

Robert Courts MP response to Department for Transport's Great Western Rail Franchise Public Consultation

- 1a. I agree with these objectives for the franchise in the 2020s. In particular, I would prioritise strengthening the connection between the railway and the communities it serves, as this change would inform the franchisee on what other changes it needs to prioritise.
- b. I would change 'continue to improve the environmental performance of the railway' to 'significantly improve'. Although steps are being taken, this consultation states that rising demand on non-electrified routes will require more trains. It is important that the franchisee and Network Rail work together to ensure the electrification of the most used routes as soon as possible. More explicit specifications need to be set out regarding how to make the franchise greener and more efficient, to bring the new franchise in line with the Minister of State for Transport's vision of completely removing diesel-only trains by 2040.

Further, in the table outlining how 'much of the franchise will be changed beyond recognition', there is very little for the Cotswold line. This part of the franchise must not feel like a poor relation and more investment is essential.

A priority to invest in technology for a better experience for passengers, particularly mobile ticketing across the franchise and reliable wi-fi on trains, should be added.

- 2a. Although I can see the benefits of the proposals outlined for splitting the Great Western franchise into smaller franchises, I would instinctively prefer to keep the franchise as one, and perhaps move branches of the franchise to others to streamline if necessary. I feel that there may be other steps to take first to determine if this large step is needed, but I remain open to discussion on this matter.
- b. I appreciate that the Great Western franchise covers a very large geographical area, and covers a wide variety of routes. I also understand the desire for an increased market focus that two or more franchises would enable, and an increase in competition being in the passengers' interests.

However, I am not convinced that these benefits outweigh what would be lost and the complication that breaking down the franchise would bring. Ultimately, a larger group has more buying power to use its resources more efficiently. For example, by transferring stock between services.

Having one, integrated, coherent service in coherent regional groupings is preferable. Firstly, for the franchisees who are able to have greater vision for the system as a whole, have greater economies of scale and have resilience in challenging circumstances. Secondly, it is preferable for passengers, as they have one coordinated service with one simplified fare structure and the same standard of service. This is particularly pertinent for long distance services, such as from Paddington to Cornwall. However, of course, I would want to retain regional franchising to keep that tie to the specific area's requirements.

The argument for a greater market focus would have greater sway if the franchisee did not engage with stakeholders and service users. However, this is not the case, demonstrated by representatives from Network Rail and Great Western Railway attending my recent 'Ask the GWR' event for West Oxfordshire residents, to listen to passenger concerns and discuss the future of the franchise.

Further market focus could be achieved by even more engagement, perhaps by rolling out more public meetings and continuing engagement with groups such as the North Cotswold Line Task Force and the Cotswold Line Promotion Group, of which I am a member.

If the general feeling is that the franchise is bloated and needs to be streamlined, other solutions as detailed in Question 3, by transferring some of the outlying branches to other franchises, would provide a better solution.

- 3a. Regarding transferring Greenford branch services to the Chiltern franchise, I have no specific opinion as transferring this branch would have no direct impact on my constituents in West Oxfordshire. However, I would raise concerns that the Chiltern franchise is due to be re-let in 2021 and ask how this would tie in with the re-franchising of Great Western Rail. As stated in 3.11 to 3.14, the GWR franchise is due to be extended from March 2019 to April 2020, and this document proposes extending this by a further period of up to two years. It is essential, therefore, that if the Greenford branch was to be transferred to Chiltern from GWR, this would need to be clearly planned, taking into account the timing of the rest of the franchise to ensure continuity and efficiency of service.

I would state the same concerns about the transferring of the Brighton-Southampton service to the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise. With this due for re-franchising in 2021, should the current GWR franchise not be extended after April 2020, there would be a disjoint here in any transfer of service. Although without specific local knowledge, this transfer seems to make more geographic sense, as it does naturally tie in with services on other franchises.

- b. I do not have any specific suggestions for the movement of routes between franchises. However, I would support the movement of branch services such as above if appropriate, in order to streamline the GWR franchise, without the need to split the franchise in two.
- 4a. The main challenge that might be addressed through greater co-ordination and integration between the operator and Network Rail is communication with passengers about why delays are taking place, and work together to avoid regular delays. For example, the Worcester to Paddington route is often delayed in the mornings for commuters, but many of my constituents feel that they are not clearly communicated with about why these delays are taking place.

It is worth noting that Great Western Railway and Network Rail are already taking welcome steps towards closer working. For example, at my recent public meeting I held with both companies, where local residents could raise concerns and discuss the future of the franchise. This public meeting has helped to inform my response to this consultation and details of this meeting are outlined in appendix 1.

In terms of closer working operationally, I would advocate consideration of bringing back together the operation of track and train on our railways, perhaps through the establishment of joint management teams, including representatives from the franchisee and Network Rail. This will ensure that both are working clearly together to synchronise upgrades to stock, signalling and the network. I understand that will be first trialled with the South Eastern and East Midlands franchises, due for renewal in 2018/19. I look forward to seeing how joined-up working in the industry will benefit passengers.

- b. Future priorities for strengthened partnership should be open communication channels about works and delays, so that one clear, smooth message can be communicated to passengers.
- 5a. I believe that the route between London Paddington and Hereford, specifically services past Oxford serving stations such as Hanborough and Charlbury, would greatly benefit from increased frequency of trains. This is a valuable commuter line, with many residents travelling into London for work. Currently the line is very well-served from Oxford onwards, however particularly in the evening there is only one train an hour from Paddington to Hanborough, for example. Increased frequency and later return times from London in the evenings would enable more residents to have stress-free travel and greater flexibility. Large projected housing growth in the next two decades will not only increase the number of residents, but will provide even greater strain on the highly congested A40 between Witney and Eynsham. An increase in service will be essential to ensure that residents can get where they need to go and ease the burden on West Oxfordshire's roads.
- b. The greatest importance is the later travel times, where there are currently large gaps in service. For example, on a Saturday, when many people might travel travelling back to Hanborough from London after evening events, there is only the 19.52 service and the 21.50 service from Paddington. Week days only have one extra service at 23.20.

This is also true for early morning commuters, with the first train from Hanborough to London starting at 06.13 and only running every half hour. This is not regular enough for the high number of passengers, which has tripled in the past 10 years, a trend which looks very likely to continue with the projected housing growth mentioned in 5a.

- c. In order to encourage greater use of the railways by residents of West Oxfordshire, a much more frequent service is required. A last train on a Saturday from London to Hanborough at 21.50 hinders travel for many events, and infrequent services on week days only serves to increase the pressure on earlier peak services which already frequently require passengers to stand. Again, this pressure is only set to increase with the increase in housing in West Oxfordshire and continued increasing pressure on the A40.
- d. If this was only able to be realised through a decrease in service elsewhere, I would suggest that the line is mainly used by commuters in the week and day trippers at the weekend, so might tolerate a slightly reduced service during the day in the week - but this is not ideal. However, on this particular line, the reason for a lack of frequency is due to the single track for this part of the line, physically restricting the number of trains

which are able to run. **The solution here is to redouble the North Cotswold Line as an urgent priority.**

- 6a. I am promoting the North Cotswold Line Task Force, where I have attended many meetings as representative for the area it covers and would strongly align myself with its aims to develop proposals for faster and more frequent journeys to and from London. These include redoubling the Cotswold line, improvements at stations such as Hanborough and Charlbury including parking.
- b. In order to support the development of this scheme, I would like the franchisee to continue the current level of engagement, and work closely with the taskforce and MPs to develop proposals. As I outlined in Question 5, the likely way to achieve these aims is, ultimately, to redouble the North Cotswold track. The current single track is a severe hindrance to progress and there is a clear case for this to be improved. A next step would be to create a clear business case for redoubling the track. Of course, I would press for this to be explicitly stated in the refranchising agreement, and I look forward to discussing this further with the Department for Transport.
- 7a. I have no opinion on this particular proposal with reducing journey times to destinations in the South West by reducing stops at intermediate stations, as I am not familiar with the needs of this specific area.
- b. & c. There are eight stations in my constituency, with seven on the North Cotswold line. Many of these stations already have a reduced service. The services that are already provided at Hanborough, Finstock, Combe, Charlbury, Ascott, Shipton, Kingham and Tackley are relied upon daily for residents to get to work and travel to Oxford or further. Particularly as there is a distinct lack of tied up public transport to stations from surrounding villages, to stop services to these stations would force residents to travel by car to larger stations such as Hanborough and Charlbury, where there is already high demand for parking spaces, as there is no reliable, regular bus service.
- 8a. West Oxfordshire is well-served by direct routes to London Paddington, and it is essential that these are preserved. As many use these services to commute into London, having to change at Oxford, for example, would greatly discourage passengers, with many instead choosing to drive to Oxford, increasing traffic congestion and placing even higher demand on an already congested station.
- b. Continuation of direct services on the North Cotswold line to London.
- c. Connections with different franchises should look to be improved. In particular, with only once hourly trains from Oxford to Hanborough, those travelling on the Chiltern line from Bicester and beyond should not have to wait up to an hour for the next service; coordination between the two franchises is required here. This is likely to become more of an issue in the future, with significant investment in the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor this is set to increase in demand as a commuter route.
9. As an area which attracts large numbers of tourists, it is particularly important to increase service provision to the Cotswolds in the summer, with 38 million day visits made every year. A growing draw in the area is the number of festivals in this area, and although specific plans cannot be made for every event, across the franchise are

some extremely popular events, such as the Wilderness festival and many events at Blenheim Palace. It is particularly important that bus services also respond to this increase in demand, and the franchisee must work together with local operators to ensure visitors can go to these events.

10. I would press for greater links tying train services to other public transport, such as bus services. For example, the largest settlement in West Oxfordshire is the town of Witney, however the nearest station is Hanborough, itself a small village. Traffic congestion along the A40, particularly at commuting times, is infamous in the area and so many residents would rather get the train for the smoother, less stressful journey to Oxford and beyond. However, with limited parking at Hanborough, it is of the utmost importance to have a reliable, regular bus service from Witney to tie into train services. Recently this has improved with a change in the bus timetable, as previously a bus would arrive at the station 5 minutes after a train has left, but there is huge potential here to further increase passenger numbers. **The whole journey for passengers needs to be considered, not just the time they spend on the railway.**

I support a reopening of the Cowley branch line for passengers, with a shuttle service to Hanborough, with more parking and the creation of a concentrated public transport hub, including cycle and bus provision, with regular and reliable connections to Witney, Eynsham, Woodstock and beyond.

Having a regular shuttle service between Hanborough and Cowley will enable many residents to avoid driving on the A40 and would dramatically ease congestion by providing a direct route for commuters to the other side of Oxford. However, this would only realise its full potential with an integrated public transport network around Hanborough as a hub. This would enable residents around West Oxfordshire to travel to the large employers in south Oxford without having to get in their cars. That being said, an increase in parking would allow residents the flexibility to choose how to travel.

Consideration should also be given to ways in which a direct service of different types might be provided directly to Witney, as the largest settlement in West Oxfordshire. I appreciate that this would be at considerable cost, but ought to be part of the consideration. Additionally, a station such as near Yarnton along the current line, between Hanborough and Oxford, might be a further option. If the above shuttle service of very regular, reliable trains is created, a new station at Yarnton would serve the same purpose, whilst easing pressure away from the village of Hanborough.

11. Not applicable.
- 12a. Longer rolling stock to accommodate increased passenger numbers. Although new stock is welcome on the London Paddington – Oxford line, this is shorter than older stock, meaning less seats for passengers. Demand at Hanborough station has trebled over the past ten years, so more seats should be a priority as this trend looks set to continue. That being said, every effort should be taken to rotate out old rolling stock as soon as possible, as they do not provide the level of service passengers expect from the franchise and contribute to the reliability crisis currently being experienced on this line.
- b. I am content with the current level of First Class accommodation.

- c.&d. The franchisee should provide reliable wi-fi on board trains; current facilities are not sufficient, with the wi-fi not providing a consistent connection, for example, for work on a laptop. Further, all trains should have plug sockets; on some of the older rolling stock still in use at off-peak times these are not provided.
- e. I believe that innovative technologies for rolling stock, such as hydrogen or battery power, could bring huge environmental advantages and they create much less pollution than diesel. Also, it would advantages, particularly I understand, for stopping services at smaller stations, as it enables quicker acceleration, allowing for an increase in services. Furthermore, innovative technologies have been proven to be more reliable, where reliability has become a major issue across this line.
- f. As mentioned above, routes that would particularly benefit would be stopping services, due to the ability to accelerate much faster also so enabling shorter journey times and more services. It would also be much greener for stopping services, which emit a lot more pollution when regularly accelerating over short distances between stations, whereas long distance trains are able to maintain a more contract speed.

13a&b. As many of the stations in West Oxfordshire are small, each with only one platform, wheelchair accessibility is adequate, however at Combe and Kingham station there is little accessibility for those in wheelchairs. In general, the network should be upgraded so that all stations are accessible. This is particularly an issue at rural stations, where for many disabled residents getting the train could a great public transport option if they are unable to drive.

Also, where parking provision has been expanded and demand continues to grow, some disabled passengers are having to travel long distances to the platform. For example, there are three disabled parking spaces at Hanborough station, with new additional parking spaces built on a neighbouring site, which accesses the station with a long ramp. As the station is seeing increased demand, it is highly likely that at peak times the disabled spaces will be full, meaning disabled passengers having to travel much further.

- c. At more rural stations, there are often no announcements over a speaker, with incoming trains and expected arrival times on an electronic board. This poses an issue for those who are partially-sighted, as the height of sign and colours used could make it difficult to read in bright sunlight, and impossible for those without sight.

Generally, the franchisee needs to improve its communication with rail users about whether a train will arrive on time or be cancelled, as far in advance as possible. Perhaps for those who have booked a specific ticket online, customers could be emailed with an update about their train, as many airlines do if a flight is delayed. Constituents raise particular concerns about the 16.22 from London Paddington which is regularly delayed; as a service which many rely upon to get home in time to see their families etc. delayed services here is a particular sore spot.

- 14a. I agree with these priorities, as I stated in Question 10, it is essential that franchisees consider the whole passenger journey, not just their time on a train. A high priority, particularly for rural routes, should be for franchisees to work with other providers of public transport, particularly both commercial and community bus routes to ensure

passengers have a stream-lined route. This is particularly the case for travel from Witney and Eynsham to Hanborough; currently regular, reliable public transport from these settlements at the station is not provided. I am interested in the idea of a Station Travel Plan and look forward to consulting further on this with the franchisee.

I support the proposed requirement for the franchisee to set aside funds for station improvements, with a portion dedicated for improvements at smaller stations. All too often it is the larger stations that receive improvements, and facilities at smaller stations woefully lacking, for example at Hanborough, Witney's closest station. This station improvement should be in partnership with local councils and residents. For example, West Oxfordshire District Council and GWR have recently announced that Hanborough station is set to receive a café, toilets and other facilities; this is welcome investment for a station with greatly increased demand over recent years. Further, at my recent 'Ask the GWR' event, GWR agreed to invest in the community garden at Charlbury station; it is essential that the franchisee invests in the communities to create a positive relationship, and this is a welcome step.

There is a need for improvements at Tackley station, where a lack of a passenger bridge is a real danger to residents. Whether this is something that could be realised through a fund for station improvements or not, issues like Tackley need to be rectified. The franchisee must work with communities to solve safety issues.

- b. I am satisfied with the suggested priorities.
- c. As detailed in Question 10, co-ordination between transport modes should be improved at Hanborough, with much more regular bus services between Hanborough needed, ideally every 10-15 minutes. If there were to be more frequent services that only stopped at Hanborough and Charlbury, Charlbury station would also need much improved bus links, to remove the strain on parking.
- d. I believe these priorities could be achieved through co-ordination of timetables or a requirement in the franchisee to subsidise local bus companies to enable them to run more frequent services, as more bus services would increase passenger numbers.

Furthermore, with regards to parking, I appreciate the expansion of parking provision at both Hanborough and Charlbury stations. However, much more is needed and I would push for innovative solutions to create more parking without negatively affecting the character of rural stations and villages; for example, building a two-deck car park but sinking it into the ground so as to minimise its impact on the village. Of course, better links with other public transport would also decrease demand on parking. Any building work regarding parking must closely work with the local community, for example the new car park at Charlbury has caused much public concern about how this will impact the town.

- e. Examples of best practice elsewhere include Oxford Parkway, Bicester North and Warwick Parkway.
- 15a. I agree with these priorities, particularly the promotion of tickets integrated with local buses, in co-operation with local authority smartcard schemes. This is not yet the case in Oxfordshire, but there are very preliminary suggestions of an 'Oxford' card – I

support this plan, to promote public transport in Oxfordshire, as a potential way offering savings to passengers who buy a joint train and bus ticket, and removing the need for paper tickets if the system acts like an Oyster card, making the most of modern technology and as a more sustainable 'greener' option.

I would add a priority towards moving away from paper tickets and enabling mobile tickets. Not only is this more sustainable, passengers from rural stations are unfairly affected by faulty machines resulting in fines; as there is no manned ticket office and usually only one ticket machine, if this is broken passengers are unable to print their pre-purchased tickets, resulting in a fine when they are asked to produce their tickets on the train; this is also true at Oxford where there are frequently long queues at ticket machines. This is a regular occurrence and would easily be avoided by standardised mobile ticketing across the franchise.

Further, the high cost of tickets compared to the service received must be mentioned. Any ticket price should reflect the level of service provided to the customer. **In order to justify high ticket prices, the operator must provide a punctual, reliable, high-quality service.**

Where customers do experience significant delays, the compensation process must be made simple and efficient. My constituents raise concerns that claims can take a long time to be processed.

- b. For passengers travelling from west to east, for example Bristol to Hanborough, there is a fault in fair structure, perhaps because the journey goes 'back on itself' where passengers would have to change at Oxford, resulting in inflated fares. If one purchases a ticket from Bristol Temple Meads to Hanborough, this is significantly more expensive than a ticket from Bristol Temple Meads to Oxford, and then a ticket from Oxford to Hanborough. Anomalies such as this need to be rectified.

Fare-splitting should be rectified; there should not be the flaw in the system that if I purchase tickets for each part of my journey it works out at a different price to purchasing one ticket for my whole route. The cheapest possible fare should be offered.

- 16. Although there are no Community Rail Partnerships in West Oxfordshire, it is essential that the franchisee works closely with local communities. I understand that Cotswold Line Promotion Group would like to see a CRP created at Worcester, and I would urge the franchisee to work with the group and Worcestershire County Council to develop a plan. Perhaps the franchisee could access with the group if it would be appropriate and beneficial to create a CRP in West Oxfordshire.
- 17. Particularly in areas such as West Oxfordshire, the franchisee could work more closely with other leading companies based in the area to work with schools and teach them about a future career path. For example, in West Oxfordshire we have RAF Brize Norton, meaning we have companies such as Airbus, Boeing and Thales based in Carterton. With such great examples of engineering, the franchise could engage with schools and teach students about other routes they could take using engineering skills to work in the rail industry. This could be furthered through apprenticeships and work experience offered by the franchise to local students.

18a&b.I agree with these priorities; however I would set out the specific points I have made which much be addressed in the new franchise:

- The cost of tickets versus the level of service received by customers.
- The reliability of services; these must be on-time, and any delays or cancellations must be better communicated with customers.
- An increase in services on the Cotswold line; this to be realised through the use of more efficient, greener rolling stock, but mainly through:
- A redoubling of the Cotswold line. This is essential.
- More public transport which ties in with rail services. Public transport must be regular, reliable and take passengers to the right place to decrease the reliance on roads.
- Expansion of the existing freight Cowley branch to passengers with a regular, reliable shuttle service from Hanborough.

c. Introduction of mobile ticketing across the franchise on all services, which would work with other local public transport to create a smooth public transport system.

d&e. More clearly explain to the public how those with disabilities can work throughout the rail sector, as there are opportunities here which are not currently fully realised.

Robert Courts MP
21st February 2018

Appendix 1:

“Ask the GWR” Thursday, 8th February 2018 - Briefing

Panel

Chair: Robert Courts MP

Great Western Railway: Jane Jones, Head of Public Affairs

Tom Pierpoint, Regional Development Manager

Claire King, North Cotswolds Station Manager

Network Rail: Toby Elliott, Senior Public Affairs Manager

Acronym key

GWR – Great Western Railway

NR – Network Rail

NCL – North Cotswold Line

Main points of discussion

- **Performance over Christmas and New Year period:** GWR were very apologetic about the inconveniences that have been caused to rail users either by the effect of cancellations or delays along the North Cotswold Line. They explained that these have been in large part due to a shortage of staff trained to operate the new Intercity Express Trains (IETs); this shortage was down to the re-timing of track electrification, meaning drivers have not had the time to learn how to operate the new trains on this new system. GWR acknowledged that this is unacceptable, and that rail users deserve better. They are working hard to train up drivers as quickly as possible to fix this problem and acknowledged concerns over value for money against this background.
- **North Cotswold Line Infrastructure:** NR discussed issues caused by stretches of single-track on the NCL, as well as how older railway tracks – which we have along parts of the NCL – are especially vulnerable to the effects of bad weather. However, NR outlined how NCL should benefit from a £7.5billion investment on infrastructure enhancement, which will be rolled out over the next 5 years.
- **Consulting communities on timetable improvements:** GWR explained that timetables are determined by the Department for Transport (DfT) when they renew a franchise. Therefore, the current consultation will inform any changes made to new timetable. GWR stressed that if residents want to see changes to the current timetable, they should respond to the Government’s consultation and make this clear, as this is the best way to highlight what we want new timetable to be.
- **Lack of conductors and ticket machines along NCL:** GWR explained they are working on putting in place more conductors on their services, but it is difficult for conductors to pass through an entire train before it reaches Oxford from NCL stations. GWR are exploring the extension of smartphone ticketing, but have yet to make any official announcements about its rollout. GWR has secured £8million from the Government to make ticket barriers card-enabled.
- **Cotswold Railcard:** GWR explained that this railcard does still exist and is available to rail users, although highlighted that it is off-peak only.

- **Compensation timescales:** GWR explained that they have recently changed customer service contractors so that all of this work is now UK-based, but acknowledge that the changeover has caused delays to the process of compensation for some individuals. They are working hard to get up to speed on processing claims and apologise for any inconvenience caused.
- **Future plans for smaller stations:** GWR promised that the services that are currently provided to smaller stations will indeed continue.
- **Confusion regarding suitability of tickets:** GWR explained that multiple tickets with the same name or price may be caused by different routing options, and apologised if rail users found this confusing.
- **Re-instating Witney Railway Line:** NR explained that when they have previously looked into this, they have determined it to be too expensive. Nevertheless, NR will continue to examine all options.
- **Charlbury Station Garden Volunteer Group:** GWR promised to provide the volunteers with the £3,000 they need to maintain the Charlbury Station Garden.