



Department
for Transport

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Dear Jayne,

On Monday 11 November, we met to discuss the impact that the construction of Old Oak Common station will have on GWR services. We were joined by several parliamentary colleagues, and a number of other issues were raised with me about Old Oak Common, and also rail services in the South West. You will have already received a copy of my letter to Mark Hopwood, MD of Great Western Railway (GWR), about communication of information ahead of major works at Old Oak Common impacting GWR services, and diversion of GWR services on 11 November, and his subsequent reply. I am also aware that he had a meeting with a number of Parliamentary colleagues on 5 December, which I understand went into the issues at Old Oak Common in detail.

During our discussion, several colleagues raised concerns about the impact that both construction and subsequent operation of Old Oak Common station will have on GWR services. It will provide interchange opportunities for passengers in the South West, with connectivity provided between HS2 services to the North and Midlands, and with existing Elizabeth Line and potentially GWR services. It will also enable growth, jobs and housing, supporting the Government's missions.

As I said I would at the meeting, I subsequently went to meet all the industry parties at Old Oak Common, in order to understand for myself the impacts both of construction and operation of the station.

There are unavoidable but necessary passenger impacts during the construction of the station, with a series of reduced track operations and total

track closures, to complete essential work to move the existing Great Western Main Line (GWML) tracks into the new station. My department has worked closely with all the parties - HS2, Network Rail, GWR, Heathrow Express and TfL, to mitigate the impact of Old Oak Common construction, including through the provision of a £30 million pot for capital investments to mitigate the impact of disruption. On Sunday 17 November, GWR successfully diverted services to London Euston to ensure passengers retained a direct link to a central London terminus during the closure of London Paddington.

The number of surface platforms to be built on the Great Western Main Line, to enable both more Elizabeth line trains to call and terminate, and on the fast lines, initially to allow for trains to call during perturbations, require changes in track geometry and alignment on the main lines. An initial extended possession to start this process was planned in December 2026 but, having checked with my officials it is clear that this possession will not happen then, and will move back substantially from this date. HS2 and Network Rail are working to agree a new possession strategy with the department by Spring next year, and my guidance is that any disruptive possession should be as near the opening date of HS2 as they can be.

We discussed in our meeting the journey time impact of the station of fast trains, and I recognise that any impact comes as a disbenefit to your constituents. I have asked all parties to review what they are planning so that line speeds, particularly on the down main line out of Paddington, are as high as possible and thus the impact of the station is minimised, and I am optimistic as to the result. The future timetable is still under development, and my officials will be working with the industry to re-assess GWR fast-line stopping patterns at Old Oak Common.

In addition to the construction of Old Oak Common Station, a number of wider issues were raised during the meeting on 11 November. I have set out below some further information which I hope will be helpful to you.

Cost of tickets

This Government has set out its ambition to simplify the fares and ticketing system and drive innovation across the network. We are still setting the role Great British Railways (GBR) will have in fares, ticketing and other operational aspects of the Railway. Until GBR has been established, fares

and ticketing will continue to be the responsibility of the train operating companies.

The industry recommends that the best deals can nearly always be achieved by booking as far ahead as possible. All long-distance operators already offer advance tickets and provide passengers excellent value when booking ahead. Peak and off-peak pricing is used by train operating companies to regulate demand on their routes, ensuring that services do not become overcrowded and encouraging people to travel at less busy times. Until GBR has been established, peak and off-peak restrictions will remain a matter for the train operators.

Sea wall works at Dawlish

To date £165m has been invested in the South West Rail Resilience Programme (SWRRP) at Dawlish, providing better journey reliability for rail travellers in the south west. Four phases of the programme have been delivered comprising two sections of sea wall protecting Dawlish and Dawlish station, a rockfall shelter north of Parsons Tunnel, and cliff protection measures covering the areas in between. The fifth and final phase involves cliff protection measures for a 1 mile section of the railway between Teignmouth and Parsons Tunnel. This work is expected to cost substantially more than the other four phases combined and is currently not funded. However, it will be considered as part of the multi-year Spending Review. The Secretary of State is conducting a thorough review of the previous government's transport plans to ensure that our transport infrastructure portfolio drives economic growth and delivers value for money for taxpayers. Decisions about individual projects, including the final phase of the SWRRP, will be informed by the review process and confirmed in due course.

Restoring Your Railway Tavistock - Bere Alston

Following the Chancellor's July 2024 announcement that the Restoring Your Railway (RYR) programme would be brought to a close, the Department is reviewing individual former RYR projects, including the Tavistock to Plymouth line. Ministers have been clear, however, that in the context of the financial situation the Government inherited, it will not be possible to afford to deliver all proposed projects. The Department believes that Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) are best placed to advocate for projects which will most

benefit their local areas. It is possible that LTAs may wish to press ahead with former RYR projects under alternative sources of funding in the future. The ultimate aim is to encourage strong business cases, which effectively identify the optimal transport solution, which support growth, more homes and increased job opportunities.

Access for All in the South West

The Government is carefully considering the best approach to the Access for All programme (AfA). While we are not yet able to comment in detail on next steps regarding specific stations, we remain committed to improving the accessibility of the railway and recognise the social and economic benefits this brings to communities. Once we can confirm our approach to the Access for All project, DfT Ministers will of course ensure that all MPs and stakeholders are informed.

Under the previous Government, nominations were sought for the next round of Access for All. A total of 310 nominations were received from Network Rail, train operating companies (TOCs) and other strategic transport organisations such as combined authorities. Of these, 50 additional stations were selected for initial feasibility work and if that is successful, will be taken forward as part of the AfA programme. Five of these additional stations (Bodmin Parkway, Castle Cary, Dorchester South, Stroud, and Yeovil Junction) are in the South west. This is in addition to stations already in the AfA programme or having accessibility improvements funded by other means, and in addition to a number of previously delivered or continuing station schemes in the South west such as St Austell, St Erth and Cheltenham Spa.

Internet connectivity on GWR trains

Free Wi-Fi is available on GWR services, however, I am aware there are connectivity issues on parts of the network. I have asked my officials to explore the feasibility of a range of technology options to improve passenger connectivity on the rail network. The Department is also conducting research to measure the strength of mobile signals along the rail network to fully understand where interventions are needed, and the potential impacts.

Sunday Performance

I also wanted to note that I am acutely aware that the performance of GWR services, particularly on Sundays, isn't where customers rightly expect it to be, and I recognise the inconvenience caused for customers when there is disruption.

GWR is reliant on a level of voluntary overtime from their drivers and other on-board crew to operate a full service on Sundays due to the current terms and conditions in their contracts. Whilst all new drivers who have joined GWR in recent years have a Sunday commitment, many of their longer serving drivers and other traincrew still do not. This has resulted in higher levels of cancellations on Sunday in recent months. My department and GWR are actively working to address this issue, and I continue to press for a resolution which will restore reliable services on Sundays.

National Highways work on the Tamar bridge

We expect National Highways to work closely with Network Rail and train operators to ensure that as far as possible, major works do not overlap, so that travellers have alternative journey options. If you have specific queries about National Highway work, please contact National Highways directly.

I hope you find this information helpful. I will revert to all addressees on Old Oak Common station and its effect on Great Western Main Line services when I have more information. The effects of this work on all your constituents is very much on my radar and that of the industry parties, HS2, Network Rail, GWR, Heathrow Express and TfL, as a result of your approaches.

Yours sincerely,



Peter, Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill

MINISTER OF STATE FOR RAIL