

Alan Feist
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Dear Mr Feist

Greater Western Franchise

I am writing in response to your letter of 27th October 2005. I apologise for, but do not attempt to excuse, the failure to reply to you earlier. In partial mitigation, I can assure you that, even though there has been no formal reply to your letter, the concerns it contains have been extensively considered within the Department, and in its dealings with First Great Western (FGW).

It is best to be frank, and while I could evade the issue for the moment by saying that FGW has yet to make an announcement about its final timetable for December 2006 (actually expected by the end of this month), I also have to say that I do not expect it to announce any substantial changes to the services on the Melksham route proposed in its consultation timetable published last February. Nevertheless, your officers who attended the RATSOG meeting in Taunton on 10th July attended by DfT, Network Rail and FGW, will have heard that the industry, led in this case by FGW, is committed to working with stakeholders to continue to develop the timetable to meet market needs.

For the Melksham route, I think your case is essentially that past commercial performance of the service group is no guide to its potential, given your view that the current timetable does not best meet the needs of the market, and that performance levels have been a serious deterrent to use. In framing the base specification for the new franchise, the DfT, and its predecessor the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), should have sought to establish the business case for an enhanced service, using as part of its assessment the increased patronage such a service would attract. This in essence is what was done: for example a 2-hourly Swindon – Southampton service was modelled, based on TEMPRO forecasts of population growth, and using standard rail industry modelling to assess passenger growth. The business case for such a service was negative.

Later in the franchise award process, the level of service on the route was again reviewed, but against recent data showing that that only the morning train to Swindon and the evening return carried more than 20 passengers, we concluded that there was not a case for an increase.

You also mentioned the level of service between Westbury and Southampton. You will know that among the changes to its proposed December 2006 timetable announced by FGW on 3rd April 2006 was the provision of a shuttle service between Westbury and Southampton. While this may not achieve the regular half-hourly frequency you advocate, it is a significant step in the right direction. FGW is committed to operating this service until December 2007, for which date the position will be reviewed in the light of the timetable to be operated under the new South Western franchise.

Given the industry's commitment to work with stakeholders on continuing timetable development, I suggest that the interested parties should meet as soon as practicable to start this process in relation to services in Wiltshire. Andrew Nock, my Franchise Sponsor who deals with specification changes to current franchises (and who also was sponsor for the latter stages of the GW franchise award process) is willing to attend such a meeting, and we are currently seeking FGW's agreement to participate as well. The purpose of the meeting would be to clarify and explore; Andrew would explain in greater detail the thinking behind our original decision, and Wiltshire would have the opportunity to outline the service options it thinks would be worth considering, together with the range of benefits to be used in appraising new proposals. To be frank once again, I must emphasise that a willingness to talk is without prejudice to the outcome: ultimately, FGW will only be willing to operate more services if they have a funding source, whether that be farebox income, subsidy, or support from a local authority or another third party.

Andrew Nock is talking direct to David Phillips in your office regarding next steps. In the meantime, please get in touch again if you think I can help in any way.

Yours sincerely

Roger Jones
Divisional Manager, Rail Franchise Specification.

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