

YOUR RAILWAY....



SALISBURY TO EXETER RAIL USERS GROUP (SERUG)

Newsletter No: 27 – mid August 2026

SMD Special

Supporting the stations of:

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

A very brief Newsletter – to provide some further insight on the Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD) issues. The (SMD) temporary timetable starts on 10th August 2026 (Monday) and will run until advised. It can be found on <https://www.southwesternrailway.com/plan-my-journey/timetables>.

The main difference to last year's timetable which ultimately ran from July to end November is that due to SWR's team working with Southampton University (Prof William Plowrie) and better track/tamping work, trains can run at 50 mph rather than 40 mph last year. That allows journey time improvements of around 30 minutes to the London/Exeter services. There is an excellent article by Paul Clifton in RAIL magazine this week (Issue 1067 5-19 Aug 26) – worth a read.

We are still pushing for an Exeter Central to Axminster shuttle, but we're told no trains are available – we've been advised that these revised timetables actually require more rolling stock (and crews) than the normal services.

The other serious issue is the lack of rolling stock. Far too many trains are out of service because of defects, some requiring new engines. This is serious because these are 35 years old, and spare new engines are not held in large enough numbers to offer a quick turnaround. In addition, wheel / bogie issues can also be added to the list of defects. There are 29 x 159's (3 car units) and 9 x 158 (2 car units), including one on loan to another operator. SWR need at least 24 of the 159's to provide the full service. Added to that, the C6 improvements for all 159's (to keep them running for another 8./10 years) has hit snags - the first unit started its refresh in December 2025 and may get back into service soon...7+ months later. The following units should have a faster turnaround, but we are still talking "years" before full completion. It's therefore not surprising that so many trains have been formed of 3 cars between Exeter and Waterloo and vice versa. More unplanned work for the SWR Depot at Salisbury who need a thank you!

Poor performance, short trains and now SMD, plus non-effective air conditioning and "dodgy" train passenger information systems, all complete a very disturbing picture.

SWR have been trying to find other 158's in the UK and hope to have their other 158 back from EMR (East Midlands Railway) soon - see below.

Oliver Rogers at SWR has been extremely helpful in responding to our many questions raised over the past few days. Below is a summary of the further actions they are taking:

- The information update to not display Woking / Basingstoke calls on short-formed services is now live.
- Further to the above, we will call the Waterloo to Weymouth service additionally at Basingstoke in and around West of England short forms, to try and take pressure off those services
- More bottled water to trains from tomorrow. Every WoE train should have crates of water, while the hot weather continues
- Exec and Senior Managers will be at stations Salisbury – Exeter from Monday next week, all week. To support stations and on-train teams - but also to do some of the explaining to customers on why these temporary changes are necessary.
- We will raise the point within SWR about posters & lack of - or no – Automated Passenger Information or guard announcements.
- We are hoping to be able to confirm the arrival of the additional 158 from EMR by the end of next week, timescales for entering service look like Autumn, but this requires the final paperwork to be completed.
- We will have a date for the first C6 unit to re-enter traffic very shortly, final tests are now being completed.

None of these fix the problems we are facing immediately but they will all help.

Note above - about the senior managers – if you see them, do chat - they are all very approachable!

We will continue to update you, where relevant. The SERUG management team will meet next week to work out a wider Campaign to continue to work to get a better railway. We will want all your help with that!

Best wishes for now and the next Newsletter should be out in mid-October 2026 – enjoy the rest of the summer!

Bruce Duncan, Chair.



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Stations now have SMD posters, but no timetables (yet)

*Meanwhile...
overcrowding and short formations continue....*



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.

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