



West London Line Group



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Mr Chris Burchell
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Dear Chris

WEST LONDON LINE SERVICE CHANGES

We have received a copy of your company's stakeholder consultation on timetable proposals for December 2008 in connection with the Brighton Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy. We are very alarmed to learn that these proposals run counter to the present recommendations in Network Rail's South London RUS, which we understand to be the prime document in determining service patterns on the South Central and South Eastern networks from this point until at least 2019, in relation to the West London Line.

1. General

1. It would appear at first glance that the vast majority of users of the main trunk routes within your network are going to gain considerable benefits from these proposals.
2. However, your plan for your passengers on the West London Line trains is to downgrade their service so that the barest minimum facility (an hourly service between only eight (instead of ten) key traffic generators in one of the most prosperous sub-regional corridors in the world which is about to experience further employment growth) will be now offered.

2. Overall results expected

Moreover, this is to be done in such a way that will: -

1. significantly increase the personal inconvenience and hazard to all who use the service at Clapham Junction (which will also result in your company deliberately adopting a stance which is contrary to the intention and the spirit, if not the wording, of the DDA legislation),
2. deny so many people who presently enjoy them direct connections with the country's second international airport (Gatwick) - this is directly counter to specific policies in the Mayor's London Plan - and its tenth largest conurbation (Croydon), and thereby

3. encourage them to use the overcrowded and stressful tube and road networks.

By so doing, your company apparently seeks to run counter to the policies being adopted throughout the rest of the world to: -

4. improve social inclusion, especially with regard to those with disabilities,
5. improve rail connectivity and modal shift,
6. alleviate pollution and road congestion, and
7. tackle the adverse effects of climate change.

3. The Better Alternative

On the other hand, the introduction of just two extra four-car dual voltage units would ensure a robust hourly service between Gatwick, the WLL and Milton Keynes, with most, if not all the benefits expected from a lean, efficient and reliable rail service.

We have given an initial response to your detailed proposals below.

4. An unwelcome, unnecessary and distasteful contrast

We would contrast the following improvements for your network as a whole: -

[From Section 1. Introduction and Purpose]

“The key benefits of these proposals are:

- An increase in passenger capacity - 10.7% additional seats in the high peak to London as compared to today.
- A higher frequency of trains between Brighton and London.
- The retention of a high-quality airport product - continued dedicated non-stop Gatwick Express service.
- An improvement in passenger capacity on the Redhill corridor. “

with the simultaneous degradation of your company’s West London Line service: -

[From Section 7, West London Line services]

“As a result of the Brighton Main Line RUS recommendations, the current Brighton to Watford Junction service is withdrawn...”

Not only have there been virtually no improvements to this service, it has been subject to a continuing series of cuts ever since the opening of West Brompton in June 1999. The major truncations in March 2002 have been the most notable, but these have also been joined by reductions in the evening peak, late evening and Sunday services. Of the very few enhancements, only one (the 0747 Mondays-Fridays East Croydon to Kensington Olympia and the following shuttles) has been principally for the benefit of WLL Southern passengers.

In brief, Southern management has already performed extremely poorly over this service for well over five years and now your company proposes to slash the service to the bone, to the increased personal jeopardy of your own passengers!

5. A partial and inequitable treatment of the RUS process and outputs

We would remind you that there were four scenarios offered under the BML RUS, one of which kept open the option of a cross-Clapham WLL service.

In the introduction to your proposals, the phrase “our on-going programme of stakeholder liaison” indicates that your company may have a structured, pre-planned programme of liaison activities with different stakeholder groups. If such exists, this stakeholder group is unaware of it and we would ask to be included in this programme at the earliest opportunity.

Even if your “on-going programme of stakeholder liaison” is what we have enjoyed so far, it has certainly omitted any discussion with us about why your company has selected an option in the BML RUS that does not allow for such a service.

If we had been included at an earlier stage in this programme, we would have been at considerable pains not only to “highlight many of [our] timetable aims and/or concerns” but would have made every co-operative effort with your colleagues to ensure that “where feasible [Southern could] have tried to incorporate suggested improvements into these timetable proposals”. Neither has been allowed to happen or be explored. We have had no constructive dialogue with your company since July.

We would also ask why in relation to this service you are only having regard to one RUS (and in such a narrow manner), when three other RUSs clearly indicate the strategic desirability of keeping and strengthening the cross-Clapham link.

6. A restored (not a “new”) extension to Milton Keynes

Moreover, at this point in the document, the following wording has been used that we would contend is gravely misleading, “...and replaced by a new service running between Clapham Junction and Milton Keynes on an hourly basis...”, as this implies that this is some wonderful innovation, whereas it is merely a part-restoration of what your company or its predecessor has previously destroyed.

We would be delighted indeed if the service was re-instated to run between Watford and Milton Keynes, but trains should ideally run as fast as possible between these two points to ensure minimum chance for delay, maximum opportunity for recovery and optimum effective utilisation of rolling stock.

However, since your company’s proposal is for this “new” service to “stop at West Brompton, Kensington Olympia, Shepherds Bush, Wembley Central (peak service), Harrow and

Wealdstone, Watford Junction, Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted, Tring, Leighton Buzzard and Bletchley”, it will not, in our opinion, be “an attractive service” for those wishing to change onto Virgin West Coast services at Milton Keynes, since the last five stops (already served by other trains between Watford and Milton Keynes) will cause extended journey times between West London and WCML services.

Your own company’s operation of the present service has clearly demonstrated the drawbacks of so doing, through its relatively poor performance between Gatwick and Brighton, where what should be a swift inter-regional service becomes a slower, less-attractive, local facility stopping at all intermediate stations.

We would venture that these additional stops in Sussex, presently inadequately served by trains to and from London yet controlled by Southern, are a major cause of delays to northbound WLL trains reaching Clapham Junction.

Delays to the present southbound Southern WLL service are not due to delays “exported” from the WCML, but are due instead to the poor precedence given at Clapham Junction to WLL trains which are also all too often held there even longer than the scheduled nine or ten minutes, waiting for Southern trains that have been despatched late from London Victoria. Thus we would contend that it is Southern’s inadequate management controls in Sussex and at Victoria, and not problems on the WCML, that have unfairly undermined this service’s attractiveness over several years.

However, extension to Milton Keynes involving several intermediate stops north of Watford Junction will also give rise to such “exports”, which will again render the service unattractive to longer-distance travellers and may cause new unfair impacts on other services, e.g., southbound London Overground services south of Willesden Junction.

7. Comments on interchanges with WCML services

The comment, “...Milton Keynes will offer better interchange opportunities than Watford Junction from December 2008...”, does not hold true if the service is to run at the timings showed in the indicative timetables that we have seen so far. Indeed, we would comment that the proposed WLL/LM/Virgin interchange options in the proposed December 2008 timetable are somewhere between woefully inadequate and non-existent, as follows:-

1. Acceptable northbound Birmingham connections will be available at Watford Junction (18-minute waits). However, there are less robust southbound connections here (34-minute waits).
2. Northbound Birmingham connections at Milton Keynes will not be as good. WLL passengers will be able to arrive in Birmingham 19 minutes earlier by changing at Watford Junction. Southbound connections from Birmingham at Milton Keynes will have to be reduced from the proposed 53-minute waits for them to be acceptable to passengers.
3. The key connection at Milton Keynes should be with Manchester services which do not call at Watford Junction. However, it is essential for northbound WLL trains to connect with the xx51 departures from Milton Keynes to Manchester, instead of arriving at Milton Keynes at xx59 or xx00. Again, such lengthy waits must be significantly reduced. Southbound connections from Manchester at Milton Keynes should also be reduced from the proposed 27-minute waits.

4. Northbound connections for Northampton are not good at either Watford (43-minute waits) or Milton Keynes (25-minute waits), although we would support the southbound connections from Northampton at Milton Keynes (9-minute waits).

8. Proposals to improve WLL service, especially in relation to interchanges with WCML

In the light of the above, we would strongly propose the following: -

1. The WLL northbound service is re-timed with departures from Watford Junction at about xx11, ahead of the stopping Euston - Northampton - Birmingham service.
2. If the latter was re-timed with departures from Watford Junction at about xx17, this would provide good connections at Watford for WLL passengers to Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted, Leighton Buzzard and Bletchley. WLL passengers to Tring would be served by changing to the departures from Watford Junction at xx24.
3. This amendment should enable the WLL northbound service to connect with the xx51 departures from Milton Keynes to Manchester without being prejudiced by any intermediate stops between Watford and Milton Keynes.
4. The return southbound WLL departures from Milton Keynes should be timed earlier at about xx08 to provide improved connection from southbound Manchester services and to retain good connections from Northampton. Again, these connections should not be prejudiced by the need to serve intermediate stops between Milton Keynes and Watford.
5. All the above times relate to Monday - Friday services. We would hope that the same priority to achieve good WCML connections at Watford Junction and Milton Keynes is also given in the timetables at weekends.

9. Cross-Clapham services

Finally, it is regrettable that even under these brave new proposals your company can only “hope to retain the corresponding evening service” to “the recently introduced 0747 East Croydon to Kensington Olympia train” and, secondly, that this “is dependant on more detailed timetabling work”.

We are pleased that you intend to retain at least one cross-Clapham service. As this is in the middle of the peak when the pressure on train paths would be expected to be very high, we see no reason why cross-Clapham services cannot be operated at less pressured times of day.

We believe that more attention will need to be given to providing cross-Clapham services in and out of the weekday peaks and ensuring that they could serve Shepherd’s Bush and (possibly) Wembley Central. We would also remind you of the potential advantages of offering to your longer-distance commuters (wishing to avoid the seven-year redevelopment of Victoria underground station) direct services to and from Shepherd’s Bush for interchange via the Central Line for the West End. There may even be disadvantages in not having made such plans to react to a sudden growth in customer demand for such a “safety valve” to alleviate overcrowding at your main London terminal.

10. Next Steps

We would very much like to speak with those of your colleagues who would be most sympathetic and best placed to assist in dealing with our concerns as soon as possible, so that we might provide a more positive response to you in the near future.

Although we would welcome attending joint meetings with other stakeholder groups, we believe that it would be preferable, bearing in mind the unique range of issues on the WLL, for us to meet your colleagues in a separate set of meetings.

We would hope that at these times we, and they, can talk constructively about: -

1. Securing just two more 4-car dual-voltage units to operate an hourly Milton Keynes – Gatwick Airport/Three Bridges service, calling at Watford Junction, Harrow & Wealdstone, Wembley Central (all), Shepherd's Bush, Kensington Olympia, West Brompton, Clapham Junction and East Croydon.
2. Possible intermediate stops at Balham and/or Redhill.
3. Possible weekday morning and evening peak stops at Bletchley, Leighton Buzzard, Tring, Berkhamsted and Hemel Hempstead.
4. The present morning and evening peak stopping services between Kensington Olympia and East Croydon calling at all intermediate stations should be retained and strengthened. If feasible, these should be extended to serve Shepherd's Bush.
5. Continued deployment of the existing 4-car single-voltage unit after the weekday morning peak to operate between Kensington Olympia and Gatwick Airport/Three Bridges, calling at West Brompton, Clapham Junction, Balham (if possible and desirable), East Croydon and Redhill (if possible and desirable). If necessary, this unit could also be deployed on the retained/enhanced Shepherd's Bush/Kensington Olympia – East Croydon evening peak stopping services.
6. Use of possibly either fast or slow lines north and/or south of Stoats Nest.
7. Saturday and Sunday services.
8. Good connections at Gatwick Airport with Eastbourne, Brighton and Arun Valley services and at Milton Keynes (or Watford Junction) with Northampton, Birmingham, Manchester and other WCML destinations, throughout each day.
9. In the light of the Arriva Cross-Country service withdrawal, a possible through Brighton – WLL – WCML – Birmingham service (2 - 4 trains per day in each direction.) This has been a long-term aim of this Group and we now understand that this is in line with an aspiration from London TravelWatch.

Please be assured that we continue to seek to support all positive developments on the West London Line and we look forward to more of these coming forward in the future.

Yours sincerely

Mark Balaam
Chairman
West London Line Group