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 **Through service - Bristol to London (Waterloo) via Trowbridge ceases 10.12.2021**

« on: Today at 09:15:58 am »

An update. At this point, my personal account though reflecting subsequent discussions with Bryony, Mark and Richard after our meeting with SWR and GWR on 30th November. Up for discussion at WWRUG committee next week, but the news need to be propogated to all of our supporters. I will come back and edit this post in the light of corrections and additions from the Committee or those at the 30.11.2021 meeting



Through trains from Bristol Temple Meads to London Waterloo cease after next Friday - 10th December 2021. The decision to cull them was made by the Department for Transport, not discouraged (suggested?) by South Western Railway, in the spring 2021 and without wider consultation. The decision only came to public knowledge in August 2021, with the background to how this had come about revealed under freedom of information in October.



Passengers from London to Trowbridge, Bradford-on-Avon and Oldfield Park will no longer have any through trains; passengers to Warminster and Keynsham will just have a single early morning direct service. Passengers, Bath Spa and Bristol will no longer have through services from Waterloo, and to Westbury there will be just one train a day from Waterloo, before 8 a.m.

All journeys will remain possible by rail, but they will now involve one or more changes of train along the way, and in most cases with significant waits between trains at interchanges or at a significantly higher price. The leisure market, which is key to the future of the railways, is very sensitive to price and the ability to make journeys direct, and the services we are left with are not an adequate alternative. We are told that the service being removed are "duplication" but they were not duplicates as far as customers were concerned. That is why over 6000 people signed our online petition asking merely to retain the services for a further year while sensible consultation took place.

A massive "Thank You" to everyone who supported the campaign run by the West Wilts Rail User Group, Two Tunnels, TravelWatch SouthWest and the Coffee Shop forum, aided by local Railfuture branches and the Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways. Even at the point that the campaign started, we were aware that the decision to axe the trains had already been made and within the tortoiselike planning processes of the rail industry we would need something of a political storm to have even a chance of a review of the perverse decision already taken in secret and on selective and skewed data.

A "thank you", too, to all the other groups, local transport authorities, WECA mayor, Transport Focus, LEP, sNTB, etc, who have aligned with us in some cases with remarkable direct wording making their professional views clear. It has seemed at times that no-one supports the DfT / SWR decision except SWR and the DfT.

And a "thank you" to our MPs as well. Almost all of you at affected stations have asked the Department for Transport to explain their decision and continue the service until it's properly consulted / analysed - especially being in mind that extra services are planned where the duplicates have been running for 2023. Sadly, initial requests simply re-iterated the perverse decision and shaky data and logic behind it, and a second round that the MPs then put seemed to result in "meeting the minister" from which we got no further report.

During last week, our campaign "leads" virtually met with managers from SWR and GWR - a multiple-times postponed meeting - at which we were finally told what plans are for (no) services from 12th December 2021. The Department for Transport weren't able to send anyone, and it was pointed out that nothing can be changed this late. Frankly, we felt we were speaking to the privates in the rail industry's troops who could do nothing but feed us the [word to be added] of their superiors. We (campaign leads) met before and after; prior to the meeting, we had a clue from the agenda that we were to get little or nothing, but we hadn't anticipated being treated in such a way that we came out not only disappointed but somewhere between angry and livid. Trust between SWR and their customers in this area will need to be rebuilt - except that they don't really care as they don't want our custom any more. GWR, sadly, are tarnished by association too - good friend there put into an embarrassing position, but they don't help themselves by re-iterating promises of increase capacity first promised two years ago and still not delivered - we'll only believe them when we see it!

Now - we may have lost this battle (which we knew to be a long-shot), **but in the longer term we are advocates of strong public transport, as we know that many of the troops we have been dealing with are too (not sure if the same thing can be said of certain politicians, who's priority may be careers and other interests) so we have taken care to maintain links and look forward even at this difficult time.** Long after the SoS is no longer the SoS, long after constituency boundaries are redrawn in Wiltshire, there will still be the need for zero carbon, for transport for those who cannot drive, and for combining journeys onto public transport to prevent chronic congestion.

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Following paragraph for TROWBRIDGE (Andrew Murrison); similar to be written for Bradford-on-Avon (Michelle Donelan), Oldfield Park (Wera Hobhouse) and Keynsham (Jacob Rees-Mogg)

The final through train from Waterloo station in London to Bristol Temple Meads leaves at 19:20 on Friday 10th December and with it ends through trains from London to Trowbridge where it arrives at 21:31 (Bristol at 22:06). Single tickets on that train - London to Trowbridge - £28.00. On Monday, 13th December the nearest equivalents with changes are at 19:23 from Waterloo, underground to Paddington, GWR service to Westbury, change train for Trowbridge where you'll arrive at 21:51 at a cost of £37.40. The other alternative is to catch the 19:20 which runs as before (but no longer has a Bristol portion detached at Salisbury), change at Salisbury (arrive 20:50, leave 21:42) and arrive at Trowbridge at 22:18, at the original fare of £28.00.

So - your choice is to pay a third more and make 2 changes, or to make just one change (where there was none before) and spend 50 minutes waiting at Salisbury along the way within a journey that's over a third longer. If you have access to a car, you could also chose to drive as the convenience of rail has gone.

Next steps - what for next year and beyond

- * A new late (final) service for next year on Saturday evenings from Bristol to Swindon, filling a gap in the timetable that has existed for many years by re-instating a train that used to run on Friday and Saturday evenings many years ago
- * A replacement with a GWR train from Bristol to Westbury (and Frome) of the late SWR train that ran as far as Salisbury
- * Increased frequency from Bristol Temple Meads to Avonmouth and Severn Beach

– up from every 40 minutes to every 30

* New services from Exeter to Okehampton and a new hourly direct service from Newport towards Ebbw Vale.

* Monday to Saturday reductions to GWR services too south of Westbury / Warminster with the removal of all but one (at 06:54 southbound, 08:23 back) local services. There will be an additional Sunday morning trains from Portsmouth though.

* Consultations / discussions on the adding in a second local service in the hour from Bristol Temple Meads to Westbury under "Metro West" (replacing in part the trains that have been removed this year as "duplication")

* Funded consultancy and reports on the possibility of new stations at Corsham and Devizes Gateway, though the potential opening of such stations is many years away

* "Great British Railways" – the big hope for the future of the rail industry where everything will be co-ordinated by experts working not for private companies but by government bodies and departments.

For the record - what moved us from "disappointed" to "livid" last week.

I am fully aware that there may be "yes but" answers back from DfT / GWR / SWR on these issues and that what you read below is therefore somewhat biased – but it's a record of what "got our goat" and has taken our trust in those who are supposed to be a partners back a decade or more.

* The absence of any representative from the Department for Transport who are the key decision maker in this process even though the meeting was put back several times to "allow everyone to attend". And the inability of the SWR or GWR reps present even to commit to fund the printing of a leaflet to explain - puppets?

* "Too late" say SWR when they knew about this possibility from February and failed to consult ... more recently postponing our follow up meeting until less than two weeks before the services go. Yes, very late, SWR, because you chose to prevaricate, delay and postpone - "too late" by your cynical design

* "Salisbury to Bristol" say SWR. Time and again ignoring the through elements of the service - even last week, the headline and pretence was that this is a local issue of duplication.

* "We are short of trains - and we lost a couple more in the Fisherton Tunnel collision." The Fisherton Tunnel collision occurred after the plans were finalised and it's gross to blame the loss of the through Waterloo trains on that event!

* "We [GWR] will step up a morning train from Westbury to Bristol to 5 carriages to compensate" (1) If there's a train available for that, why not run it to / from Waterloo - two round trips a day, start from Westbury or Salisbury.

* "We [GWR] will step up a morning train from Westbury to Bristol to 5 carriages to compensate" (2) You said the same thing about Cardiff to Portsmouth services two years ago, months before Coronavirus, and you are still not running 5 carriage trains on other services - daily shortages - so how can we believe you on this promise?

* "Not many people use the through trains" (1) The pre-Covid figures you have

given us are for a period of prolonged strikes. And of course people can't use trains that aren't running and leisure traffic will be put off even trying around those periods.

* "Not many people use the through trains" (2) How do you get to these figures? Ticket data is imprecise and you have not told us the metrics of selection. We suspect you have been very selective and haven't said anything that reduces that suspicion.

* "Not many people use the the through trains" (3) Oh yes they do - huge numbers. That's why there is such an outcry - typical regional and long distance passengers make a few round trips per year, not 20 round trips per week on your other (commuter) services.

* "Not many people use the through trains" (4) Because you have failed to market / promote them in the way that SWT did - I asked SWR how much they had worked with User Groups on promotions like SWT used to do, and they had no examples (Richard of WWRUG couldn't think of any either), so much of the issue is because SWR have allowed them to wither on the vine.

* "You don't have to wait 50 minutes at Salisbury eastbound - there's a train headed east after a decent 16 minute connection". Yes - it only goes as far as Basingstoke, where you have to change and wait for the next train that's come up from Salisbury anyway.

* "Look at these better-than 50/59 minute connections". Yes, there are a few - and for the most part they're at times that attract peak fares - commuter times and not when passengers on the through service have been travelling.

* "Have you considered this connection at Westbury instead into a Yeovil to Waterloo SWR service?" Briefly, yes, but if the train from Bristol is late into Westbury, the connection misses (it's not really an official connection anyway - under the minimum) and passengers are left with half an hour at Westbury and a further 50 minutes at Salisbury.

* "It would cost a million pounds". (1) Maybe, but how much income would there be? Isn't it about the balance sheet?

* "It would cost a million pounds". (2) While it would cost a million pounds, as a rough guide a third of that would go to Network Rail as access charges - so that part's not really a cost at all, but rather a move of £350k from one budget to another.

* "It would cost a million pounds". (3) We wonder how much it's going to cost GWR to run their extra late night replacement service for the SWR train being withdrawn?

* "We can only run the service if it breaks even". Ouch! Look back at the Serpell report - if you apply that uniformly, there will be no trains west of Exeter or Cardiff, Westbury will be at the end of a branch from Reading, and Salisbury won't be on the rail network any longer!

* "Look at these charts - how low the loadings are". Indeed the graphs look dramatic, but this is a case of dressing up the stats. You have not given us a "control" or stats for another line to compare, and from all the work we've done in the past, these are actually average to good seat occupancies.

* "Difficult and expensive to keep up driver route knowledge for just a few trains a day". "OK - let GWR drivers take over at Westbury." "That would be just as difficult

and expensive". Err - how and why??

* "We can't run trains from everywhere to everywhere". Agreed - but all we asking is that you continue to run trains you've been running for decades and make a very real difference.

* "You can get there almost as fast via Paddington". Yes, and it's an alternative - if you are fit to make multiple changes, don't have too much luggage, aren't on a budget, and are happy and knowledgable enough to share the underground without current concerns. So it's an alternative for the rail staff who were at the meeting and no doubt the civil servants who made the decision.

* "You'll be able to use Crossrail when it opens to get better access from Paddington". Agreed. Crossrail is now - how many - years overdue? And whilst it will aid journeys to some parts of London, it does nothing for those passengers wishing to get to or go via Clapham Junction and into Waterloo.

* "The 'via Salisbury fares will remain available after the SWR services to Bristol cease" but when asked "for how long", no-one could (or would?) tell us. Not even a re-assurance that they would remain through 2022.

In summary.

Last February, DfT told SWR it would like to give them less money for 2022 and asked them what they would like to cut which would save subsidy and generate least complaint. SWR's commuter / electric bosses felt this was a good opportunity to get rid of the service to Bristol which has been a bit of an "oddball" for them. DfT bought this idea and contracted SWR for services for 2022 which didn't include the trains to Bristol, and SWR reduced staff training and recruitment through the year in preparation.

I would suggest that few if any of the decision makers and recommenders actually understand / understood the service and its metrics and they saw it as an easy opportunity to flex their muscles - an inconvenient and low hanging fruit they could brush out of existence quietly along best "Jo Moore" lines. She sent the following email on 11 September 2001, after the World Trade Centre towers had been hit in terrorist attacks but before they collapsed: "It's now a very good day to get anything out we want to bury" Replace "World Trade Centre" with Covid. And I don't think I'm far out either - note the SWR use of the Salisbury Accident as an excuse. Problem is - for every 1000 annual journeys on a commuter service, you've got perhaps 5 people each making 200 single journeys, but on the Bristol to Waterloo service you had 200 people each making 5 journeys - each journey important to them. And no-one in Whitehall or SW Towers realised this!

In support of public transport, we will continue to work with these [people] - we have no choices. We will invite them to learn from us so that future decisions are better, more appropriate, and have local support. I think I'm speaking for the whole team when I say this is / has not been about preserving historic services as they are, but rather to help use them and their supporters to build back better. That requires a rebuild in trust from the very, very low point that we have at the moment.

 Logged

Coffee Shop Admin, Vice Chair of Melksham Rail User Group, and on the board of TravelWatch SouthWest.