

**Frome Town Council
Frome Town Hall
Christchurch Street West
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Department for Transport,
Zone 4/19, Great Minster
House,
33 Horseferry Road,
London, SW1P 4DR

14/2/18

Re: DfT Great Western Rail Franchise Consultation Response

Please find below Frome Town Council's response and key areas for action and improvement in response to the Great Western Franchise Consultation. Frome Town Council is very keen to see improvements to rail services in the area as service provision is currently very limited and is not meeting the town's ever increasing demand.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Best wishes,



Anna Francis
Resilience Manager Frome Town Council

FROME TOWN COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE GWR FRANCHISE CONSULTATION

PROPOSED SPLIT OF GWR FRANCHISE

1. The suggested split of the franchise into two sections is NOT considered a sensible move.
2. The Somerset and Wiltshire areas are dependent or focussed on the Bristol "Hub." Any separation into two operators and resource groups will weaken the service resilience in this region.
3. Somerset residents recall the days of Wessex Trains which has some similarities to the current split proposal. Service provision was then poor and unreliable, and the situation has improved somewhat under an integrated franchise.
4. A split operation in Bristol will lead to more restricted crew availability with probable reduction in driver/conductor route knowledge leading to a lower resilience to recovery from disruption.
5. Currently alternative routings and diversions are feasible for certain types of service disruption. These will remain physically available to a (now fully) bi-mode IET fleet and also diesel trains but such usage may be restricted by route knowledge and other operational issues by crews from the "foreign" operator.
6. DfT have asked about cross-Bristol working of the regional train services. Cardiff-Portsmouth working and probably Cardiff-Taunton will need to continue as in the current form. The Gloucester to Westbury/Weymouth group is less important for through traffic. This working arrangement has come and gone over the years, but the working pattern should be left to an operator decision, within the *integrated* franchise.
7. It must be noted that there is a demand for cross-Bristol services at peak times especially to serve Filton Abbey Wood from the Westbury direction. This implies that the current arrangements are best left untouched but simply improved.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAIN SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS IN SOMERSET AND WILTSHIRE AREAS AND FROME, SOMERSET

A. LONG-DISTANCE OR INTERCITY SERVICES AT FROME

1. As a large and growing town in Somerset, Frome requires improvements to the long-distance rail services.
2. These services are required to improve direct journeys to Reading and London but also West, to Taunton and beyond, especially to improve connectivity across Somerset which is currently very poor.
3. From January 2019, the new group of semi-fast services PAD to EXD provide intermediate calls on the Berks and Hants routing. It appears these are not planned to call at Frome but a formal request has been made to GWR to provide for calls by some of these services.
4. Frome Station is in a unique location and train calls there generate certain technical issues. We expect these to be overcome by imaginative planning.
5. We recommend that around 50% of semi-fast services (up and down) are scheduled to call at Frome in the new/revised franchise specification.

B. WESTBURY STATION – IMPORTANT CONNECTIONAL HUB

1. The importance of Westbury as a connectional hub cannot be underestimated and therefore the whole approach to service provision needs to be overhauled and modernised. Waiting times should be kept to a realistic minimum.
2. The most important inward and outward connections are:
West Country route to Southampton etc. (and Trowbridge/Bradford on Avon)
Heart of Wessex route to London, Swindon and Southampton etc.
3. Such a variable group of connections are difficult to manage but the current arrangement is rather random and will be assisted by use of timetables that are (near) clock-face.
4. Westbury Station is already congested at times and Platform 4 needs to be reinstated as a matter of urgency. Changes to signalling may also be required to improve the flow with split platform working.

C. WESTBURY TERMINATING SERVICES

1. Local authorities and rail user groups in Wiltshire/Hampshire will present elsewhere a sound proposal to link and rationalise the SWI-WSB, WSB-SAL and SAL-SOU groups of services.
2. Currently there is a stopping service BRI-WSB in most hours. Typically, these continue to WEY every second hour. The terminating units are often used for odd services to WMN, SAL or SOU which will not be required when there is an integrated SWI-SOU service.
3. The now spare units are available for a service westward to fill gaps in the Heart of Wessex services.

4. Possible destinations for this service could be FRO, CLC, YVP, WEY or alternatively TAU.
5. If TAU is selected, then the service could serve the proposed new station at Somerton. In addition, the trains could continue on a circular service back to BRI. This provides a new connectivity across Somerset where existing public transport and road routes are very poor. Such a service could utilise the path of the current WSM-BRI local train. Naturally the circular route would operate in both directions.

D. BEDWYN - TERMINATING SERVICES

1. For rather strange historic reasons there has been the train service group that turns around at Bedwyn, Wilts. (BDW)
2. A key to improving services along the Berks and Hants corridor into Wiltshire and Somerset will be to make greater use of these terminating services.
3. Many of the BDW terminating services should be extended to at least WSB or FRO. This will allow improved services at Pewsey and also to the proposed Devizes Parkway.
4. Alternative destinations could be WEY, YVP or TAU. If TAU is selected, then again, a service to Somerton becomes possible.
5. Caution is required here. If this service should become the primary direct service from say FRO and rural Somerset to PAD, then the overall journey time must be acceptable. This requires that stations calls between NBY and PAD are kept to a minimum – another interesting compromise!
6. The Trans-Wilts Community Rail Partnership (and their associates) have been able to design a timetable which makes much improved use of the BDW terminating trains. They will be willing to share this with the relevant bodies.

E. JUSTIFICATIONS FOR IMPROVED RAIL SERVICES IN THE FROME, SOMERSET AREA

1. Frome, like many non-metropolitan towns, is expanding with increased housing and population.
2. Mendip District Council has provided population data and predictions which show population increases 25480 (2006) to 27,270 (2016) to 29870 (2031). An overall increase of 17.2%. In addition, there is a recent proposal for 2000 new houses, equating to a further new population increase of 6000.
3. Frome has strong commuter flow towards Bath and Bristol and also London to a lesser extent. Frome has become a more rural dormitory, especially for Bath, since house prices whilst not cheap are more “affordable.”
4. The train service provision for commuting towards Bristol is just about adequate on frequency/timings but not on capacity.
5. On the current train provision, inward commuting to Frome from the North and East is not realistic for those working normal hours.
6. A consistent hourly frequency of services should represent a minimum service provision for a town of this size.
7. Travel and connectivity within and across Somerset are especially poor due to the inadequate road network and poor bus services.

8. In principle, travel to the County Town of Taunton should be straightforward and fast. However, rail journey opportunities from Frome (or Westbury) are quite limited and often involve long waits at Westbury or Castle Cary. Rail commuting tends to be unrealistic.
9. Despite increased population and consumer expectations, Frome has essentially the same train service as in the late 1960's, post the Beeching cuts. This is the core service of 8 trains per weekday each way on the Weymouth to Westbury/Bristol corridor. More recently Frome has received a commuter service to/from London and a few additional terminating services from Bristol (3 in and 0 out). SWT/SWR have also provided a few new services to Salisbury and Waterloo.
10. In 2013, Somerset County Council identified Frome Station as showing the highest passenger increase in the county since 2008-9. Published ORR passenger data is shown below and reflects the general growth along the Heart of Wessex route.

FROME STATION – TOTAL ENTRIES AND EXITS			
Year	Total	% increase since 1998	% increase since 2013
1998	67962		
2012	145574		
2013	152240		
2017	187594	176	23

11. Frome Town Council hopes that the suggestions above represent a realistic and cost-effective way to improve train services for the growing town and in this region. Certain of the above points might be considered duplication but a holistic approach could represent the best overall result for the new franchise specification.
12. The suggestions proposed do not include any technical input on operability of these services with considerations such as line capacity, signal spacing, train unit availability or crewing issues.
13. Easy travel facilitates a whole range of social opportunities linked to employment, leisure, social cohesion and environmental improvement. It is wiser to encourage rather than neglect these opportunities for social and environmental benefit.

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