

Train issues delay Island Line reopening

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South Western Railway (SWR) says it is disappointed to announce that, due to challenges with the delivery of the new fleet of class 484 trains, the reopening of the Island Line will be delayed.

Rolling stock manufacturer Vivarail had been set to deliver all the trains to the Island well before Easter, but complex software issues mean the fully refurbished trains are yet to be delivered. As soon as the trains can be delivered to the Island, SWR can begin the extensive process of operational testing, safety assurance and training required to bring them into service.

As a result, it is with regret that it will have to push back the reopening of the Island Line to later this summer. SWR says that given the complexity of the challenges it faces, primarily with the software on the trains, it is too early to provide a firm date.

SWR and Vivarail are now conducting a full review to build a strong programme in which all parties can have confidence and will provide further updates on that programme in due course.

In the meantime, SWR is committed to keeping customers on the Island moving and has today pledged to double the capacity of the rail replacement bus service from 17 May, to match the capacity of the previously expected rail timetable.

Alex Foulds, Major Projects Director at SWR, said: “We are as disappointed as our customers by this delay. Our infrastructure works are largely on track, but there is a delay to the delivery of the trains and we apologise for the impact that will have on our customers and the communities we serve. We continue to work incredibly hard in partnership with our train supplier Vivarail to reopen a safe, reliable and fully upgraded Island Line as soon as possible.”

Statement by Adrian Shooter, CEO, Vivarail: “This is an announcement I hoped I wouldn’t have to make. I must tell you that, regrettably, there will be a delay in delivery of our trains for the Island Line. Whilst we were able to deliver the first train to the Isle of Wight several months ago, the rest of the fleet are still at Eastleigh for mainline testing before delivery.

“We know that this is the second delay to the introduction of the new service, and acknowledge that South Western Railway is on schedule with its infrastructure upgrades.

“As a company we take full responsibility and offer our apologies to the passengers and staff of the Island Line. It would be easy to hide behind Covid and point the finger at the pandemic, but we had in fact managed to claw back a lot of that lost time and brought the build back on schedule and all trains have now left our factory.

“However, we have unforeseen difficulties with the software. Although in essence it is no different to the version we have used previously it needed some changes to enable the train to run on the 3rd rail. Planning and analysis began over 18 months ago and did not bring any problems to light, but the live tests have uncovered some serious issues. Our priority is to deliver safe and reliable trains, so I have instructed my team to undertake a thorough review rather than try to ‘patch’ the software.

“Although this is a difficult time I would like to acknowledge also the help that we have had from our friends in the Railway Family. Bombardier allowed us to use their test track at Derby, Arriva have let us use their depot at Eastleigh and Network Rail could not have been more helpful. Above all the support from SWR has been invaluable. Their team of engineers and project manager have given us help and guidance throughout and it is testament to their professionalism that we still have a robust testing, delivery and training programme in place.

“We have a team of engineers on the Island already, working with SWR’s depot engineers on unit 484001 to ensure a smooth handover of responsibilities as the rest of the fleet begin to arrive.”

As part of the infrastructure works, which have largely progressed on schedule, SWR has:

- Improved the ride comfort of the line by trimming, rejointing and adjusting the rails on over 6.5 miles of railway, as well as installing new sleepers and rail at various locations between Shanklin and Ryde St Johns.
- Installed new electricity cables, an upgraded power supply and new signalling cables and equipment across the line to provide greater resilience and reliability for years to come.
- Constructed a 'passing loop' at Brading which allows trains to pass each other and make possible a new regular half hourly service.
- Upgraded stations which will see new ticket machines at 3 locations and Wi-Fi at all stations
- Improved accessibility by raising platforms or lowering tracks at 5 stations to reduce the step between the train and the platform.
- Transformed the Ryde St Johns depot to accommodate the new 484 class trains, with a new crane and hi-tech software to maintain the fleet

Photo credit: South Western Railway