

Full speed ahead on West of England line from mid-November as rain helps hurry things along

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Services on the West of England line are set to return to normal, after two months of fewer trains and lower speeds.

Services between Salisbury and Exeter St Davids will return to timetable on Monday, 14 November, after speed restrictions of 40 miles per hour were brought in at locations near Tisbury, Gillingham and Axminster, in response to the clay-based track bed shrinking in the record-breaking hot and dry summer. This left the rails uneven and too bumpy for trains to run at full speed.

Mark Killick, Network Rail's route director for Wessex, said: "We're still suffering the after-effects of a record-breaking summer on our railway, but I'm pleased we'll be able to have trains running at full speed again soon, and I'm so grateful for customers for bearing with us.

"We've invested tens of millions of pounds on the West of England Line in the last two years by strengthening railway cuttings and renewing track and switches and crossings. As well as December's

track renewals, we've got even more planned in 2023 and 2024, demonstrating our commitment to all of the customers who use this line every year."

Engineers have been working hard to restore the track levels, helped significantly by cooler temperatures and a hefty dose of good old British wet weather, which has stopped the track bed shrinking further. As a result, Network Rail have been able to lift the speed restrictions and South Western Railway's (SWR) regular timetable will be restored from Monday 14 November.

Claire Mann, South Western Railway's managing director, said: "I am sorry to all those customers whose journeys were affected as we waited for weather conditions to improve to enable Network Rail to safely remove the speed restrictions. We're looking forward to implementing a full timetable and providing the quality services that our customers deserve."

The cause of the speed restrictions on the line is known as Soil Moisture Deficit and is caused by largely clay-based soils shrinking in hot and dry conditions as trees and other vegetation soaks the water from them. They shrink unevenly, meaning track laid on top loses its level profile.

There are around 6,000 embankments built from clay in the Southern region of Network Rail with a four mile section in Tisbury the longest. With only a single track for trains in both directions, any delays caused by running slowly mean services going the other way must wait, and delays are compounded.

In a separate project a month later, engineers will return to this area of the West of England Line to renew track and improve reliability. As there is only one track in the area, it means SWR services between Salisbury and Exeter St Davids will be diverted via Westbury between Saturday 10 and Sunday 18 December while work takes place. Buses will serve Tisbury, Gillingham (Dorset), Templecombe and Sherborne.

The focus of the nine-day closure between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction is to replace track in the Gillingham area. Making the most of the closure, engineers will also make improvements at Gillingham and Sherborne stations; improve drainage in the Sherborne, Templecombe and Gillingham areas; perform track maintenance in the Gillingham and Sherborne areas; and remove graffiti and clean litter from the line at Salisbury.

Further closures are planned in November/December 2023 and March 2024, with the Axminster, Crewkerne, Templecombe and Gillingham areas all set for improvements.

Image Credit: Network Rail