

YOUR RAILWAY....



SALISBURY TO EXETER RAIL USERS GROUP (SERUG)

Newsletter No: 26 – mid June 2026

Supporting the stations of:

Tisbury, Gillingham, Templecombe, Sherborne, Yeovil Junction, Crewkerne, Axminster, Honiton, Feniton, Whimple, Cranbrook, Pinhoe, Exeter Central.

NOTES FROM THE CHAIR – Bruce Duncan

DEADFUL RECENT PERFORMANCE - WORSE AFTER NATIONALISATION

The recent performance on this line has been very poor, and Nick has written in detail about this below.

Despite politicians' promises for a better railway, there is no doubt that performance is deteriorating. As we have said many times before, with 75% single track between Salisbury and Exeter, there is no room for making up time once trains have started running late. We need investment.



With Soil Moisture Deficit issues likely to demand a reduced timetable. It is essential that the (often cancelled) GWR evening service from Exeter to Axminster runs.

Photo: Dave Tozer

The excuses are varied, so there is no single issue to remedy. We need money to re-double track at a minimum of two locations, provide new signaling and axle counters (replacing the existing track circuits), remove lineside vegetation and reduce incidents of Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD). Strategically **the** critical matter is for a decision to be made for the replacement of rolling stock. Those trains need to have power other than diesel, and we need to know what that is – only then can we (ie SWR) plan for the future - **Government must make a decision.**

Our mailbox has been inundated with examples of disrupted journeys and lack of accurate or timely information from SWR. We have recommended that they create a dedicated West of England Line web page on their website advising passengers of likely disruption

and, more importantly, advice on **current** disruption – especially those services which will be short formed (see below) where that information will normally be available at least a day or so in advance.

Our "Vision" for the improvements to the line was published in our last Newsletter (No.25 - February 2026) – it highlights all that needs to be done and is available in the Publications page on our website

Also on our website is a letter published in the June edition of Modern Railways, summarising the need for action. That can be viewed on the News page of our website: www.serug.co.uk

ROLLING STOCK POSITION AND FAILURES – SHORT FORMATIONS

So, in the meantime we struggle with 35 year-old diesel trains. Failures will occur due to their old age – the latest issue relates frequent to oil leaks and therefore failed power units. But we also hear stories of windows damaged by the closeness of foliage, and continued issues with wheel flats caused by bad (slippery) track conditions. Serviceable rolling stock shortages are now resulting in many examples of 2 or 3 car trains all the way from Waterloo to Exeter, resulting in major overcrowding. For example, on 10th June, the 11.20, 12.20, 13.20 and 14.20 were all formed of 3 cars throughout from Waterloo to Exeter.

The team at Salisbury depot do a tremendous job maintaining the fleet of these 158 and 159's, and they are now entering a major "C6" overhaul, to ensure they last for another 8/10 years - when they will be 45 years old! This will not be an easy ride. The first set, 159103 entered the works last December... and is only now returning to service (in fairness to SWR, the timescale is always longer for the first unit overhaul). The plan is also to improve the passenger experience with better information systems and USB plugs – but that work will take place separately to the C6 work, resulting in 2 units being out of action at any one time, rather than one. The process will not be completed until 2030.



Unfortunately, 3 car formations are increasingly common. A London bound service leaves Axminster
Photo: Paul Blowfield

SOIL MOISTURE DEFICIT (SMD)

It's very likely that we will see timetable reductions again, assuming hot weather as the summer progresses.

The track is in a similar condition to the same period last year. We have had more rainfall this spring than last year (despite the short heatwave in late May) but further rain is needed. Network Rail have removed "thirsty" trees along some 5km of track, but they have no current powers to remove vegetation not on railway land.

The timetabling team are preparing various options, should SMD restrictions be necessary. Whilst overall journey times will again be extended, it is hoped these will be less than last year. Staffing levels at both Salisbury and Yeovil Junction are improved, which will also help crew scheduling. One thing is (almost) certain.... services west of Yeovil will be reduced to 2 hourly again if an SMD timetable is implemented.

POLITICS

As an organisation we are non-political, but we have to acknowledge that currently, 'there is no money' and that could well be a reason for doing nothing. However, failing to finance the railways properly means both taxpayers and passengers lose out. Two examples...

1. If a decision to go ahead with the replacement of the current trains had been made five years ago, the estimated £14.5 million currently being spent on refurbishing the existing rolling stock would have been saved.
2. The SMD issues last year, which resulted in extended journey times and reduced service frequencies, cost SWR £3.5m in lost revenue. Climate change is with us, and the issues will no doubt occur again if we have a dry summer. Investment in reducing lineside vegetation would reduce the likelihood of SMD and allow a full service to operate - maintaining passenger revenue.

... But our government doesn't see it that way.

Failure to upgrade infrastructure means more money is spent on maintenance of ageing equipment (and an increased likelihood of failure of that equipment). Add in the effects of inflation, and the law of diminishing returns applies!

Bruce Duncan

MEMBERS MEETING

TUESDAY 7TH JULY 2026 16.30 TO 19.00 MEMBERS DAY - YEOVIL RAILWAY CENTRE

We have our annual Member's Day as above, and like last year we have differing topics to discuss - a good way of members meeting and chatting. Our key conversations will include:

1. SWR/NR and the new team plus our/stakeholder policy for lobbying.
2. GBR and national policy for new rolling stock.
3. West of England line (London, Salisbury and Exeter Railway) development and Vision.

Please let us know (email: contact@serug.co.uk) if you would like to attend, Members free, non-members £8 taken as a subscription to year end. Tea/drinks, light bites, etc, will be available.

PERFORMANCE – Nick Hurrell

Timekeeping

We are all aware that the current infrastructure (long, single track sections) severely restricts on-time performance – and that has certainly proved true in recent weeks. May 2026 produced the worst results for over a year with just 65% of trains running on time (ie arrival within 3 minutes of schedule) at Yeovil Junction. The results for other stations vary only slightly.

28 May was the low point – with Crewkerne a good example. Of the 36 trains scheduled to call, **just one was on time**. Four trains were cancelled completely. Of those that ran, the average lateness was 14 minutes per service. Other stations fared little better.

West of England Line Timekeeping: 18- 31 May (Figures based on arrivals at Yeovil Junction)

Date	% of services on time (to 3 minutes)	Date	% of services on time (to 3 minutes)
18 May	69	25 May	54
19 May	57	26 May	48
20 May	66	27 May	44
21 May	59	28 May	14
22 May	54	29 May	50
23 May	29	30 May	50
24 May	63	31 May	82 (services started at Basingstoke)
AVERAGE for period 18-31 May: 52.6% TARGET: 89%			

Short-formed Trains

These are now a regular occurrence. The target is for all “daytime” services (ie excepting early mornings and evenings) to and from Exeter to run with 6 cars. Following SERUG lobbying over the past two years, that objective has been regularly achieved; but more recently, a number of 3 car (or occasionally 2 car) formations have appeared - causing serious overcrowding. The prime causes of these short formations are highlighted in the Rolling Stock Position and Failures paragraphs above.

A snapshot of 10 June shows that of the 36 services due to run on the Yeovil-Exeter section, just 10 were formed of 6 coaches, so over 70% were short-formed – see table on page 4.

Train Formations – Crewkerne Wednesday 10 June 2026

Dep time	No of Cars	Dep time	No of Cars	Dep time	No of Cars	Dep time	No of Cars	Dep time	No of Cars	Dep time	No of Cars
06.06	3	9.19	3	12.49	6	16.19	3	19.51	3	23.21	6
06.25	3	9.51	3	13.19	6	16.49	3	20.19	3		
06.44	3	10.19	3	13.49	3	17.20	3	20.51	6		
07.16	3	10.51	6	14.19	3	17.49	6	21.19	6		
07.36	6	11.19	3	14.49	3	18.21	3	21.52	3		
08.17	3	11.49	3	15.19	6	18.50	6	22.21	3		
08.49	3	12.19	3	15.49	3	19.21	3	22.50	n/a		

Source: Real Time Trains (note, formation not available for 22.50 Departure)

And to finish....

It may look like an atmospheric photo from the 1950's or early 60's....

Merchant Navy Class 35028 "Clan Line" sits at Exeter Central on 23rd May 2026, with the Down "Atlantic Coast Express" from Waterloo, having run down the West of England line.

The service was operated by the Railway Touring Company.

Photo: Paul Blowfield



SERUG's aim is to lobby the Government, SWR/Network Rail, Train Operators and others to improve the passenger experience on this line. If you'd like to help, Bruce Duncan (Chair) or Nick Hurrell (Secretary) would be pleased to hear from you.

Email: contact@serug.co.uk

Membership is £8 per year – payable in March annually and includes regular updates, and admission to members only events.

Join our mailing list for free: Simply email us at the above address and join our mailing list to receive regular updates and Newsletters.

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