

Questions and answers from Members sent to First Great Western – 20 March Extraordinary Council Meeting

From Cllr Duncan Hames:

- Q1 What is the overall net average annual payment between First and the Department for Transport for the region's new rail franchise?
- A1 The overall premium over the ten years of the Franchise is £1.13 billion, but it is not divided equally across each individual year.
- Q2 What is the average annual value of funding from the Department of Transport to First to support commercially non-viable services in this franchise?
- A2 The franchise agreement premium is not broken down by individual routes, but in effect the local and rural services in the West Country are cross-subsidised by the higher-volume, higher-value routes into London and the Home Counties.
- Q3 How much of this government funding relates to services which pass through Wiltshire?
- A3 As funding is broken down by individual service it is not possible to put a figure on the income and cost of journeys made from or to Wiltshire stations, let alone journeys which simply pass through the County.
- Q4 What proposals have First put to the Department of Transport for services additional to those currently operated in the county, and for what level of public funding contribution?
- A4 Any additional services must either be commercially viable or require external funding to bridge the gap between costs and revenue. It would not be right for us to suggest additional services which would require funding from the public purse, and there are no commercial propositions in Wiltshire that we have identified (although we are investigating improvements to the Portsmouth-Cardiff route, for example).

- Q5 Would First still be interested in negotiating an enhanced rail service between Swindon and Westbury with the Department for Transport, Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire County Council? What does first require of third parties to make such negotiations purposeful?
- A5 We are always interested in negotiating to enhance rail services, and are currently doing just that with Bristol City Council for an improved service on the Severn Beach branch. We will willingly negotiate with any third party and supply costings based on the service specification they wish to see.
- Q6 Are direct rail services between Swindon and Westbury now properly displayed at all stations on that route both on display boards and customer information screens (where available)?
- A6 We do have problems with the reliability of the Customer Information System, and part of our investment plan is to replace with a superior system. In the meantime we will ensure that all other channels of customer communication, including timetable posters at stations, are up to date correctly displayed.
- Q7 Will First promote an integrated approach to local public transport by including bus services to Melksham and Trowbridge on its customer information screens at Chippenham (as is done by other operators in other parts of the country e.g. Buses to Romsey from Winchester Station)?
- A7 Where usage of linking buses is high enough and where the bus timings are geared around making connections with rail services then yes, we will promote them. We are happy to review this for the Melksham bus at Chippenham.

From Cllr Julian Bower:

- Q8 There used to be three direct services from Warminster to London (Waterloo) and back on weekdays. This has been reduced to two. What chances are there of having the third reinstated?
- A8 We do not operate the Wiltshire to London Waterloo services, only those to London Paddington. This is really a question for the new South West Trains franchise.

From Cllr Rosemary Brown:

Q9 I would like First Great Western to know that very recently travelling from Bradford on Avon to Bath, for the first time in 20 years I had to stand as there were absolutely no seats available. Apparently First Great Western say that buying a ticket does not entitle a passenger to a seat but I think it does and should do and would like to hear their views on health and safety issues regarding this point. I believe it is unsafe to have carriages full of standing passengers and I also believe that the travelling public, when purchasing a ticket, are of the understanding that by doing so a seat will be available for them. If this is the case then, for how long do First Great Western think a person should stand when making a train journey in view of the fact that everyone may not be medically fit enough to stand for long periods of time?

A9 The terms and conditions of ticket purchase do not include a guarantee to a seat, because there is no restriction on the numbers of people who may turn up wanting to use the train without having purchased a ticket in advance - the only way of ensuring that every customer gets a seat. To remove this right and only allow advance purchase (as with airlines) would not be appropriate for the high numbers of short-distance journeys that are made (as with buses). In busy periods the trains do sometimes carry more people than there are seats, and we have increased the size of our rolling stock fleet to minimise this where possible. The aim is that no-one should have to stand for more than 20 minutes. The safety aspect has been examined in depth by the Rail Standards & Safety Board, and whilst standing is of course not pleasant it is not a safety hazard. There is priority seating for people with disabilities.

From Cllr Malcolm Rosier:

Q10 Does First Great Western (FGW) not agree that the Cardiff to Portsmouth route is its "Cinderella" service?

A 10 We would agree that the potential of this route has not been fully recognised for many years - and this is why we have started an internal analysis exercise to understand that potential more fully. We then intend to set up a Line Working Group to involve all key stakeholders on the route, and agree a Line Development Plan for the next three years. The natural springboard for this will be the refurbishment of the class 158 fleet which starts this summer, and which will make a real difference to the comfort of travelling on the route.

Q11 What is FGW doing to improve the reliability and punctuality of its service from Trowbridge to Salisbury, particularly trains timetabled to depart before 7.00am? Can FGW give the council figures, since the beginning of the year, for the percentage of scheduled trains that depart Trowbridge on time and the percentage of 06.25 and 06.43 trains that have departed on time? Can FGW comment on these figures and the implications of them for their fare-paying passengers?

A11 The data you request can be extracted, but not in time for this evening's meeting. We are very conscious that train performance is not as good as either we or your customers want - the target is for 90% of services to run on time. An improvement programme has been initiated to drive up performance, largely focussing on behind-the-scenes aspects, but with additional staffing and customer service resources being deployed. The fruits of this are already beginning to show through.

Q12 What is FGW doing to alleviate overcrowding on the evening services from Southampton and Salisbury to Trowbridge and beyond?

A12 We have already doubled the number of seats on a key morning service (0647 Frome - Bristol), where it was quickly apparent that a 2-carriage train was not enough. A comprehensive review of capacity provision on services in the new timetable which started in December is underway. This could not be done earlier due to the short-term problems we had where the correct number of carriages for each services was not being delivered on a regular basis, thus distorting the true picture of demand.

Q13 I am sure that FGW surveys its passengers and collects attitudinal data. Can FGW give the council the results of its customer satisfaction surveys on its network as a whole and those from the Cardiff to Portsmouth line and comment on the absolute numbers and any differences between them?

A13 The 'National Passenger Survey' is a twice-yearly exercise and provides a clear picture of customer opinions on a wide range of subjects. The overall satisfaction rating for First Great Western was 77% - which is not good enough, and a result we strive our utmost to improve. The major investment we are undertaking in rolling stock, stations and customer service is only now starting to come through, but will undoubtedly improve experiences and perceptions. A breakdown on Cardiff-Portsmouth results will be provided for the Line Working Group.

Q14 What is FGW doing to improve the cleanliness and appearance of the trains and stations along the Bath to Salisbury section of the Cardiff-Portsmouth line?

A 14 Improving station and train cleanliness is a high priority for us. A programme of additional deep-cleaning and painting of stations is now underway, and regular cleaning will be more frequent and more thorough. To assist with this a new cleaning contractor is being appointed from the end of April. The new £8m servicing depot in Bristol for the local trains fleet includes a wash plant, which has just come into begun operation. Until now washing can only be done by hand, or by cycling the trains to other depots, which can result in inefficient working. We are confident that by the summer both the trains and stations will look better than they have done for many years.

Q15 Is FGW not perpetuating the policies of its predecessors – the Great Western Railway and BR Western Region – by running down the services on “competitor” routes that cross its territory to force passengers to use its services to Paddington?

A15 No. Competitor routes are just that - operated by competitors, and we cannot influence their actions or anything not within our franchise specification. We presume you are referring to the Bristol-Waterloo service, but this would seem to be thriving.

Q16 I travel regularly from Trowbridge to London Waterloo. Can FGW explain why the identical 158 units operated by SW Trains appear quieter, cleaner and more comfortable than those of FGW?

Q16 After our refurbishment (which includes ‘under the bonnet’ work as well as refreshing the passenger saloons) we intend our fleet to be better than those ran by other operators.

Q17 The morale of your staff on the Cardiff-Portsmouth line seems pretty low. They frequently discuss the shortcomings of the FGW services openly with their passengers. A high employee engagement and satisfaction score is recognised, today, as being key to high performance organisations and, in my experience, generally forms part of the senior management team’s objectives. Can you tell the council what is FGW doing to engage its staff and improve their apparently low levels of satisfaction?

A17 We do recognise that our staff are our biggest advocates, and also that with the merger of three companies into one some staff have not yet engaged with us as much as we would have liked. There is a wide range of improvements in particular to help frontline staff, which includes increasing job satisfaction. We also recognise that one of the best ways of improving morale is by ensuring that the trains punctual, clean and have adequate capacity.

Glenda Lamont, Customer Services Director, First Great Western.
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