

Greater Western Franchise Replacement Consultation Response

Introduction

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group (BTPG) represents the interests of users of Bedwyn station. In view of the forthcoming Greater Western Franchise Replacement we produced our keynote document *A Review of Train Services on the Berks & Hants Line*.

On December 22nd 2011 the Department for Transport (DfT) published the *Great Western Franchise Replacement Consultation*.

With particular interest to Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury we note that this document states:

The actual service pattern run will be decided by the franchisee within the constraints of the Train Service Requirement. Respondents are encouraged to consider the service components set out below. Comments on this section will be examined by the Department and will also be provided for bidders to consider.

It goes on to state:

The current (off peak) service pattern is London to Newbury fast, continuing all stations to Bedwyn, some operated as part of the West of England group – one train an hour;

And under the “Future service pattern” it states:

1 (IEP train per hour) (most hours) semi-fast to Westbury, with some extensions to Exeter and one mid-day round trip to Paignton.

Our keynote document *A Review of Train Services on the Berks & Hants Line* was produced before publication of the DfT’s *Great Western Franchise Replacement Consultation*. We would suggest that our document still maintains much of its relevance; however some new information has now been made available.

We are pleased to have this opportunity to comment on the Draft Consultation and to put forward our views on the future of rail services in the Greater Western area and more particularly on the Berks & Hants Line.

Background Information

BTPG carried out an exit survey on 23/11/2011 of 77 passengers (approximately 40% of total daily users). It was found that 66% of people that caught the trains from Bedwyn travelled directly to and from Paddington, 19.5% Reading and 14.5% stations to Newbury. We would suggest that these figures give strong support to the retention of through services to Reading and Paddington at least to the current levels.

Bedwyn station is grossly undercounted due to it (i) not being a penalty fare station, (ii) no on-station ticket purchasing facility, (iii) most trains not having a ticket seller. Our calculations show an undercounting of around 30%.

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People have deliberately moved to Great Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury because of the direct service to Paddington. It would hit these people financially if they should have to move due to any cessation of through trains.

The line between Reading and Paddington is notoriously overcrowded and the recent increase in seats announced only allows the problem to 'tread water' as year on year passenger numbers increase. If Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury users had to change trains at Reading they would find it difficult to get a seat. This would also add to people needlessly changing trains at Reading, causing unnecessary platform crowding.

The Paddington to Bedwyn semi-fast service has operated for many years on an hourly basis for much of the day. BTPG can see no valid reason why any future semi-fast service to Exeter St David's, Westbury or other destination should not take up the same stopping pattern as far as Bedwyn.

Bedwyn has 22/23 weekday calls in each direction at present giving an hourly service for most of the day, with roughly two trains per hour during the peak periods. Therefore, any specification which significantly reduces calls or frequency will simply not be acceptable to station users. Of these calls, 12 trains in each direction (just over 50%) run through to and from Paddington.

If an hourly off-peak service is to be maintained any omission of stops west of Newbury would require the provision of a Turbo shuttle, at least to and from Newbury. This would considerably increase costs and may also be difficult to operate due to the lack of a west-facing bay at Newbury.

The use of some Turbos particularly to operate additional peak and possibly some late evening services would be welcome. However if they were used all day on Bedwyn shuttles to and from either Newbury or Reading this would be strongly opposed, and if implemented this would almost inevitably lead to large numbers of passengers driving to stations such as Newbury or Andover (this has previously happened).

The RUS suggests that the introduction of Exeter semi-fasts would allow the longer distance fast trains to omit most stops east of Taunton by transferring these stops to the semi-fast services. Although this would mean longer journey times for stations such as Westbury and Castle Cary this should be easily offset by much higher frequency of service.

The use of 125mph trains along with a likely reduction in station dwell times (compared with HSTs) should ensure that stops at Kintbury, Hungerford and Bedwyn do not impact on the timing of longer distance services.

If Turbo shuttles to and from Newbury were to be used for most of the day they would naturally be timed to provide links with Reading and Paddington. As a result this would preclude any direct links with the West Country, something that would be provided if stops were included on the proposed semi-fast trains.

BTPG would also oppose any suggestion that these semi-fast trains only stop at 'larger' stations such as Hungerford. Bedwyn in particular acts as a railhead for

Marlborough and a wide surrounding area, and there would still be a need to run an additional shuttle to cover Kintbury and Bedwyn.

Future Services

Although we still await clarification on the stopping pattern for the semi-fast trains we will assume that in general they take up the same pattern as at present as far as Bedwyn. We will also assume that an hourly electric all stations service operates between Reading and Newbury. The RUS and the Draft Consultation Document both refer to possible additional electric trains which may run between Newbury and Paddington, presumably on a semi-fast basis. It is not clear whether this would be peak only or on an hourly basis. We will concentrate on the possible level of service for Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury.

Eastbound Service

Prior to the franchise change in 2006 there were four trains from Bedwyn before 8am, all running through to Paddington. In the current timetable there are five eastbound trains but only two through trains at 0555 and 0647. The others run at 0613 and 0707 (all stations to Reading) and 0756 (to Newbury). Based on the current times BTPG would like to see the following post-electrification morning peak service.

Retention of the 0555 Bedwyn, 0520 Bristol Temple Meads and 0607 Frome trains to Paddington (the latter two trains to call at all 'semi-fast' stations). A new semi-fast train to Paddington calling at Bedwyn, to resolve the demand for an approximate 0730 departure caused by the loss of two early morning direct Paddington services in December 2006. This would possibly start from Westbury c. 0705 and allow the 0546 Exeter St David's to omit some stops. New electric semi-fast trains from Newbury to Paddington c.0725 and c.0820 with possible Turbo shuttles from Bedwyn to connect with these trains.

The Consultation Document describes IEP Inter-City services that will run '1 tph (most hours) semi-fast to Westbury, with some extensions to Exeter and one mid-day round trip to Paignton.' BTPG has concerns about the likely number of trains running beyond Westbury. To allow maximum connectivity we would like to see more than 50% of these trains running to and from Exeter and, if possible a few to and from Bristol. We pointed out in our review that terminating and starting trains at Westbury would most likely lead to more fast trains having to stop at stations such as Castle Cary (and Westbury for connection purposes).

These changes to resolve one of the losses for Bedwyn from the December 2006 timetable change. That is presently there is no sensible scope to get to Thatcham or Theale or Reading for a 0900 start. In 2006, and before, there was. This was a big loss which we need to recover from.

We would assume that a clock-face timetable would operate between the peak periods, with a standard stopping pattern. Based on the current timings of eastbound fast trains we would estimate a departure time of c.xx15 from Westbury. It would seem likely that these timings would continue during the evening 'contra-peak' period. If the current practice of running additional Turbo shuttles from Newbury to Bedwyn during the evening peak is continued then there are likely to be some additional eastbound return shuttles during this period.

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Later in the evening a mixture of semi-fast trains from various points to Paddington and Turbo shuttles from Bedwyn (or possibly some from Westbury) to Newbury would appear to be the best solution. We feel that the provision of some direct or connecting trains from the west is important to enable a 'day-trip' market to become a realistic possibility from Kennet Valley stations. The last eastbound train should not depart from Bedwyn earlier than 2300.

A concern of BTPG is that stops at Aldermaston, Midgham and Newbury Racecourse (other than race days) will be added to our services to maintain other service levels. We have a significantly higher passenger count than these stations and will always oppose being included with those stations.

Westbound Service

The westbound semi-fast service may take up the same departure time, namely xx18, with the fast trains leaving at xx06. Whatever times are used the interval between departure times would need to be maintained unless the timetable is designed to allow overtaking along the route.

BTPG would like to see an early westbound train from either Paddington (0618) or Reading (0645), via Westbury to Bristol Temple Meads. Calling at the standard 'semi-fast' stations such a service would allow commuting from Kennet Valley stations to places such as Bath and Bristol. At present the earliest train to the West Country is the 0706 service to Paignton, but because of connection issues this train has limited stops. If this situation continues then it seems likely that the first semi-fast train would leave Paddington at 0718 with subsequent trains leaving at xx18 until at least 1518. We would also like to see a reasonable proportion of these services operating beyond Westbury, with a few going to Bristol Temple Meads.

The current timetable gives Kintbury, Hungerford and Bedwyn an evening peak service westbound service of 2tph. This is formed of semi-fast commuter trains from Paddington at 1706 and 1806 to Bristol Temple Meads and Frome respectively. In addition connections are provided at Newbury to West Country departures from Paddington at 1636, 1736 and 1833. We feel that this arrangement gives a reasonable service to commuters in most circumstances.

The 1833 train currently includes stops at Hungerford and Bedwyn. We are obliged to First Great Western for provision of the Bedwyn stop, but we are aware that this is far from certain in future, the 1833 being a fast service. We would therefore suggest the provision of an additional semi-fast train, timed to leave Paddington shortly after the fast service and running to Westbury or possibly Bristol Temple Meads. This would then allow the existing 1833 to run faster east of Westbury.

After the evening peak period, at present trains to Bedwyn either run all stations from Reading or as connecting shuttles from Newbury. We would like to see some through trains from Paddington brought back, presumably supplemented by some connecting shuttles from Newbury as it seems unlikely that Turbos would be used on the electrified section between Reading and Newbury. A slightly later last train would also be welcomed.

Weekend Service

It would seem likely that a standard pattern would be used consisting of 1tph fast, 1tph semi-fast, 1tph all-stations between Reading and Newbury, with possibly some additional semi-fast electric trains between Newbury and Paddington. BTPG would welcome this but we are concerned that the earliest trains, currently timed at 0605 and 0639 are retained as through services. As with the weekday timetable, it seems likely that some later evening journeys would require connections, probably at Newbury.

The current situation during the summer months where the limited Exeter/Taunton semi-fasts are removed completely should be addressed. We feel that there is a potential day-trip market from the Kennet Valley and it makes no sense to remove it during the summer.

A similar Sunday timetable, albeit at a reduced frequency would appear to be called for throughout the year. BTPG would welcome any sort of service to and from the west as it is completely lacking at present. A slightly earlier first eastbound train would also be an aspiration.

Shorter Term Services

The situation during the next few years prior to electrification is such that it will be difficult to make anything other than minor changes. BTPG would like to suggest that, in view of the proposed future semi-fast service to Westbury and beyond, it may be possible to extend a small number of Paddington to Bedwyn trains to Westbury. This would be particularly useful if they were to provide connections into fast services which currently stop at Westbury.

The lack of a viable semi-fast train to the West Country in the morning and a return train in the mid-evening period is also an issue. The former 0818 Paddington to Exeter St David's and 1917 Westbury to Paddington were very useful services. We would also welcome any improvement in West Country connectivity at the weekend, particularly on the Sunday service.