

EXETER CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ECONOMY
8 MARCH 2012

CONSULTATION ON THE NEW GREAT WESTERN RAIL FRANCHISE

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report is to give Members the opportunity to comment on the Council's proposed response to the consultation on the new Great Western rail franchise.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Great Western rail franchise is due for renewal in April 2013. This is very important to Exeter, as most train services through the city are operated under this franchise. It includes intercity services between London Paddington and destinations further west, such as Torbay, Plymouth and Penzance. It also includes services on the local lines to Exmouth, Barnstaple and Paignton.
- 2.2 The current franchise began in 2006 and it is widely recognised that it was underspecified. First Group seriously underestimated the number of trains they needed to run, and the quantity of rolling stock necessary to run them, with the result that some of the vehicles previously operated by Wessex Trains were reallocated to other parts of the county. For the last six years the system has gradually recovered, with many trains now in the timetable not forming part of the original franchise specification. The Department for Transport (DfT) has confirmed that the current level of service will be the starting point for the new franchise, but it is unclear to what extent this includes services currently funded by third parties such as Devon County Council.
- 2.3 The new franchise will be for 15 years so it is even more important to get it right. Our Core Strategy envisages at least 12,000 additional dwellings in Exeter alone by 2026, together with 60 hectares of employment land and up to 40,000 square metres of net retail floorspace. With the city's arterial roads operating at capacity, rail is intended to form a key role in our transport strategy, with Devon County Council's "Devon Metro" project proposing new stations and longer and more frequent trains.
- 2.4 There has been some concern that the DfT will favour a light touch approach to new franchises, leaving much to the commercial discretion of operators rather than providing a detailed specification. The consultation paper for the Great Western franchise provides some reassurance through the sheer volume of detail on which stakeholders' views are sought.
- 2.5 The DfT appears to recognise that the Great Western franchise covers a much more varied network than, for example, the West Coast Main Line (WCML) franchise, for which an Invitation to Tender has recently been published specifying minimum numbers of trains for every station together with first and last train times for key services. The Great Western comprises local, suburban and regional services as well as intercity trains. Accordingly, there is much detail that ought to be included in the specification in addition to the items specified for the WCML.

3 OUR APPROACH AND SPECIFIC ISSUES

- 3.1 Rail is currently undergoing a renaissance after years of decline. Cross-party political support has set the scene for ambitious modernisation projects, such as a high speed line to the Midlands and North, as well as electrification of the main line out of Paddington to Bristol and Cardiff
- 3.2 It is therefore vital that Exeter and the far South West do not lose out. There is sometimes a perception that the South West is less effective at lobbying than other parts of the UK, because it is less good at speaking with one voice. To overcome this, TravelWatch South West (a social enterprise company and advocate for public transport users across the region) is co-ordinating a franchise-wide strategy. At an earlier stage in the franchising process, TravelWatch SW produced a comprehensive lobbying document, "Greater Western or Lesser Western?", and there is evidence in the franchise consultation that this document has already influenced the DfT's approach. The City Council contributed to the lobbying document and is contributing to the formal response that TravelWatch SW is now formulating, to deal with the strategic issues affecting all local authorities and other stakeholders across the South West.
- 3.3 Key points identified by TravelWatch include the following:-
- a smooth transition to the new franchise;
 - capacity, ie. ability to get a seat;
 - value for money, not just ticket prices, but cost of parking at stations;
 - "turn up and go" passengers paying more and not getting seats.
- Additional points relate specifically to stations, namely:-
- passenger environment;
 - staffing;
 - ease of ticket purchase;
 - security;
 - accessibility and interchange.
- 3.4 In addition, the City Council continually engages with local Rail User Groups, the Exeter Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Devon County Council as Local Transport Authority. Their views have been taken into account in formulating the City Council's own response to the consultation.
- 3.5 A draft of that response forms Appendix 1 to this report. Before dealing with the specific questions, the document describes Exeter's role as an economic centre, punching above its weight. The Secretary of State for Transport acknowledges the importance of rail in supporting economic growth, as evidenced by the investment announced in projects such as High Speed 2 and electrification, and our response argues that this applies equally to Exeter. Without proportionate investment in our rail system, our rail service (particularly journey times) will deteriorate relative to other cities, and Exeter's role as an economic powerhouse would be put at risk.
- 3.6 In relation to intercity services, current electrification proposals do not extend as far as Exeter, but we should continue to press for progressive electrification (the Government's stated national policy) to reach the city during the lifetime of the franchise. This is a point in favour of retention and further refurbishment of the existing High Speed Trains (HSTs) rather than their replacement by a new diesel intercity fleet, which would make electrification to Exeter a very remote prospect. Also, if the HSTs were confined to fast services to Exeter and the far South West, their seating could be reconfigured so as to be more suitable for such use, with more table seating and wi-fi

connections to assist business travellers. (Our position in respect of local train retention versus replacement is somewhat different, for reasons explained below.)

- 3.7 Fast trains to London are important to business users in particular, and the objective should be a clock face timetable with one fast and one slower train per hour. In the meantime, Exeter Chamber members have identified the ends of the day as priority times for fast services, together with mid-morning down services, and this is reflected in the draft response.
- 3.8 Turning to local services, the franchisee should be required to provide the longer trains envisaged by Devon Metro, serving the additional stations when they are provided. The draft also reflects what is believed to be a local consensus that all local trains should serve Polsloe Bridge and St James' Park.
- 3.9 The introduction of passing loops, to enable more than one additional station on the Exmouth line, coupled with a 15 minute frequency, is a longer term objective but one that we would wish to see achieved within a 15 year franchise. There is a need for the franchise to be reviewed at intervals during its lifetime so that services can be adjusted to meet future needs.
- 3.10 There is concern that the DfT continues to refer to the operator working within "defined rolling stock constraints", given the current shortage of local diesel trains and the fact that there is no intention to order additional stock. While some trains will be cascaded by electrification elsewhere, there are some lines which are unlikely ever to be electrified, and it is unrealistic of the DfT to assume that the existing diesel trains (which have not been refurbished to the same standard as the HST fleet) can be expected to last indefinitely. There has to be scope for train operators nationally to organise a rolling replacement programme, as recommended by Network Rail's recent rolling stock strategy document, and indeed "smoothing" the supply of new trains would potentially save money compared with a "stop – go" approach to procurement.

4 CONCLUSION

The draft response appended to this report covers these and other issues and Members are asked to endorse the response, subject to any alterations or additional points they may wish to be included.

5 RECOMMENDED

That Members comment on the proposed response to the Great Western franchise consultation.

ROSS HUSSEY PROJECTS AND BUSINESS MANAGER

Local Government Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

Devon Metro Appraisal Report – Devon County Council, 2011.

Specifying the new Greater Western Franchise: Greater Western or Lesser Western? – TravelWatch SouthWest, September 2011.

Network Route Utilisation Strategy (Passenger Rolling Stock), Network Rail, 2011.