

## **London TravelWatch response to the South Western Railway December 2022: Timetable Consultation**

Thank you for this opportunity for London TravelWatch to respond to the December 2022 Timetable Consultation. We are the independent watchdog set up by Parliament to provide a voice for London's travelling public, working in partnership with Transport Focus.

The context in which this consultation is taking place is unlike any other in the past. The pandemic has thrown into question many of the assumptions and predictions about how people will travel in London in the future. Many have been speculating about which changes will be permanent and what we can do to make sure transport is greener, safer and convenient for people after the pandemic.

To respond to this uncertainty, London TravelWatch and Transport Focus have spent considerable time talking to London's rail users in the last year to understand the concerns and priorities, as far as is possible in such uncertain times, of those who will be using the rail network in years to come. Our research has echoed what many in the industry have recognised: we simply cannot predict exactly what will be needed as we recover from the pandemic.

In relation to the proposed timetable frequency changes therefore, we have three main areas of concern we would like to address.

### **1. Cutting services on suburban lines**

Our primary concern is that pre-emptively reducing frequencies on suburban London routes will have a long-term negative impact on the convenience of the services to London rail passengers, but also discourage people from using rail at a time when more public transport use is needed to reduce car dependency in outer London.

We think that it is key that South Western Railway maintain a reliable core service pattern, not only to support those who can't travel off-peak but also to incentivise and encourage London passengers to use the train. We are particularly concerned by proposals to cut the frequency of trains at some stations from four to two trains per hour, which is a retrograde step that runs counter to TfL's metroisation vision (which requires no fewer than four trains per hour) and risks turning the train in key suburban London areas into an inconvenient and unhelpful mode of choice.

We fear that some of the proposed cuts to suburban services will set rail travel back as they are counter-intuitive and unhelpful in relation to the way London rail passengers use the network. Passengers in southwest London, many of whom in the



next year will be coming back to the railway more frequently after two or three years away, will be underserved, especially if frequencies drop below four trains an hour.

In particular:

- Proposed frequencies for stations in southwest London which go from four to two trains per hour at Mortlake, North Sheen, St Margarets, Worcester Park, Stoneleigh and Ewell West. This is not meeting the minimum four trains an hour needed for London services, and two trains an hour means that any disruption leaves a service at one train per hour. Even with SWR's forecast of passenger numbers, this could lead to overcrowding.
- The changes proposed to the Hounslow loop at Twickenham will create much longer journey times for passengers between Richmond, Hounslow and Brentford, for whom the rail network provides a useful and affordable connection within southwest London as an alternative to bus routes in the area which take much longer.
- We are also concerned about the proposed reduction in services via Kingston which have been redirected to Surbiton. Although keeping a high-frequency at Surbiton is welcomed, the reduction to four trains an hour at Kingston, Norbiton, Worcester Park, Stoneleigh and Ewell West comes in addition to off-peak cuts. This again will have an impact on rail passengers in these areas on a busy and popular part of the network, making rail travel from these stations far less convenient.
- There is also a related point to be made regarding the proposals for the West of England routes which will no longer serve London Waterloo. The loss of these connections may cause accessibility issues for those who have to travel into and across London to get to Paddington.

We understand the reasons provided regarding the huge financial pressures faced by the railway as a result of the pandemic. However, we think it runs contrary to the wider objectives of government and the transport industry to encourage public transport use as a way of moving away from car-dependency in London and across the rest of the country. Earlier this year we published our [Journey Ahead](#) report, which explored what transport users in London need from the future transport network. Echoing existing knowledge, most rail users we spoke to wanted more reliable services with less crowding and services better matched to their needs.

There were also calls for better services and links in outer London, which may reflect the fact that during the pandemic more people have been spending a greater amount of time in their local area. One transport user commented he would like to see 'a transport system better matched to modern travel patterns. Too many services are still in and out of Central London. Better suburban orbital services are needed.' If the proposed cuts to suburban areas are to go ahead, this will be counter to what we have heard from rail users we have spoken to.



## 2. The picture of travel demand remains uncertain: how will SWR measure changing demand and respond with flexibility?

The working from home revolution has been a striking consequence of the pandemic. However, it was clear in our research earlier this year that there was a big question as to how much working from home will continue and how much of the typical 9-5 journey will return.

The pandemic has highlighted that the option of working from home only includes certain jobs and sectors and is often only available for those in better paid jobs. In industries such as construction, retail and catering, along with much of the night-time economy, the option of working from home simply does not exist. So, whilst some travel patterns may change, core services that help early morning and evening peak workers to get around the city must be protected. We need to remind ourselves that whilst much of the focus has been on home-working, the majority of journeys are not to paid work. Journeys to get to places of education, social care duties and health appointments will continue to take place at all times. Travelling for the purpose of social events, entertainment, shopping and leisure is a growing rather than shrinking market, and this too needs to be planned for.

Bearing this in mind, we are concerned that:

- Should demand increase, there may not be enough capacity. What will SWR being able to do in terms of being able to flexibly meet changing demand, if new trends and pinch-points emerge?
- There are also early indications that the rise of part-time commuting, which the rail industry is trying to respond to, is showing Tuesday to Thursday working patterns developing, with less travel on Mondays and Fridays. How will emerging trends such as this be responded to?
- It has been mentioned that the rail industry would like to continue with the pandemic-messaging to passengers, encouraging them to travel off-peak and at less busy times. Whilst helpful advice during a public health crisis, it is not enough to rely on the self-regulation of passengers to adapt their journeys to what the rail industry chooses to provide – it should be the other way round, with passenger needs driving the service patterns. It will not be enough to ask passengers to change their travel habits - services will need to better match their needs.
- Previous research has shown London Rail and SE Rail passengers were the least satisfied in the country before the pandemic (apart from on London Overground services). Our research this year has shown their primary concern is still reliability, which should, as indicated in the consultation document, improve with this timetable. But the issue of crowding has also moved up their list of concerns, and the fact remains that people are far less tolerant of being crammed on a busy commuter train now. How will this be addressed if crowding once again becomes a problem? Recently we have

seen Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) peak services reporting overcrowding, so we know the unexpected happens without warning.

What also needs further thought or explanation is how SWR plans to monitor changing demand and trends. Whilst we can hope that forecasting will provide an accurate picture for planning services that will meet the needs of passengers in 18 months, there is a chance that it may be different. We would like to hear more about how SWR will be working with TfL to take account of entry data across southwest London, looking holistically at where there may be emerging or changing demand and making sure that rail services work well as part of the wider public transport network.

The rail industry has done well in the last year, demonstrating operational and timetabling flexibility in response to dramatic changes to travel patterns and demand. Alongside lessons learned about how a more streamlined timetable can result in better performance and reliability, we want to see flexibility baked into the way the rail industry delivers timetables, with an ability to adapt when needed. If passenger needs change in the coming years, resilience from the rail industry in terms of the tools and levers they have available to adapt services need to be improved and made more flexible too. Whether this is in terms of the rolling stock kept in reserve or keeping track access available for additional passenger services, a more proactive approach to meeting demand needs to be taken.

The onus should not be on the passenger to alter their behaviour or their travel needs to match the railways – it should be the other way round. Therefore our concern is that specifying these cuts in frequency to suburban routes predicates lower demand, as passengers who have yet to return or who don't know if they will require these services in a year's time have to find alternatives.

### **3. Wider communication and engagement with London's transport users is needed – even more so than in the past**

We agree that the pre-pandemic timetable caused many problems for passengers and was over-subscribed, leaving little resilience in the network for delays, faults or signal failures and resulting in a more unreliable service. We think that a more reliable service for passengers with fewer cancellations and delays would be good news.

Therefore if some change or reduction in service is unavoidable, we believe much more needs to be done to communicate to passengers why proposals will benefit them and exactly how it will create a more reliable service. This consultation has not been public-facing and has not engaged with passengers, which from our perspective is disappointing. The strategic objectives of this consultation are understandable, but for passengers this will not make sense unless communicated properly. For example, it is not clear in the consultation document what the service levels were prior to Covid – so for someone looking to see how this would differ from

their old timetable, it is not clear. We would like to hear from SWR exactly how they will be engaging with rail users on their network, but also non-users who have not yet returned or started using these services.

In response to whether we think a return to capacity at 93% of pre-Covid levels is an appropriate target, we would argue only as long as it is a fair cut across the entire network without the suburban routes losing a higher number of services to meet SWR efficiencies. For this reason we think more work needs to be done to create a timetable that is fair.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to your consultation. We look forward to further discussion with SWR to see how rail users can best be represented as the timetable is developed.

