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**Better Trains for Chepstow Response to Great Western Rail
Franchise Consultation 2012.**

The GW Chepstow to Bristol and Portsmouth Services.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment upon the forthcoming renewal of the GW franchise that provides a long awaited juncture to rectify shortcomings of the existing FGW franchise specification.

We are primarily concerned to maintain and improve train services to Chepstow and the Wye Valley and whilst no GW services currently serve Chepstow we (with Lydney and Caldicot) rely upon the GW Bristol / Portsmouth services providing connections at Severn Tunnel Junction with our local Arriva Trains Wales trains.

Integration of train services at Severn Tunnel Junction is important to passengers at Chepstow, Lydney and Caldicot especially those wishing to travel to and from Filton, Bristol, Bath the Portsmouth line because of the absence of any direct rail services linking these towns.

When the franchise was transferred from Wessex Trains to First Great Western mistakes and omissions in the new franchise seriously worsened train services along the Chepstow line the through inadequate specification of service levels for the Portsmouth – Cardiff services. The worst mistake was not to stipulate that all the Cardiff/Portsmouth trains stop at Severn Tunnel Junction, as they had previously. This mistake was compounded by omitting to specify that the train operator should maintain service connections at STJ with the up and down ATW services in order to integrate GW services with those of ATW.

These contract shortcomings and the resulting loss of services at Severn Tunnel Junction and along the Chepstow line caused a furore and public protests when FGW took over. Many people from Chepstow, who previously used trains to Bristol and Filton, were forced to find other means of transport, change jobs or move house. The disruption caused to the Chepstow – Bristol service was so severe that few people now regularly attempt this journey by rail.

It is fortunate that following protracted discussions and persuasion FGW co-operated with the Severn Tunnel Action Group (STAG) and over the last few years restored stops at STJ for most of the peak Portsmouth/Cardiff services to/from STJ. These train stops are currently outside the scope of the FGW contract and the top priority must be to firmly establish these stops at STJ into the new GW contract specification.

The action so far taken by FGW has met the needs of peak services for STJ/Bristol passengers. The smaller numbers of passengers boarding at STJ throughout the day have the benefit of the hourly FGW Taunton services, but this does not cater for those wishing to travel to Bath and the Portsmouth line

It remains necessary to stop all Cardiff/Portsmouth trains at STJ throughout the day so that passengers from Chepstow, Lydney and Caldicot who are currently cut off from

Bristol, Bath and the Portsmouth line may have their services back. A few of these trains will not have connections immediately, because of current two hour gaps in the ATW schedules. However it is anticipated that WAG will soon be dealing with this shortcoming to the ATW service and upgrade the sub-standard service along the Chepstow line to be regular and hourly.

- Stopping all the GW services at STJ and introducing the hourly Chepstow line service will combine to provide the much needed and long awaited regular hourly services (without 2 hour gaps) linking Chepstow, Lydney and Caldicot with Cardiff, Cheltenham and Bristol,
- These regular services will reduce the journey time between Chepstow and Bristol from up to one and a half hours to less than an hour by cutting waiting time at STJ from around 50 minutes to 17 or 26 minutes.
- It must be emphasised that cutting out the STJ stops in the FGW franchise did not reduce overall journey times as these schedules were unaltered.
- Restoring the stops and services should cost nothing yet increase the number of passengers attracted to rail.
- This should bring substantial benefits to the local economy through helping people utilise our rail services in pursuit of education, business, social and leisure activities in addition to facilitating a growth in tourism in the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean..
- Re-establishing stops at STJ will be a small step towards restoring lost services, correcting past mistakes, and prepare the way for future improvements.

Our comments relate to the current service patterns and the anticipated upgrading of Chepstow line ATW services to hourly. This is the situation which we anticipate will prevail during the initial stages of the franchise.

We are of course aware that electrification will bring the possibility of considerable improvements and restructuring of services throughout the area. With so much uncertainty over timescales, the phased introduction of the electrification and the service patterns that will evolve we do not feel able to make constructive comment at this time.

We would however urge you to ensure that mistakes of the past are not repeated and to ensure that in future each TOC has a duty and responsibility to maintain and improve the integration of their services with other train operators at STJ.

We are looking forward to a regular hourly service (eventually half-hourly) along the Chepstow line. Any alterations to the GW franchise should we hope help and improve and not impede the progress we seek to attain a regular service with connections to the wider rail network. We urgently need better connections with London services.

We have endeavoured to be brief and concise. Please don't hesitate to let us know if you require further information.

Yours sincerely,

Jim Jenkins. Chair. Better Trains for Chepstow