

SWR Timetable consultation – sent by Hambledon Parish Council to South Western Railway, 19th September 2021, in response to its timetable changes consultation

Dear Sir/Madam

The new timetables proposed by SWR will have a hugely negative impact on the residents of the Parish of Hambledon. We consider them to be based on a flawed study which gives inadequate consideration to the impact on passengers. We strongly request that the consultation period is extended, due to its limited advertising, and that timetables are maintained at their pre-pandemic levels in the meantime.

The points below outline the concerns of the residents of the Parish:

1. The calculation of the expected number of passengers travelling is based on a study made in May 2020, at a very immature stage of the pandemic, cherry-picked to support the proposal. These figures do not tally with current projections and make no effort at modelling best case to worst case scenarios. Traveller numbers at peak times currently have trains running at full capacity during a period where not all commuters have returned to work, so traveller numbers can be expected to increase further. If timetables are to be revised, any changes should be made on the basis of data from recent studies and such changes should be delayed until a time where passenger numbers can be accurately predicted.
2. The study ties a reduction in passengers during 2020 to a reduction in faults. Whilst they may correlate, the study does not address why this has resulted during a time of many unusual variables. The number of faults in 2020 was still higher than the number of faults in 2015-16, when passenger numbers were significantly higher than in 2021.
3. The proposal fails to disclose any consultation with Network Rail to understand how they would benefit and what their plan would consist of. Network Rail is responsible for 75% of service issues, thus it would be expected that they would have a significant input to this proposal.
4. The study of passenger numbers fails to address the rising number of commuters moving outside of Greater London, in addition to the thousands of new homes being built within the local area, which Witley and Milford stations will both serve.
5. SWR have proposed a 'slight reduction' in services. A reduction of 50% during peak hours from Witley and Milford stations is an enormous reduction in services and should be acknowledged as such.
6. A reduction of 50% of services during peak hours will cause considerable overcrowding at the stations between Guildford and Haslemere that will not be serviced by the 'fast' trains. These trains were operating over capacity with the original timetable and will feel enormous strain with the proposed new timetable.
7. By reducing peak services to a single train per hour, there is no allowance for redundancy when there is an inevitable breakdown or other incident impacting services. An incident occurring on 16th September during peak hours (8am) led to overcrowding on the trains once service had resumed. A reduced service would have made this situation unsafe and ultimately led to additional service issues as a result.
8. By reducing the service by 50% on peak trains, the amount of space between passengers is inevitably reduced. During a time of a pandemic with government advice to maintain social distancing, this seems irresponsible and outrightly dismissive of passenger safety.

9. An increase in train length is not a viable solution. The platforms of Milford and Witley only have capacity for 8 carriages, so existing trains of 12 carriages are already too long.

10. The parish of Hambledon is served by a very limited bus service, leaving residents reliant on the local train service. This includes a large number of children attending the local schools, and residents visiting the nearby hospital and clinics. The reduction in train service would hamper the ability of children to attend their education and residents to attend hospital appointments punctually.

11. 'Value for money' is mentioned in the proposal. There is no increased value for money when the service is severely reduced for the same cost. SWR's strategy to improve services was to increase revenue. Transforming a mainline commuter station to an hourly service akin to a remote country station is contrary to building revenue.

12. Service levels on the line dropped instantly during the SWT to SWR transition. SWR has consistently failed to deliver on existing promises to improve services, so any further promises are treated with scepticism on whether SWR can deliver on them. Such examples are the automated refund scheme (that existed under SWT and was promised for Spring 2019 and still does not exist, to the financial expense of customers), and a commitment to clean and sterilise trains during COVID, which have continually turned up to service with litter, let alone sterilised. SWR currently have a customer satisfaction rating of 24% and are ranked 15th out of 20 TOCs (2019-20 ORR Rail Passenger Complaints Statistics dataportal.orr.gov.uk)

13. The Government's green strategy is to encourage train use. The proposed timetable will force commuters to drive to a nearby 'fast' station, thereby increasing road use without reducing the number of passengers on a train, whilst causing increased stress at mainline stations. Hambledon Parish Council strongly urge this proposal is withdrawn for its numerous flaws that will result in decreased quality of life for its residents, an inability to reliably meet work and personal deadlines, and an increased number of safety concerns.

Hambledon Parish Council