

South Western Railway sets out its business plan for the next year

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South Western Railway (SWR) has today published its business plan for 2022/23, setting out how the company will meet post-pandemic demands while still delivering improvements for customers.

The plan sets out in detail what the company expects to achieve this year in eight key areas: customer and communities, accessibility, train service operation, environment and sustainability, leadership, management and resourcing, collaboration, people and workforce, and revenue.

Notable commitments set out in SWR's 2022/3 business plan include:

- Rolling out live train occupancy information on the class 444, 450 and 15X fleets
- Boosting Wi-Fi provision across the fleet, introducing superfast connections in some locations
- Delivering a comprehensive package of station improvements, including toilets, waiting rooms, benches and anti-trespass measures
- A package of station accessibility improvements including installing induction loops, accessible toilet and additional wide aisle gatelines
- Developing plans to achieve net zero
- Signing up to the Armed Forces Covenant
- Appointing a fraud investigation team to crack down on digital, electronic or systemic fraud

Under its National Rail Contract, SWR receives a fixed fee from the Department for Transport to deliver an annual business plan against an agreed annual budget. The operator has the opportunity to earn additional fees based on stretching targets that incentivise excellent performance for customers and the taxpayer.

SWR's business plan comes at a challenging time for the rail industry, with customer numbers still below pre-Covid levels and the taxpayer continuing to heavily subsidise the railway to provide vital connections for customers and communities.

Over the past twelve weeks, SWR has seen its overall customer journeys stabilise at 70% of pre-Covid levels. While off peak travel has returned strongly to 100% of pre-Covid trips, commuters have been slower to return making just 53% of the peak journeys they did before the pandemic.

In light of these figures and the ongoing cost challenge facing the rail industry, SWR, Network Rail and the Department for Transport have decided to defer the timetable changes set out in the December 2022 consultation.

Instead, SWR will continue with its current service levels in December, with a limited number of targeted interventions to optimise services where demand has returned quickest. SWR and Network Rail will continue to monitor customer behaviour and act with agility to meet increased demand, subject to funding being agreed with the Department for Transport.

Commenting, SWR's Managing Director, Claire Mann said:

"The Covid pandemic has fundamentally changed the way we work, play and travel, and the long-term future of the railway depends on it adapting to the new normal.

"Our new business plan does just this, striking the right balance between reducing the cost to taxpayers, who have subsidised the railway to the tune of £16 billion since the start of the pandemic, and delivering the improvements our customers want to see.

"Alongside our business plan, we have made the joint decision with the Department for Transport and Network Rail to defer our planned December 2022 timetable changes. While we know this will come as a disappointment to some of our customers, we cannot justify spending taxpayers' money on a further timetable uplift while the number of commuter journeys sit at around 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels."