

Stakeholder Consultation: South Western Rail Franchise **Response by Rt Hon Maria Miller MP for Basingstoke**

Introduction

The key issue for this consultation is the continuing huge increase in the number of rail users – and particularly commuters – in Basingstoke, with almost a 100% increase in passenger numbers in the last 17 years. The service provided has not kept pace with this increase, and there are important opportunities for improved passenger service, especially given the major shift to agile working, including part time commuters, and the need to ensure that commuting is economically viable, given the continuing need for additional manpower in London.

Passenger Satisfaction

The top priorities expressed by Basingstoke passengers are the cost/value for money of services; capacity/overcrowding on trains, both during the peak hours and also during shoulder/off peak periods; and improved communications. Other priorities include flexible ticketing to accommodate part time commuting; integrated travel; and improvements to station and surroundings.

Franchise Objectives

From the Basingstoke perspective, the key objectives for the South Western franchise should be to increase the economic viability of commuting from Basingstoke to London, and to increase the capacity on already overcrowded routes, particularly given the significant growth in housing and jobs planned, both in Basingstoke and London. The objectives need to include a specific requirement to work with local authorities and local enterprise partnerships to clearly understand where and when future growth pressures are going to arise.

The stated Objective 3 regarding improved passenger satisfaction needs to include a specific requirement of providing fare payers with improved value for money, with commuter tickets now costing around £40 per day.

Capacity

Overcrowding on the route between Basingstoke and London Waterloo is a key concern. While the Wessex Route Study identifies peak time capacity as the most significant constraint, it should be acknowledged that overcrowding is also a serious concern during the shoulder/off peak periods, which many commuters opt for on the basis that they are off-peak in terms of fare, but which are often configured as only 5 car trains. Standing room only now seems to be the norm for passengers from Basingstoke taking the long distance trains to Waterloo (with seats only available on the stopping services originating at Basingstoke). Capacity does therefore need to be addressed on both peak and shoulder services.

For many commuters from Basingstoke the key issue is to have a seat for their journey, enabling them to work productively and have the comfort they should rightly expect from their costly ticket price.

While I note the short term improvements planned before the end of the current franchise, more ambitious and innovative ways of increasing capacity need to be considered. The number of carriages on busy trains needs to be increased to the maximum possible; other options include maximising the use of space in carriages by removing first class seating; and removing the (often unused) buffet space. The 3 + 2 seating configuration is unpopular with passengers, due to the narrowness of the seats. It is suggested that this could be replaced either with a drop-down third seat, or by having 2 + 2 seating with a wider standing area, including hand rails etc in order to make it possible for passengers to stand more safely and more comfortably. Larger standing areas with hand rails and perch-seats to provide support while standing could also form part of the solution.

Future impacts on Demand

Basingstoke has continued to grow throughout the recession and the draft Local Plan, now nearing completion, envisages further housing growth in the region of some 850 new homes per year over the Plan period, until 2029. Many of the new residents in Basingstoke will commute and will therefore add to the demand on the already over-capacity network. Furthermore, Basingstoke has been identified as a Growth Town by the Local Enterprise Partnership; and

Basing View Business Park, adjacent to Basingstoke Station, has been designated by the Government as an Enterprise Zone and is expected to generate some 4,000 jobs. Plans are also in the early stages for the redevelopment of the Basingstoke Leisure Park, to include a major outlet shopping destination, similar to Bicester Village. All these factors will undoubtedly increase demand for rail services.

Train Service Specification

In principle, any measures that would improve overall line capacity should be explored, but the impact on passengers would need to be carefully considered. I would in principle support more non-stop services from Basingstoke to London, but this would need to be balanced against adequate services allowing for transfers at Woking and/or Clapham Junction, especially given CrossRail and the opportunities this will offer.

Performance and Reliability

Punctuality of services is important to rail users, and any measures to deliver improved punctuality and reliability through a performance regime are to be welcomed.

Managing Disruption

The key issue regarding managing disruption is communication with passengers, both to publicise planned disruption due to engineering works (and alternative transport) and also when unforeseen events disrupt the network. Communication should include email, website and twitter, as well as station announcements etc. Whilst some passengers feel that this has improved, there is significantly more to do, particularly given the length of the journey some Basingstoke passengers undertake on a regular basis.

Partnership Working

It is essential that the new operator continues to work with local authorities to understand future growth in demand, and with other passenger transport operators to improve the integration of the public transport network in the Basingstoke area (see also below).

Community Rail and other Local Partnerships/Island Line/Third Party Funded Changes

No comments on these questions.

Stations

Basingstoke Station is the only station within the Basingstoke constituency. The Station suffers from overcrowding at peak times on platforms 2 and 3, and on the stairs connecting them to the station concourse. There would be benefit in installing a second set of stairs and/or improved arrangements/signage to channel ascending and descending passengers more safely.

Facilities for disabled passengers need to be given priority, including for example for blind and partially sighted people, the need for improved tactile paving surfaces at the station.

The circulation of traffic around the station and the drop-off/pick-up areas both to the front and rear of the station are dangerous for pedestrians, and it would be helpful to have better lighting, and improved markings of pedestrian walkways through these areas, including to the car parks and to the buses.

Door-to-Door Journeys

With increasing demand for rail services in Basingstoke, it is essential also to look at the ways in which rail passengers access the station. Many passengers would prefer to get to the station other than by car, but in many cases this is not currently practicable. As noted above, pedestrian access needs to be made safer in order to facilitate those who wish to walk to the station. Cycle routes are currently inadequate and there is insufficient storage for bicycles at the station.

Many Basingstoke commuters would like to use the bus to access the station, but timetables, routing and the location of the bus station make this impracticable for many people. I would therefore welcome measures to improve the integration of train and bus travel, including through timetabling, and smart and integrated ticketing (see below).

The Borough Council and bus operator need to work together with Network Rail and the new rail operator to find solutions to the need for greater sustainability in door-to door journeys.

Fares and Ticketing

The consultation document suggests that bids for the Franchise are expected to be based on the current regulated fares policy of RPI + 0% for the duration of this Parliament. This needs to be challenged.

Passengers commuting from Basingstoke to London increasingly feel that the cost of their fares means that it could become uneconomic to work in London. Furthermore, for some groups the high cost already precludes them. Coupled with increasing dissatisfaction with overcrowding, there is a growing sense that rail travel from Basingstoke to London represents very poor value for money.

The current South West Trains franchise is one of the busiest and most profitable in the country; the company paid a premium of £374 million to the Treasury in 2014/15, and in the past four years has paid cumulative premium payments of over £1 billion. Given that this is such a profitable route for a franchise to operate, the question must be addressed as to whether there can be any potential to enhance the value for money for commuters and also make it a more economic option for more workers.

The fares structure also needs to address the growing proportion of the workforce who commute on an agile basis, including part time. Many people are now working from home for part of their working week (often because businesses are reducing their office capacity and requiring an element of home working) and therefore are commuting for only part of the week; others work on a contract basis and therefore have a less predictable travelling pattern. It is suggested that the new operator should consider the opportunities for innovative fares for this growing cadre of commuters, for example through the use of a “carnet” system of ticketing.

There also needs to be greater clarity and transparency about the fares structure and the discounts available through travel cards.

In terms of the questions asked in the consultation documentation under this heading, it is important to have new, improved and efficient ways to buy tickets, including online and via mobile phones. Current arrangements for buying tickets from retail staff, including on-board, should continue, particularly for those less able to access alternative methods.

Smart and Integrated ticketing

The use of smartcard technology could have considerable benefits in speeding the passenger's passage through station gates and for use with integrated transport systems. It should also be capable of accommodating the "carnet" system for part time commuting referred to above.

Passenger Information

It is vitally important to give rail passengers timely, relevant and up to date information when there are delays to services, either planned or unplanned. Apart from on-board information, the new operator should be required as a matter of course to communicate through on-line methods and text messaging.

Service Quality

To improve service quality for passengers, it would be important to monitor levels of overcrowding and improved scheduling for planned delays due to engineering works.

Passenger Compensation

Passengers' rights to compensation due to delays and the process for claiming compensation are not well understood and not well publicised. In the new franchise I would like to see this issue addressed so that passengers are more easily able to get any compensation due to them when they experience delay.

Health, Safety and Security

As noted previously, I have concerns regarding the safety of pedestrians in the immediate environs of Basingstoke Station due to traffic flow and drop-off/pick-up arrangements. On the route between Basingstoke and Waterloo the train is usually so busy that security issues are rare, but on quieter stretches of the network, the ability to summon the guard could be helpful.

The safety of disabled people on trains and at stations needs to be given high priority. For example, improvements should be considered such as greater use of tactile paving in order to give blind and partially sighted people more warning about platform edges and other hazards.

Rt Hon Maria Miller MP
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