

THE PPM FARCE

Train Journey Times and PPM Targets.

Introduction.

There have been a number of reports and articles in the national press recently comparing train journey times today with those under British Rail and showing that in many cases journey times have actually increased.

As a member of two groups (BT4C & STAG) campaigning for improvements to train services on the borders of England and Wales I think I may have discovered what is actually happening. Dismiss it as another one of those conspiracy theories if you like but I have been closely involved with the many organisations that run our railways for the last few years and I don't think that I am far wrong. If there is a better explanation for the worsening of our services then I will be pleased to know.

This is a complicated story, as is anything to do with government and railways today.

PPM Targets

We start with a government target called the PPM which all Train Operating Companies (TOC's), Network Rail and possibly DfT personnel must achieve. The set targets are most likely enforced by salary or bonus incentives related to "train performance".

PPM stands for "Passenger Performance Measure". It is a simple and direct way of setting a target to check that a train operator is keeping to his schedule. What it does is to monitor arrival time at the final destination on a train's route. Within the contract there is a margin allowed of usually 5 or 10 minutes. Penalties are due if the train arrives later than the agreed margin.

I do not know what the penalties would be for failing to meet these targets but it is apparent that they are more severe than any incentives to pick up and transport passengers.

Meeting PPM targets appears to have become an overriding consideration for TOC's and Network Rail. It is an important factor for the DfT and the TOC's to consider in their contract negotiations. I suspect that the DfT may even trade increased time margins for a cheaper contract!

These PPM measures are intended to make the train operator more diligent in his working and over the past few years there has undoubtedly been an overall improvement in the general level of punctuality.

One way for a Train Operator to ensure that target are met is to build extra time margins into the schedule at the end of the journey. We know all about that in Monmouthshire because we are not far from Cardiff where several journeys terminate.

On the surface all looks well. Look deeper and you will find that the PPM target is being taken too far and instead of the passenger getting a better deal there is evidence that it is leading to taxpayers, passengers and communities being deprived of a service they might otherwise enjoy.

We have two examples here in Monmouthshire, just over the border in Wales.

- **Cardiff-Portsmouth Service. First Great Western.**

In December 2006 First Great Western was awarded a new contract to operate the Cardiff-Portsmouth services. The DfT awarded the contract leaving FGW with discretion whether or not to stop trains at Severn Tunnel Junction as Wessex Trains had done, previously.

The cuts in services at STJ caused serious problems for people commuting from STJ into Bristol and led to public protests. FGW restored some of the busier services used by commuters to Bristol. However, it has still not restored stops outside peak hours which makes it impractical to take a train between Bristol and Chepstow during the day.

Cutting out stops has brought no advantage to Cardiff-Portsmouth passengers because end to end journey times remain the same, and non-stop trains are still scheduled exactly the same as those that stop. The only perceivable advantage is that FGW gain a couple of minutes insurance against infringing the PPM target at Cardiff.

- **Nottingham-Cardiff Service. Arriva CrossCountry .**

A year later in December 2007 a similar situation arose which affected Chepstow. This time the DfT awarded a new franchise contract to Arriva CrossCountry Ltd to operate the Nottingham-Cardiff services.

Representations had been made to the DfT for these trains to serve Chepstow in order to provide a much needed improvement to the towns train service and to restore direct services to Birmingham.

Once more the DfT negotiated the franchise contract leaving the train operator discretion over stopping at Chepstow.

Many different excuses were offered for not providing the service which everyone now accepts would take no more than 2 minutes and would apparently cost nothing. There is already 6 or 7* minutes spare time in the schedules as well as spare time in the turn round at Cardiff.

No definite reason has been offered to explain this refusal but the correspondence we have had on the subject appears to revolve around an obsession to hang on to all the spare time they can muster.

It is not unusual for these CrossCountry trains to be 6 minutes early and have to wait for time.

- **Summing Up.**

Both of these examples show how I believe the present arrangements used by the DfT for letting TOC franchise contracts are preventing the public from getting a better train service. In the above two cases the DfT failed to fully specify the level of service required and allowed the blame to fall upon the TOC whom he had contracted for the job.

One cannot really blame the TOC for sticking to their contract and not providing more than they were asked. The TOC cannot be expected to take the slightest risk to fulfil the wishes of the passengers, taxpayers, the community or its elected representatives.

It is understandable that they do not feel accountable for the wider social or environmental consequences to the community that result from adhering to the terms of their contract.

Jim JENKINS, Chairman, Better Trains for Chepstow Team.

**Note; I should explain that rail timetables necessarily incorporate margins of time and these are all well documented in the Working Timetables. WTT.*

- **Appendix 1. Further Evidence.**

Whilst I have highlighted two cases in the same locality I suspect that communities in other parts of the country have suffered too.

The practice of adding additional minutes into the schedule ahead of the terminal station is commonplace.

The List below shows the difference in times allowed for trains approaching a terminal station compared with the time allowed for the same section on departure.

FGW

Swansea to Neath 11 minutes Neath to Swansea 16 minutes

Paddington to Reading 26 minutes Reading to Paddington 30 minutes

Bath Spa to Bristol T.M. 17 minutes Bristol T.M. to Bath Spa 13 minutes

St. Erth to Penzance 18 minutes Penzance to St. Erth 11 minutes

XC

Newcastle to Durham 12 minutes Durham to Newcastle 25 minutes

Totnes to Plymouth 32 minutes Plymouth to Totnes 25 minutes

Newport to Cardiff 23 minutes Cardiff to Newport 14 minutes

Bristol Parkway to Bristol T.M. 16 minutes Bristol T.M. to Bristol Parkway 10 minutes

VT

Edinburgh to Haymarket 4 minutes Haymarket to Edinburgh 11 minutes

Glasgow Central to Motherwell 15 minutes Motherwell to Glasgow Central 28 minutes

London Euston to Milton Keynes 31 minutes Milton Keynes to London Euston 40 minutes

Runcorn to Liverpool Lime Street 22 minutes. Liverpool Lime Street to Runcorn 16 minutes

ATW

Stockport to Manchester Piccadilly 20 minutes Manchester Piccadilly to Stockport 8 minutes

Johnston to Milford Haven 15 minutes Milford Haven to Johnston 7 minutes

Cardiff to Newport 14 minutes Newport to Cardiff 22 minutes

TPE

Manchester Piccadilly to Heald Green 4 minutes Heald Green to Manchester Piccadilly 8 minutes

Thornaby to Middlesbrough 11 minutes Middlesbrough to Thornaby 5 minutes

Warrington Central to Liverpool Lime Street 28 minutes Liverpool Lime Street to Warrington Central 22 minutes

Scarborough to Seamer 5 minutes Seamer to Scarborough 11 minutes

NXEC

London King's Cross to Peterborough 46 minutes .Peterborough to London King's Cross 53 minutes

This list is not exhaustive I could quote 100s more