

Notes from OxRail Action meeting with First Great Western, April 20, Oxford

Attended by: OxRail Action members Susan Westlake, Carol Sweetman and Zahra Akkerhuys; First Great Western Customer Services Director Glenda Lamont, FGW General Manager for the Thames Valley Area Richard Rowland, FGW Media Manager Adrian Ruck; FGW Customer Panel Representative Chris Bates

Opening remarks: OA said that it welcomed the opportunity for dialogue and some of the changes introduced in January 2007, but that there were still several outstanding issues that we hoped FGW would address.

May timetable changes: FGW acknowledged there will be some timetable changes in May 2007 but these will only be minor so we must not get our hopes up. Changes will barely affect the current timetable and however hard we lobby for changes to the 7.05am, for example, nothing will change because FGW does not have resources to bring about radical changes

Provisional May timetables have been produced and are available at Oxford station; the finalised versions will be available from the beginning of May.

December timetable changes: Major changes will, however, take place in December 2007. FGW says it is working hard to ensure that it does not make the mistakes of December 2006. FGW will have a draft timetable by early-summer 2007 and wishes to consult with OxRail Action when it has this. OA noted that December is a long time away and that this will mean a long, hot summer of discontent for those unhappy with the current timetable

In response to our requests, FGW said it was looking at a number of changes. These include:

- the possibility of speeding up the existing 6.45am train so that journey time is closer to an hour than the 1hr 15mins it currently takes
- increased capacity on the 6.38am train as the current Adelante will be scrapped and a High Speed Train introduced

Some things won't improve though eg a Turbo train will continue to run on the 7.05am service, though FGW hoped that this would not be such a problem as it is at the moment because the newly-speeded up 6.45am train would ease demand on that service.

Performance/time-keeping issues: FGW acknowledged there are major performance issues with the 7.33am in particular and other trains in general. FGW says the 7.33am is regularly late because it was slotted into the timetable in response to complaints following the introduction of the December 2006 timetable changes and so it gets delayed as it is forced to follow a slow train to Didcot. OA said that excuses for the 7.33am did not cover the fact that there are very real problems with time-keeping in the mornings and that many people are forced to get extra early trains because they cannot count on their usual trains running to time.

FGW acknowledged that its performance is under the spotlight not just from passengers but also from the Government. FGW blamed some performance issues on limitations put in place by Network Rail.

FGW said that it was currently working on a major investment plan which will improve performance of trains that pass through the Reading bottleneck. The plans, expected to be implemented by 2010, will cost £500k and will double capacity at Reading.

FGW said performance improvements were also improved for trains running on the Cotswold Line which should increase reliability of the 7.44am from Oxford

FGW also said that reliability of time-keeping will also be improved as the new High Speed Trains are brought online

Refurbishment of Turbo trains: OA reported grave concerns about the quality of the Turbo trains particularly because considerable amounts have been spent on repainting the exterior. Particular problems highlighted included unsanitary toilets which make the rest of the carriage smell, windows failing to close properly, inadequate cushioning on seating. FGW acknowledged that the trains have not stood up well to general wear and tear and while they will not be completely refurbished, there are plans for them to be 'refreshed' next year.

In the meantime, FGW asked that we keep a note of specific problems (eg unsanitary toilets) and e' mail through the details + carriage number + train number (usually starts with 165...) to the FGW Customer Panel representative Chris Bates who will ensure the information gets through to the appropriate engineers (e' mail address - chrisjbates@btinternet.com)

Turbo trains expected to be in service until 2020 when they will need to be scrapped because they won't comply with the Disability Discrimination Act

Customer Services at Oxford station: FGW said that it took staff training extremely seriously and that plans are in place to support station staff better so that they keep passengers better informed.

FGW acknowledged that there were problems with the electronic information system which is supposed to keep the information boards up-to-date. FGW considering our suggestion that whiteboards (similar to those used on the Underground) be introduced when the electronic boards are out-of-action.

Other plans also being considered include help-points, more and improved CCTV. Also covers for the bike-sheds are being discussed and the possibility of clearing out old/disused bikes from the sheds

Plans for investing in Oxford station: OA asked FGW to confirm plans for the development of Oxford station with the building of a new platform and facilities to cope with increased numbers of passengers.

FGW said that plans are being looked with Network Rail and Oxfordshire County Council. The scheme, which would be part of a wider plan to improve access to Oxford by many modes of transport, could involve a rail component worth up to £17m.

OA said that while plans for developing the station were all well and good, that it would be good to get the basics right – like having enough trains and seats for the existing number of commuters – without thinking about increasing the number of passengers using the services

Newspapers in First Class: OA said that the 6.38am train regularly leaves Oxford without free copies of The Times available on-board for First Class passengers. FGW said this should not be happening and that it would look into solving this.

Next steps: FGW is keen to meet OA in early-summer to discuss the December timetable

