresses the needs of passengers and freight, and that funding commitments appropriately reflect the stage of development of enhancements. We will only commit enhancements for development, design or delivery when they have been properly worked through, to avoid the problems of the past where schemes were committed to too early.

We will continue to work with the Task Force to identify and develop the proposals within the blueprint that deliver most value for money to rail users, recognising that the strategy covers a twenty year horizon.

Infrastructure-related recommendations from “Closing the Gap” will need to be taken forward through the new pipeline process. We will make further announcements about the new process as well as confirming which enhancements are committed at which stage as part of the Rail Network Enhancements Plan in due course.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to again commend the work of the PRTF. The work that the Task Force has undertaken has been of great value to the Department in defining the needs of stakeholders on the route and providing clear goals and solutions for us to work on.

I will ensure that the Task Force is kept up to date with progress on these and other enhancements that will help to improve the rail network in the peninsula as we move into the next Control Period.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jo Johnson', is centered on the page.

JO JOHNSON

This document sets out the Government's position on the recommendations contained in the PRTF's strategic rail blueprint "Closing the Gap".

The recommendations are in ***italic bold text***.

RESILIENCE

"Closing the Gap" rightly highlights the economic costs and disruption caused by severe weather events and the likelihood that a changing climate will increase the frequency of such events.

1.1 Completing resilience works at high-risk locations on the existing network, at Cowley Bridge, the Somerset Levels, Hele and Bradninch

What we're doing

Culvert works at Cowley Bridge will be completed during summer 2018. The culverts will give a protection return of 1 in 20 years.

Work at Hele & Bradninch will be completed by February 2019.

Flood resilience work has also been completed at Whiteball and is being progressed at Axe and Broom.

Next steps

A second phase of work at Cowley Bridge, consisting of removal of up to three weirs, is under consideration and requires the consent of the Environment Agency. It would be subject to a detailed assessment of the impact on the wider area, to be undertaken by Network Rail.

Delivery Mechanism

Infrastructure Enhancements Process / Resilience programme

1.2 Further interventions to increase resilience, focusing on the high-risk stretches of line around Dawlish and Teignmouth

What we're doing

Taking forward development work for the three most critical areas identified in Network Rail's geotechnical report:

- Teignmouth – Parsons Tunnel cliff face
- Parsons Tunnel – Kennaway Tunnel
- Marine Parade sea wall

Next steps

Resilience schemes will be taken through the new enhancements funding pipeline process in CP6 and subsequent Control Periods.

Delivery Mechanism

Infrastructure Enhancements Process

1.3 Providing more effective diversionary routes, in particular by increasing capacity between Exeter, Yeovil and Castle Cary

What we're doing

Arrangements are already in place to amend train services to provide for diversions e.g. at weekends.

Next steps

Proposed diversionary routes will also be taken through the new enhancements pipeline process.

Delivery Mechanism

Infrastructure Enhancements Process

1.4 Operating Cross Country trains with rolling stock that can operate reliably along the sea wall in all weathers.

What we're doing

The Department has held a series of workshops across the Cross Country franchise area, and a full public consultation process will begin in Spring 2018. The department's Cross Country franchising team attended the PRTF board meeting on the 11th January 2018.

The next franchisee will be set challenging operational performance targets where they will be incentivized to improve performance across the whole network, and to minimise cancellations, so bidders will have to consider these targets when deciding which types of rolling stock it will use.

Next steps

The next Cross Country franchisee will be required to provide capacity to tackle overcrowding, and bidders will be incentivised to deliver a step change in passenger experience, meeting the needs of travellers with different journey purposes.

The operator will have to work with stakeholders to improve right time performance across the franchise, and operational resilience will play an important part of this improvement.

Delivery Mechanism

Cross Country franchise competition

REDUCING JOURNEY TIMES AND IMPROVING CONNECTIVITY

“Closing the Gap” identifies several priorities for reducing journey times and improving connectivity to and from the South West peninsula

2.1 Journey time reductions and frequency enhancements on Great Western services between London and the peninsula, including an aspiration for a two-trains-per-hour service between Paddington and Plymouth supported by electrification to Bedwyn

What we're doing

The first of the new bi-mode AT300 InterCity Express Trains have already been delivered and are being tested on routes in the south west.

By 2019, the AT300-based timetable will substantially reduce the differential between the fastest and slowest trains between London and the Peninsula. Even before the new fleet is introduced, GWR is now providing a new, fast early-morning journey from Paddington with a three-hour journey time, arriving in Plymouth shortly after 09:30.

Next steps

Opportunities to accelerate journeys fall broadly into two categories:

- a. line speed improvements; and

- b. changes to the train service structure to reduce the number of intermediate calls in the longer-distance services.

- a. Line speed improvements:

GWR and Network Rail have been working together to identify those locations on the route where carefully-targeted interventions will secure incremental reductions in journey times. These will be taken through the new enhancements pipeline process.

- b. Train service structure:

We will work with local partners to explore the potential for longer-term changes to the structure of the long-distance services with a view to accelerating journeys without compromising service levels at intermediate stations. We are aware that Plymouth City Council have commissioned a study into the potential for a 2tph service between London and Plymouth, which will be an important input into this process.

Delivery Mechanisms

- a. Infrastructure Enhancements Process
- b. Great Western franchise process

2.2 Journey time enhancements on the Waterloo-Exeter route

What we're doing

The franchise awarded to First MTR South Western Railway in Summer 2017 will deliver a £1.2 billion investment programme to improve services for passengers on all parts of the network from London to the South West

Next steps

We will look at journey time enhancements on the Waterloo – Exeter route and take them through the new enhancements pipeline process.

Delivery Mechanism

Infrastructure Enhancements Process

2.3 Improved connectivity to destinations other than Paddington, including Bristol, the Midlands and Heathrow Airport

What we're doing

The introduction of the full Elizabeth Line service pattern in December 2019 will open up faster and more convenient connecting journeys for passengers travelling between the Peninsula and the West End, City of London and Canary Wharf.

We are also developing plans for a western rail link to Heathrow, which would enable passengers to make journeys between the Airport and the South West without needing to travel via central London

Next steps

Through the Great Western (GW) and Cross Country franchise replacement processes, we will look at improving connectivity between the Peninsula, Bristol and beyond with the potential for new destinations and markets to be served. Interested parties have already had the opportunity to contribute their views to the GW franchise consultation and, in due course, will have a similar opportunity in respect of Cross Country.

Delivery Mechanism

Franchise competitions
Infrastructure Enhancements Process

CAPACITY AND COMFORT

“Closing the Gap” highlights a range of aspirations for improving capacity and comfort on board the Great Western and Cross Country train fleets.

3.1 Providing on-board facilities to reflect the particular needs of business and leisure travellers

What we're doing

The passenger experience on board GWR's long-distance services will be transformed in the coming year as the new AT300 trains enter service, providing a truly modern on-board environment and a substantial increase in the number of seats on 9 and 10 car trains.

Electrification to Didcot, and subsequently to Newbury by January 2019, enables significant numbers of 'Turbo' trains to cascade to the Bristol area, in turn releasing trains for local services in the South West Peninsula – providing more seats and space for passengers and enabling the 'Pacer' fleet to be withdrawn from service.

The refurbishment of the 'Night Riviera' Sleeper carriages is well under way, and will be complete during 2018. This refurbishment is taking place alongside enhancements to the Sleeper facilities at key stations, sponsored by Cornwall County Council.

Next steps

In common with the rest of the network, all trains will be required to comply with modern accessibility regulations by the beginning of 2020. We will look closely at the responses to a recent consultation when designing the next franchise.

Delivery Mechanism

Existing train operators
GW franchising process

3.2 Improving mobile and wi-fi connectivity for the benefit of all passengers

What we're doing

GWR has fitted free Wi-Fi to all its fleet except the Pacers and other rolling stock not staying in the franchise in the longer term. The new AT300 trains will also be Wi-Fi fitted. Cross Country are also committed to fitting and providing free Wi-Fi on their fleet by 2020.

Next steps

In November 2017 the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) was allocated up to £35m to trial technical and commercial options between Manchester and York (Trans Pennine route) to provide uninterrupted mobile and guaranteed WiFi coverage. This trial is due to start at the end of 2018.

DCMS recently undertook a call for evidence to understand the technical and commercial options for improved connectivity. The responses will be published late Spring. This along with the trial will help develop new policy to provide improved connectivity on all main line routes by 2025 which includes the GWR/Cross Country routes.

Network Rail Telecom (NRT) are working closely with infrastructure and telecom suppliers to conduct a desktop feasibility study along the Penzance to London via Taunton and Reading.

Delivery Mechanism

To be determined in light of DCMS “call for evidence” and lessons learnt from the Trans Pennine Trial.

LOCAL SCHEMES

“Closing the Gap” identifies a range of schemes for delivery through local partners.

4.1 Improvements to stations and station access, and new station proposals

What we’re doing

The current GWR franchise sets aside significant funds for station improvements. The franchise has delivered, or will deliver, substantial car park extensions at stations across the peninsula, including a completed scheme at Tiverton Parkway and proposed schemes at St Erth and Taunton.

New gatelines have been installed at Newton Abbot and an additional gateline will be installed at Bristol Temple Meads.

Next steps

GWR is working with Plymouth City Council, Network Rail and other partners on a locally-promoted improvement scheme at and around Plymouth station.

We will be considering how best to secure further investment in station enhancements during the 2020-22 franchise continuation period

Delivery Mechanism

Third party development and funding_
GW franchising process

4.2 Cornish Main Line resignalling scheme

What we’re doing

The resignalling scheme is due to be completed by the end of 2018 and this, along with conversion of the short-formation HST sets, will enable a two-train-per-hour service to be introduced between Plymouth and Penzance.

Next steps

Resignalling scheme being delivered by Network Rail
HST sets being converted to short formations

Delivery Mechanism

Train service to be delivered by GWR in 2019 timetable

4.3 Local service improvements such as Exeter – Axminster / Honiton, improvements on the Exeter – Barnstaple route and regular services to Okehampton

What we're doing

A regular two-train-per-hour service will be introduced between Exmouth, Exeter and Paignton in the 2019 timetable. Timetable improvements are also planned on the Exeter-Barnstaple branch.

Next steps

We have asked GWR to develop proposals to trial regular services on the Okehampton branch. We also expect GWR to play its full part in supporting the development of local proposals for other service enhancements such as between Exeter and Axminster / Honiton (Devon Metro), and in longer-term proposals such as the potential scheme to reopen the railway between Plymouth and Tavistock

Delivery Mechanism

GWR franchise (Okehampton)
Third party development and funding

4.4 Resignalling and line speed improvements between Bridgwater and Bristol

What we're doing

Network Rail is currently implementing the Bristol area resignalling project (a renewal), scheduled to be completed by Easter 2018.

Next steps

Line speed improvements will need to be taken through the new enhancements funding process in CP6 and subsequent Control Periods

Delivery Mechanism

Infrastructure Enhancements Process