

COMMENT : NEW TIMETABLE MAKES IT HARD FOR TR

South West Trains' decision to re-write its timetable appears to have paid off, with nine out of 10 trains now running on time. But is the dramatic improvement genuine or has the timetable been manipulated to the point where it's almost impossible for trains to run late? ANDREW HAINES (right), who masterminded the shake-up, talked to Paul Clifton shortly before quitting SWT to join First Group

South West Trains had a pretty rough reputation when it came to punctuality. It bumped along the bottom of the commuter performance table, vying with Thameslink for last place.

Not any more.

The timetable re-vamp last December has shot SWT to near the top of the table, with more than 90 per cent of trains arriving on time. Unfortunately for the train operator, not everyone is happy, particularly as some journeys are longer than they were in the days of steam.

Did Andrew Haines, in one of his last major policy decisions before leaving South West Trains last month, opt to make the schedules so lengthy that almost any train can arrive on time?

'Absolutely not,' he says. 'If you look at the smaller stations, some of them have longer journeys. But that's because their trains are making more stops. If you look at the big population centres – Basingstoke, Guildford, and Woking – they have all got the same journey times as before or a little better.'

SWT decided to rip up the old timetable, which, give or take some minor tinkering, had been in existence for nearly 40 years. Haines says it had reached the point where it was breaking down after even the slightest incident.

'We took it back to first principles. We looked at sectional running times, the time it takes each type of rolling stock to get from one point to another, plus station dwell times and junction margins, adding in adequate turnaround time and platform re-occupation at Waterloo. We planned around Virgin's service patterns.

'It worked because we followed the obvious rules. It's as simple as that. At Vauxhall the old timetable allowed 20-second dwell times. We could barely open the doors that quickly, and with more commuters changing for the Jubilee Line, it was becoming impossible.'

Nevertheless, most journeys on the West of England line from Exeter and Salisbury are slower than they were before. Some trains are allowed seven minutes to get from Clapham Junction to Waterloo, while others have a very generous 14 minutes. SWT's critics on the southern Rail Passengers Committee suggest that with such flexibility, Haines could hardly fail to improve on his performance statistics.

'The point is that this timetable is very robust,' says Haines. 'We can recover quickly from minor incidents. We couldn't do that before. Much simpler point to point operations like Chiltern



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and c2c have performance levels similar to ours. But we're now doing it every day with the biggest rail franchise in the country.'

Talk to passengers waiting for the 07:36 from Basingstoke, and you'll hear some very positive comments. Most think the service has improved and one even went as far as saying: 'My train leaves 10 minutes later. But it arrives on time more often than it doesn't. After 20 years of being late for work, that's surprising.'

For someone who has spent the past 10 years filming television 'vox pops' asking passengers about their journey to work by South West Trains, this is an astonishing change. Filming commuters has always been a pretty safe bet for recording grumblers and moaners.

But not now, it would seem, although there's always the exception, as this tale of woe from one unhappy passenger proves. 'The other day I was standing here and the doors of the new train wouldn't open properly. Everyone waited. And the train departed spot on time. But without the passengers. Of course the statistics would have looked perfect, but one wonders whether the train company wants a happy spreadsheet more than it wants happy customers.'

Overall, Haines believes the timetable change has proved a success. 'What other train operators can learn from our

AINS TO BE LATE



Poor performers: Desiros are less reliable than the slam-door trains they replaced.

experience is that it's not worth tinkering with the timetable,' he says. 'You've got to go for a root and branch re-write. For nine months we had a project team working on the launch. We had project managers focusing on different areas. And we engaged everyone. We went out to signal boxes and listened to their views. We got them on our side. We even abandoned a management conference at one point, and sent everyone out to spread the timetable message instead.'

SWT looked back to the last big timetable change in 1967, in order to learn valuable lessons. Thirty-eight years ago, although the new timetable was basically sound, its introduction was a disaster. The *Evening Standard* ran stories on the resulting chaos every day for a week. Staff hadn't been properly briefed about the changes, passengers hadn't a clue what was happening, and trains were queuing up outside Waterloo as signallers struggled to come to terms with complex new schedules.

Things have been much different this time. Says Haines: 'We got MORI to carry out a survey a week before the change. They found 97 per cent awareness among passengers of the new train times. It was better than we could have hoped for.'

By early March, 126 of SWT's 155 new Desiro trains were in service. The company has told Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI) that the last mainline slam door trains will be gone by mid-May, though in practice it's likely to be soon after Easter.

The new trains are built to run on 2,000 amps. SWT had hoped for 1,800. But after the southern power supply upgrade, it has been stuck with 1,500 amps, losing some of the Desiro's ability to rocket away from stations and make up for longer dwell times. But the timetable has been designed around that.

'If we'd had 1,800 amps the timetable would have looked

different,' Haines explains. 'And very few services would have had longer journey times than before.'

Departure times have been standardised across the day. Each route has been allocated specific train crews and rolling stock, and conflicting train movements at important junctions such as Woking have been reduced.

The result is a Public Performance Measure of 90.1 per cent, which is a 25 per cent improvement on the same period last year. Though the measurement methods have changed, SWT's performance is broadly better now than it was in the weeks immediately before the Hatfield crash.

And it's been done using new rolling stock with indifferent reliability. The number of miles per casualty for the Desiros is still well below the level promised by Siemens, which is costing the constructor some financial pain in penalty payments. And the performance is in stark contrast to the retiring Mark One stock which, with more than 100,000 miles between failures, is Britain's most reliable by a huge margin.

End-to-end journey times on around half of SWT's services are longer than they were before. But people boarding at the most densely-populated towns along the route are generally getting a similar journey time to last year. Some are faster.

'Overall the majority of passengers have an improved service,' says Haines. 'The emphasis now is on bettering those figures. Passengers tell us that a reliable timetable is more important than one which takes a minute or two off an hour's journey.'

Paul Clifton is transport correspondent for BBC South and CILT Transport Journalist of the Year.



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