

Andrew Boff AM
Chair of the London Assembly
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
More London
London
SE1 2AA

6 December 2021

Dear Mr Boff,

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the London Assembly regarding the Motion on the December 2022 timetable consultation. While the consultation has now closed, the points made in the motion are well noted and I have set out responses below.

The first thing I'd like to point out is that the specification set out in the December 2022 consultation document does not constitute a cut in current service levels. On the contrary, the overall change is an increase on the number of services we run today, albeit not quite to the same level as they were before the pandemic. Our current timetable sees us running 85% of our pre-COVID capacity, and the draft specification for December 2022 would increase that to 93%.

I thought it would be helpful if I briefly set out the key drivers for the proposed December 2022 timetable specification:

1. The need to improve performance for our customers

Pre-Covid, SWR was the UK's busiest rail network, with demand for our services growing all the time. In response, we, along with Network Rail, created paths for more and more services. This led to congestion, particularly in the critical corridor between Woking and Waterloo, which too often had a negative impact on the reliability and punctuality of our service. As we ran reduced timetables during the pandemic, the performance levels (and customer satisfaction) of our services improved.

Our strategic review of the timetable sought to consolidate those performance improvements for our customers, in light of the reduced demand for our services. In order to do so, we proposed not to reinstate all of our pre-pandemic services to ease congestion and improve reliability.

For example, our proposals would increase the number of trains arriving in London Waterloo between 0800 and 0900 from 45 today to 53 in December 2022, compared to 60 in May 2019. While only a small difference from our pre-Covid levels, having seven fewer trains arriving at what has long been UK's busiest station will have a marked impact on our ability to run a reliable service.

2. The need to efficiently match service levels to reduced demand

The pandemic saw a significant reduction in customer numbers for all transport operators, with our colleagues working tirelessly to provide a core service for key workers and keep the country moving.

While customers are returning to our trains, our overall customer numbers are now only 64% of pre-covid levels. Commuter demand has been slowest to recover with only 46% of pre-covid customers passing through the Waterloo barriers during the morning peak.

In order to understand the likely long-term demand trends, we commissioned two waves of research with SWR customers. They told us they expected to travel less in the future, particularly in the commuter and business markets, while leisure travel (which has not historically seen capacity constraints) would bounce back to higher than pre-Covid levels. We used the below data to inform our proposals, leaving plenty of headroom by providing 93% of pre-Covid capacity against 76% overall demand.

Expected Journeys compared to pre-Covid – Waves 1 & 2			
Commuter	Business	Leisure	Overall
60%	62%	105%	76%

In October this year, we again asked our customers their views on their future travel patterns. The results were remarkably consistent with our previous findings, with a slight reduction in expected commuter travel and an increase in expected business travel:

Expected Journeys compared to pre-Covid – Wave 3 (Oct 2021)			
Commuter	Business	Leisure	Overall
56%	79%*	107%	77%

In order to deliver the best possible service at the most efficient cost to the taxpayer, we need to use data to inform our plans. The consistency of the feedback given by our customers over the course of 18 months provides us with confidence the plans set out in the Dec 22 timetable specification are the best way to right-size our service to the new normal.

It should also be noted that the consultation clearly states that the new specification would provide a base line for our timetable moving forward and does leave some space for additional train paths to be introduced to accommodate future growth as it is needed. We are committed to working with our local communities and stakeholders to match capacity to demand in the future, based on robust business cases that can demonstrate value for the taxpayer.

The motion identifies concerns about off-peak services at four stations.

For the three on the Hounslow loop (St Margarets, North Sheen and Mortlake), the specification proposed not to increase the current frequency of two trains per hour. While the motion correctly points out that leisure demand (off peak) is likely to bounce back quickest, it should be noted that pre-pandemic these services never had a capacity challenge.

In fact, while running four trains per hour pre-pandemic, the loadings on these services at their busiest point between Wandsworth Town and Clapham Junction were on average 181 customers, giving an overall demand of 724 customers per hour.

The new specification would provide 1,092 seats per hour, providing ample capacity for all customers to have a seat on our services.

Similarly at Worcester Park, the specification proposes to maintain the current service of two trains per hour compared to four pre-Covid. In May 2019, the four trains per hour had an average loading of 156 customers at their busiest point between Earlsfield and Clapham Junction, giving an overall demand of 622 customers per hour.

The new specification would provide 1,092 seats per hour, providing ample capacity for all customers to have a seat on our services.

While we understand customers' disappointment at not having four trains per hour into London, unfortunately we, like all transport providers, have to make difficult decisions to efficiently match capacity to demand to save taxpayer money in light of reduced revenues.

The motion also mentions the importance of actively encouraging train travel at a time of a climate emergency. We fully support this view and believe that running a sustainable timetable with improved reliability and punctuality is key to attracting customers back to the railway. Our proposals would help us do just that.

It should also be noted, in light of the figures set out above, running more trains than is necessary to meet customer demand would lead to carbon inefficiencies as we run more, relatively empty, trains than required.

I hope the above goes some way to addressing the concerns raised in the London Assembly motion. As we emerge from the pandemic, all transport providers are having to adapt to the new normal of reduced customer demand and revenue. As a result we have to make difficult decisions on some services and are sorry for the impact that can have on our customers.

We are now working with the Department for Transport and Network Rail to analyse the responses to the consultation and agree next steps, but I would be happy to discuss any of these points with you in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Claire Mann". The script is cursive and elegant, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Claire Mann
Managing Director