

Response to Great Western Franchise Invitation to Tender

Introduction

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group (BTPG) has participated in the consultation stages for the renewal of the Great Western franchise. We have produced our *Review of Train Services on the Berks & Hants Line* and our *BTPG Consultation Response*. We have also had useful meetings with the DfT and two of the franchise bidders.

The Department for Transport (DfT) has now published the Invitation to Tender (ITT) for the franchise and has also made a further statement on the provision of the new IEP trains. There has also been an important announcement which outlines further electrification of various routes, including several in the Greater Western franchise area.

This document is BTPG's detailed response to these recent documents and announcements with particular emphasis on the DfT's proposed downgrading of Kintbury, Hungerford and Bedwyn stations by way of placing them on a diesel shuttle service to Newbury.

Detailed Response

BTPG broadly welcomes the recently announced improvements which can only benefit large parts of the Greater Western network. Projects such as the electrification of the Thames Valley branches and Reading to Basingstoke make sense particularly in view of Crossrail and GWML electrification.

It is therefore all the more disappointing that the DfT appear to have ignored the Berks & Hants line, and in particular stations west of Newbury in all of these improvements.

We had been fairly optimistic that the views of the many stakeholders (including BTPG) would be taken into account regarding the Paddington/Bedwyn service in particular. It should be noted that 2% of respondents to the consultation cited the increase/retention of Bedwyn services as specific aspirations. Given the size of the Great Western region 2% is a significant proportion which ranked it as joint 5th in the percentage of responses.

The new franchise starts from July 2013 and the ITT indicates that electric services to Newbury will commence from December 2016. The Train Service Requirement (TSR) does not appear to make any differentiation between service patterns before and after electrification on the Berks & Hants line.

BTPG would therefore like to highlight the following points which we feel that need to be answered as a matter of urgency.

1. The long-standing service pattern on the Berks & Hants line includes semi-fast trains between Paddington and Bedwyn. Despite this being the current position neither the ITT nor the TSR mention this service pattern at all. The service pattern now appears to have changed to Paddington to Newbury and Newbury to Bedwyn. It should be noted that in the current timetable there are 22 eastbound trains from Bedwyn, with twelve running to Paddington, seven to Reading and just three to Newbury. This change of emphasis by the DfT opens the door to the train operating company operating a Bedwyn to Newbury diesel shuttle service with no direct trains beyond.

2. BTPG understands that 'Turbo' trains will not be able to operate between Bedwyn and Paddington after electrification, however as this will not be in place until 2017 we are concerned that through trains may be removed even before electrification. All recent references point to a core hourly Newbury to Bedwyn shuttle.
3. BTPG has no problem with a number of Newbury to Bedwyn shuttles being operated, particularly as additional peak trains. However their use throughout the day is a retrograde step. Whilst the minority of users who only travel as far as Newbury may be happy with these services, everyone else (particularly London commuters) feel strongly that through trains should continue to operate to and from Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury at roughly the same level as at present (12 tpd).
4. It may be argued that a shuttle, suitably timed to allow robust connections at Newbury would provide an equally good service. To enable this we calculate that two Turbos would be required. It would appear to be possible to run a shuttle using only one unit, at least between the peak periods although reasonable connections at Newbury would be unlikely. In the current timetable some 20 trains per day from Bedwyn either run through to Paddington or offer a viable connection. We are therefore somewhat concerned that a note in the TSR states that 'on weekdays bidders must provide connections from Bedwyn for a minimum of 12 trains per day to Paddington.' Does this mean that the other ten trains per day could be timed in such a way as to provide no viable connection at Newbury in order to reduce costs?
5. Without changing the signalling a diesel shuttle service to Newbury would have to use a separate platform to the train it connects with. This would necessitate the use of the stairs and long bridge at Newbury which even the able bodied find tiresome.
6. The lack of ticket purchasing facilities at Bedwyn and Kintbury, coupled with the lack of onboard ticket sellers, would leave passengers obliged to queue at Newbury's ticket office for their ticket – thus missing any connection provided.
7. The TSR does not mention the Reading to Newbury all-stations service pattern, instead only a 20 tpd Newbury to Paddington service is listed. Does this mean that the only service for Newbury and Thatcham per hour will run all stations to Reading then through to Paddington? There were aspirations from the Newbury area for two semi-fast trains per hour to/from Paddington in addition to the all-stations Reading service. The current timetable shows 20 tpd from Newbury to Paddington but also 21 tpd, all stations Newbury to Reading.
8. The Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) published in March 2010 called for 'an hourly semi-fast service between Paddington and Exeter St David's to operate on the Kennet Valley section.' The Great Western Franchise Replacement Consultation Document issued by the DfT on December 22nd 2011 referred to 'One IEP train per hour (most hours) semi-fast to Westbury, with some extensions to Exeter St David's and one mid-day round trip to Paulton.' There is no mention of these in the ITT.
9. BTPG had hoped that these trains would take up the current Paddington to Bedwyn stopping pattern then call at stations such as Pewsey and Westbury thus allowing long distance trains to run faster than at present. Unfortunately the IEP press release from the DfT fails to mention any deployment of Bi-mode IEP trains on the Berks & Hants line following electrification to Newbury, or indeed any sort of semi-fast service. The only reference is to possible deployment between

Paddington, Exeter and Penzance at a later date, which we assume to mean the next control period (post 2019).

10. We would be interested to know if this omission is an oversight or a deliberate removal of any sort of semi-fast service from the Berks & Hants line during the early years of the new franchise. In the latter case this must inevitably lead to the need for more calls on the longer distance trains, which we assume will continue to be HST operated. However, the ITT makes no provision for such calls.
11. We have been informed that Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury calls 'are likely to be supplied from a combination of Newbury to Bedwyn and Paddington to Exeter service groups.' This would appear to be borne out in the current timetable (though many are Paddington to Bedwyn), so presumably would apply until electrification, but again no provision in the ITT. We would like to know how the bidders actually plan to provide these services following electrification given that only six of the Paddington to Exeter trains specified in the TSR are not running through to Plymouth or Penzance and there is no indication of a Paddington to Westbury service.
12. The TSR is supposed to be based on current service levels and patterns, as far as we are aware. Frequency does not appear to be an issue but we are very concerned that the 'starting point' for the stations west of Newbury has been altered, and not for the better. The Franchise Consultation Document clearly states the following under Current Service Specification. 'Reading to Newbury all stations (hourly). London Paddington to Newbury fast, continuing all-stations to Bedwyn, some operated as part of the West of England group – one train per hour.' If the intention was to introduce a regular Newbury to Bedwyn service instead then such a change should have been clearly stated in the Franchise Consultation Document. We are certain that it would have resulted in a considerable increase to the 2% response as mentioned above.
13. The Newbury to Bedwyn service was described as an 'orphan service' by one respondent to the RUS. This description could be even more apt now that virtually all of the eastern section of the franchise area is due for electrification. It should be noted that Bedwyn, Hungerford and Kintbury aggregated a total of 436,838 entries and exits per annum, based on the last available Office of Rail Regulation ticket sales figures (likely to be well undercounted).
14. BTPG suggest that this constitutes a significant and growing passenger flow and as such services should be maintained or indeed improved, and certainly not downgraded. We are confident that we are not alone in holding these views.
15. The methodology used with regards to the number of 'calls' specified in the TSR also gives us cause for concern. We understand that only departing trains are counted. As Bedwyn is used as a terminus for most trains it is only credited with 26 calls whilst Hungerford and Kintbury (with departures in both directions) have 47 and 41 respectively. We are concerned that the total of 19 trains which currently terminate at Bedwyn are taken into consideration, particularly after electrification to Newbury. Should the train operating company choose to run a service as Newbury to Westbury, Bedwyn could end up with a two hourly service for large parts of the day (i.e. 13 train departures east and 13 train departures west) whereas Kintbury and Hungerford would be entitled to an hourly service in each direction. It may sound a bit strange that Bedwyn would be left out but if timetabling a Newbury to Westbury service was tight the train operating company would be entitled to skip nearly half of the calls to Bedwyn to make a timetable work.