

STANDING ROOM ONLY

More details of how South West Trains will square the circle of increasing capacity, reducing overcrowding and paying huge premiums, are starting to emerge. Paul Clifton reports

Twenty per cent more rush-hour seats.' That was the boast in Stagecoach's bold press announcement that it had won another 10 years in charge of South West Trains. Actually, the company later rather sheepishly admitted, that wasn't quite right. What it meant to say was that there would be '20 per cent more rush hour capacity'.

Spot the difference?

In fact SWT is taking thousands of seats out of trains, to create more standing room. The process was well under way before the franchise deal was signed, as part of the refurbishment of the Class 455 inner suburban fleet. About half of the trains have been altered so far. And 28 of the almost-new Desiros are likely to be converted in a similar manner, losing at least one in five seats by replacing three-by-two rows of seats with two-by-two to make more room for people to stand.

In all, some 500 carriages will be modified. The trains cover stations such as Chessington, Epsom, Guildford, Kingston, Wimbledon and Woking.

SWT is officially the most overcrowded train operator and the economics of the new franchise are predicated on growing passenger numbers by 50 per cent in a decade. The Department for Transport considers a train to be overcrowded when more than 35 per cent of passengers are standing. That's a guide figure; it varies slightly between different types of rolling stock and applies to journeys of less than 20 minutes.

But there's another way of measuring the problem, says the DfT. If each passenger occupies 0.54 square metres of floor space, the train is not classed as overcrowded. So: take out some seats, make more people stand, and a train with an unchanged number of passengers is no longer officially overcrowded.

SWT says it will allow more people to stand in comfort. Maybe that's a contradiction in terms, but the company regards this as the only viable short-term solution to the capacity issues on the lines into Waterloo. It previously argued that the answer was to stretch suburban platforms to handle longer trains. Before it was abolished, the Strategic Rail Authority



www.railimages.co.uk

thought so too. But when the Government announced the new franchise last month, it made no mention of longer platforms. It agreed longer trains on the Windsor line, but that's all.

On the long-distance route from Waterloo to Southampton, Bournemouth and Weymouth, SWT confirms it plans to remove the ageing Class 442 Wessex Electric trains. In their place would come nearly-new Class 444 Desiros, transferred from the Portsmouth line, where commuters would have to put up with spending an hour and a half on suburban Class 350s instead. The idea is unlikely to go down well with the wealthy season-ticket holders of Petersfield and Haslemere.

The 444s, although more roomy than local trains, can't really be called inter-city stock. The big surprise is that SWT is not dumping the Birmingham-built Class 458 suburban trains it has hated for so long. Probably the ugliest modern trains in the country, these Junipers will be switched to the Windsor lines to ease overcrowding.

'SWT is officially the most overcrowded train operator – but plans to grow passenger numbers by 50 per cent'

Most 458s have been sitting idle around Wimbledon and Clapham for months. These are the trains that hit the headlines last spring because their onboard information screens fell 3mm short of Disability Discrimination Act standards. The company was told to fit bigger screens or withdraw the trains from service – which it had virtually done anyway. SWT has since found a cost-effective solution to make the lettering appear larger.

It had been widely expected that SWT would hand the keys back to Porterbrook next February. But SWT says no agreement with the rolling stock

leasing companies has yet been concluded, either to keep the 458s or to hand back the Wessex Electrics.

'It is something we are discussing,' said a spokeswoman. 'It's a plan but it is at an early stage of negotiation.'

Several SWT staff in Bournemouth contacted *Rail Professional* when rumours started to circulate. They fear the departure of the older trains would bring the closure of the Bournemouth maintenance depot, affecting up to 30 jobs. SWT insists there are no such plans, and the depot would still be required to service the two 'heritage' slam-door trains used on the Lymington branch. But the Class 444s are maintained at Northam in Southampton, so there would be no need to keep more than a small presence in Bournemouth. The RMT union hopes to have talks with SWT about the proposals within a few weeks.

What do these changes add up to? South West Trains expects its substantial profits to reduce by two thirds as this year's £44m subsidy gets converted into premium payments from 2009. With half its passengers holding season tickets, SWT's business growth is driven by central London employment and the increasing discrepancy between high London house prices and those on the margins of the home counties. It is reliant on a job market in which middle-income people are forced to live as far from their place of work as they can stand. Stagecoach has gambled that this trend will continue.

Increasingly popular services may become strangled by overcrowding for longer distances if it achieves its goal of 50 per cent passenger growth allied to 20 per cent more peak capacity. Fares and very limited investment will be driven by the need to transform SWT's finances. In its first 10 years the company received £500m in subsidy. In its next 10 years it will pay back £1.19bn – an astonishing turnaround.