

21 February 2018

RE: PRTF Great Western Franchise Response

Responding to the Great Western Franchise Consultation the Peninsula Rail Task Force (PRTF) reiterates its ambition to deliver a fit for purpose rail network for its passengers across the peninsula, with emphasis on achieving resilience, faster journey times and greater comfort and capacity. Our concern, like that of our many stakeholders, is to understand how any of these proposals outlined in the consultation document will help achieve our clear priorities.

We have been clear that we are not looking for a change in the franchise geography, but instead changes in infrastructure, timetables and train fleets which will consequently transform the levels of service to the PRTF region. We would expect the franchise specification to form part of the government response to the 20 Year Plan “Closing the Gap”, which the PRTF presented to Government in November 2016. Closing the Gap identifies outputs, which would be delivered through the franchise, such as two trains per hour between Paddington and the South West and replacement rolling stock for regional and local services.

We consider it important that franchise holders recognise the need for these objectives to work towards delivering the three priorities set out in the 20 Year Plan. Whilst the PRTF welcomes the majority of the objectives outlined in the consultation, it is vital that we can understand how the expected changes to the franchise contribute to the three priorities.

The PRTF has identified that resilience sits as the South West’s number one priority, and this needs to be added as a franchise objective. Without resilience the region’s rail network will slowly grind to a halt – leaving many of the objectives outlined unattainable. The PRTF’s three priorities:

A resilient and reliable railway

Protecting the Dawlish mainline is key to maintaining continuity of service for our communities, businesses and visitors, even during extreme weather events. The South West’s economy cannot hinge on the inevitable occurrence of another storm, Network Rail has been clear that the probability of events at Dawlish and surrounding areas will increase by 600% by 2065 – a one in four year event. Combined, the collapse at Dawlish and flooding on the Somerset Levels in 2014 cost our economy an estimated £1.2billion. We cannot afford numerous hits on our economy.

Therefore the PRTF and its passengers expect:

- Trains that can and do work efficiently through all weathers
- Minimal service disruption
- A reliable mobile and WiFi network for its passengers, with a consistent signal for at least 90% of the journey

We welcome the proposal in the Network Rail Strategic Business Plan to invest £35m in works to improve the railway’s resilience to extreme weather in particular at Teignmouth, Dawlish and other flood-prone areas, as part of a long term commitment to improving resilience. Collaboration between the franchise operator and Network Rail is essential to deliver this resilient infrastructure



PENINSULA RAIL TASK FORCE

Faster journey times and improved connectivity

As we have stated, research has shown that productivity falls by 6% for every 100 minutes from London and a journey time reduction of 60 minutes would create a £1.2 billion uplift in GVA for the peninsula. The South West has the potential to thrive economically but remains untapped until improvements are introduced.

We welcome the proposal in the Network Rail Strategic Business Plan to improve track condition between Totnes and Hemerdon as the first stage to enable higher line speeds and reduce journey times to Devon and Cornwall. Enhancements could see speeds improved from 60mph to 75mph, improving reliability and punctuality of rail services for passengers in the South West, leading to a reduction in journey times of three minutes. The PRTF welcomes the emphasis on closer collaboration between the franchise operator and Network Rail and expects the next franchise to progress delivery of the PRTF infrastructure needs.

There is also the immediate need for fleets to run reliably, reduce journey times through effective timetabling and improve connectivity between the rail network and other modes of public transport.

Sufficient capacity and comfort for our passengers

Passenger growth in the South West is exceptional and at 128% over the last 21 years, is over twice the national average and it continues to grow. Greater capacity through increasing the frequency of the trains as well as the number of seats can exploit this growth, driving economic expansion. There is the requirement for greater intra-connectivity within the South West, ensuring sufficient car parking, smart ticketing, signage and catering deliver the end-to-end journey experience expected by passengers.

The new Hitachi trains can provide the first 'smart' intercity service in the country, providing reliable mobile and WiFi connectivity throughout the journey to encourage a travelling office.

The PRTF will endorse a franchise that understands the issues that the region faces on a daily basis. Putting its passengers first through the delivery of a resilient service is paramount. Any train operator is only as good as its infrastructure and we urge the Department to address these issues as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Geoff Brown
Chair of the Peninsula Rail Task Force