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House of Commons
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Dear Colleague,

I am writing to you today to update you on work on Rail in the South West and the progress we are making on our ambitions for your constituents. I appreciate all the work that colleagues are continuing to do on prioritising transport schemes and the DfT will set out our strategy, following the PRTF report, by the end of February.

Dawlish remains our number one national priority and ensuring we find a permanent solution for this vital connection, is never out of mind. As you will recall, shortly after the publication of the PRTF report and my appointment as Secretary of State, the Department moved quickly to the next stage of the work commissioning Network Rail to look at the engineering options. Additionally, I visited the work last year to see for myself this vital rail corridor.

The Department has continued to take forward work to develop solutions for the line through Dawlish and Teignmouth. The £15m funding that has been provided to Network Rail for this purpose is focused on the three most urgent elements identified within their resilience study, in order of magnitude.

This is a complex project which has required extensive work with the Environment Agency, but the work is ongoing and I have asked Network Rail to deliver a planned solution as quickly as practical. My aim is to begin the full work quickly after the completion of this development phase.

This region is vital to the whole UK which is why we are providing funding to support a significant increase in track upgrades activity across the network, including in the South West, and increasing maintenance spending to deliver a more reliable railway. This is part of the recently announced an expected rail investment of around £47.9bn for Network Rail in England and Wales over the period from 2019 to 2024.

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The current work includes re-signalling of the main line from Totnes to Penzance via Plymouth, allowing a more frequent two trains per hour local/regional service, to be operated by High Speed Trains with four modernised coaches.

Beginning this summer there will be 29 new Intercity Express bi-mode trains running on the London to Penzance Great Western Route. These will replace 40-year-old stock and will provide more than 1,000 extra peak time seats compared to today.

A new timetable significantly improves typical journey times from London to Plymouth by reducing the differences between the current fastest journey time and the longer journey times experienced on many journeys.

In addition, the Department is contributing £9 million to a Cornish package securing the modernisation of the London to Cornwall Sleepers and moving the Sleeper maintenance from London to a new facility at Long Rock Depot, near Penzance. This depot was handed over to GWR in December 2017 and the first day and sleeper carriages are already in service, with remaining vehicles to be introduced early in 2018.

We have also been at work on an extensive programme of resilience across the network, in the wake of the floods in 2014.

At Cowley Bridge, just north of Exeter, Network Rail has already raised all of the lineside railway signal cabinets at the site, putting them above the level of the November 2016 flood. Additionally work to widen and improve the existing flood culvert was undertaken during 2017 and an additional culvert will be installed this summer to significantly improve the protection of the railway.

A further option of removal of three weirs has been examined by Network Rail as a potential last stage of its work to help protect the railway from flooding. Delivery of this is subject to a detailed assessment of the impact of such a scheme of the wider area to be carried out by Network Rail, consent from the Environment Agency and funding availability.

Flood resilience work has also been completed at Whiteball and is being progressed at Axe and Broom on the route from Exeter to Waterloo.

You raised the question of the Speed to the West proposals in our recent conversation. Last year I tasked Network Rail with providing me with an initial assessment of the potential for journey time improvements through partial electrification and improvements in track alignment. Of course the work currently under way to electrify and improve the line between London and Bristol and London to Newbury will also mean shorter journey times.

I am currently reviewing the costs and business case for the first part of the proposals, and would assure you that we will, if we decide that this is the right approach, be able to integrate this with planned renewals of the track between Totnes and Plymouth.

In addition we have instructed GWR to prepare plans to introduce regular train services to Okehampton, with the objective of securing a credible and costed plan for delivering an all-week, all-year train service between Exeter and Okehampton as soon as reasonably practicable.

I will continue to update you on the progress as we continue to invest in this vital part of our rail infrastructure.

Will best wishes
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Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT