



The InterCity West Coast rail franchise
A summary of Passenger Focus research
and recommendations to Government

September 2011

Introduction

The InterCity West Coast franchise – currently operated by Virgin Trains – is to be refranchised, with the new operation beginning in December 2012.

The timescale for the franchise competition has been moved back to take account of important changes to the context in which the future franchise will be awarded and operated. The particular drivers for this include:

- publication of a new Government statement of Franchising Policy¹
- findings of the McNulty Rail Value for Money Study²
- further consultation on a draft Invitation to Tender seeking views on the train service to be procured³.

Passenger Focus has been actively engaged in developments on the InterCity West Coast franchise and continues to work to influence the outcome for passenger benefit. In early 2011, following research with passengers we produced a detailed submission to Government making recommendations on priorities for the new franchise. A response to the recent consultation on the train service was submitted in August.

This document now brings together the three strands of our work on the InterCity West Coast franchise and includes:

Part 1: A synopsis of the initial Passenger Focus recommendations to Government

Part 2: A summary of the research conducted with 4503 passengers using West Coast train services

Part 3: The Passenger Focus response to the consultation on the draft Invitation to Tender

The full Passenger Focus submission on the InterCity West Coast franchise and the detailed findings from the route-based research can be found at: www.passengerfocus.org.uk

¹ Response to the consultation on Reforming Rail Franchising, DfT, 19/1/11

² Realising the potential of GB rail, Report of the Rail Value for Money Study, DfT, 19 May 2011

³ InterCity west coast consultation, DfT, 21 April 2011

Part 1 - what passengers want from the InterCity West Coast rail franchise - a summary of the main recommendations from Passenger Focus to Government

The InterCity West Coast franchise – currently operated by Virgin Trains - is to be refranchised, with the new operation beginning in December 2012. This report summarises Passenger Focus's advice to Government about what passengers want from the new franchise.

The advice is based on research with over 4000 passengers, in January-February 2011, throughout the West Coast franchise operating area on what they wanted from the new franchise. This was combined with scores for Virgin West Coast services from the National Passenger Survey (NPS) which tracks levels of passenger satisfaction.

The Passenger Focus submission identified five main priorities for improvement:

1. value for money
2. punctuality and reliability
3. capacity
4. journey time
5. train presentation (upkeep and cleanliness of the train).

Value for money

Passengers want flexibility at an affordable price. Fares for those passengers who can buy well in advance and stick to their plans can be good value for money; however the options for those travelling at short notice, or requiring even a small degree of flexibility are in some cases extremely expensive. The recommendations include:

- Passengers who miss the train on which their ticket is valid should be permitted to pay the difference between what they have paid and the cost of any new ticket required
- The Off-Peak Single should be priced at 50% of the Off-Peak return instead of being just £1 less at present. This gives passengers the opportunity to mix their use of train-specific Advance Single tickets and more flexible options – for instance, travelling out on a specific train but needing flexibility about the return time.

Passengers also need a transparent ticketing structure:

- Restrictions should be printed on/along with passengers' tickets to remove any confusion over validity
- Ticket vending machines must clearly display outward and return ticket restrictions on the screen prior to a passenger committing to purchase.

Punctuality

The new franchise must improve performance on all routes:

- Challenging but achievable targets should be set for increasing the number of trains arriving 'on time' (i.e. within the existing 10 minute threshold) and right-time (i.e. the scheduled arrival time)
- Reductions are required in the number of trains reaching their destination more than 20 minutes late

- Reporting requirements should be set for the performance of trains arriving at key intermediate stations
- Performance data should be reported on a disaggregated level – at least on a service group basis but ideally in a form capable of allowing passengers to track the performance of a specific train.

Getting a seat

Passengers rated 'getting a seat' as their third top priority for improvement. By the time the new franchise begins additional carriages will have been added to the train fleet but it is important that the franchisee develops proposals to further increase capacity to meet expected increases in demand during the years to 2026.

There must also be much greater transparency when it comes to crowding. The franchise should require the operator to:

- Monitor loading data across all routes
- Publish crowding information by route.

Journey time

Despite current relatively high levels of passenger satisfaction, journey time and frequency remain of great importance to passengers. This was clearly demonstrated through the depth of interest shown when the Very High Frequency (VHF) timetable was introduced by Virgin Trains. While many passengers benefited from considerable improvements in journey times some lost out: in particular passengers travelling from Milton Keynes, Penrith and Motherwell.

It is important that bidders for the new franchise take into account the depth of passenger interest when developing timetable proposals. In the longer-term the advent of the proposed High Speed 2 (HS2) line will provide opportunities to look at the issue of speed versus regional connectivity but in the meantime bidders must engage fully with stakeholders and demonstrate that they have made efforts to balance the differing needs of passengers.

Train presentation: cleanliness and upkeep

The best judge of service quality is the passenger. We believe that passenger satisfaction targets for stations, trains and customer service should be set within the franchise. The cleanliness and upkeep of the train should be a key part of the on-train suite of targets.

Consideration should also be given to applying targets on a route basis rather than for the franchise as whole - an overall average can easily mask poor performance on specific routes.

Part 2 - what passengers want from the InterCity West Coast rail franchise - a summary of passenger research conducted by Passenger Focus

Introduction

In January 2011, Passenger Focus spoke to 4503 passengers making rail journeys across six routes on InterCity West Coast train services. This research formed part of the evidence for Passenger Focus's submission to the Department for Transport, which sets out passengers' priorities for the new InterCity West Coast rail franchise. This report provides a brief summary of the research itself.

Journey purpose and satisfaction ratings

Chart one, below, shows the most common journey type on the InterCity West Coast Main Line was leisure. Over half of all passengers (53%) were undertaking their first journey when surveyed on the route; 53% of these first journey passengers were travelling for leisure.

Chart one - how passengers currently use these routes

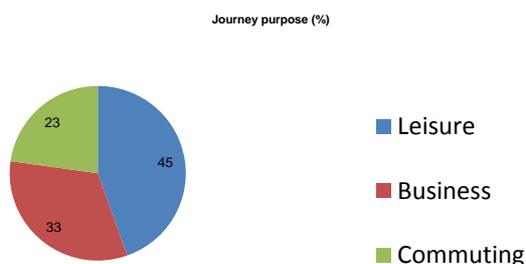
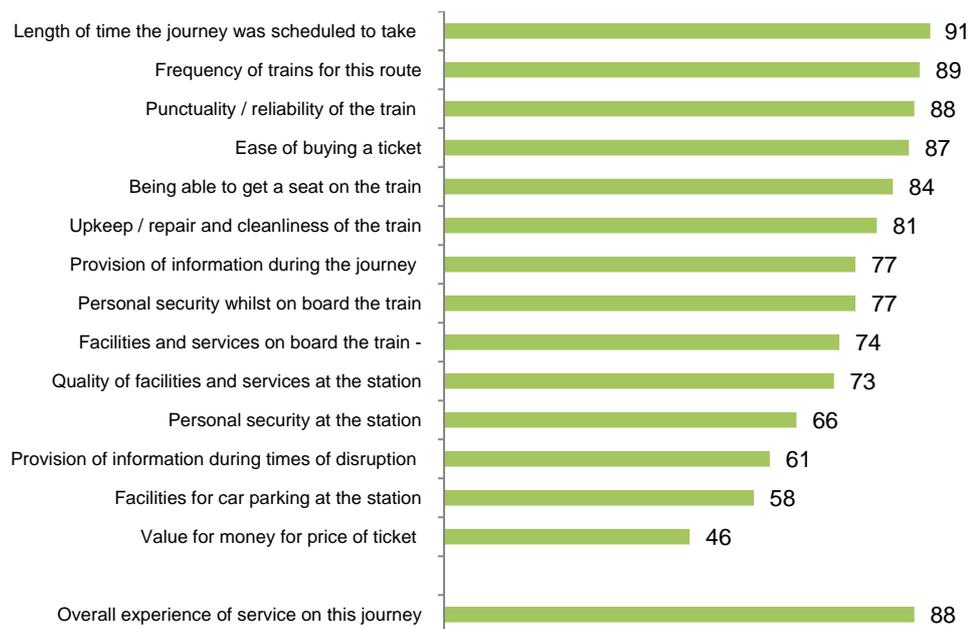


Chart two, below, shows passengers were most happy with the length of time the journey was scheduled to take, the frequency of trains for this route, and punctuality/reliability of the train. They were least happy with value for money (in fact a third of passengers-33% rated value for money as fairly/very poor).

Chart two - ratings for various aspects of the journey (% very/fairly good)



Passenger priorities for improvement

The top priority for improvement according to passengers travelling on the InterCity West Coast routes was value for money, which also had the lowest proportion of passengers rating it positively. Although punctuality/reliability of the train and being able to get a seat have relatively positive ratings from passengers, they still are high priorities for improvement (as can be seen in the indices showing their relative importance to value for money).

Table one - improvements passengers would most like to see (all passengers - 1757)

Priorities for improvement	Rank	Indices
Value for money for price of ticket	1	100
Punctuality/reliability of the train	2	83
Being able to get a seat on the train	3	76

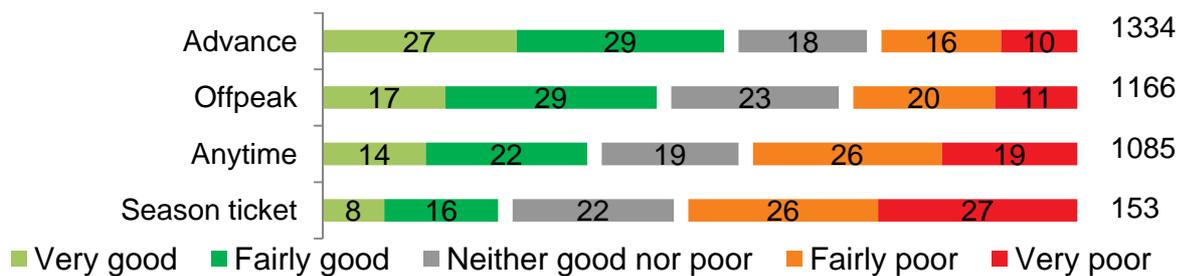
Value for money

Value for money is the highest passenger priority for improvement; this is also reflected at a national level within Passenger Focus research⁴ – Further analysis shows that value for money ratings varied by the type of ticket the passenger bought. Passengers who bought an Advance Purchase ticket were more likely to be satisfied with the value for money aspect of their ticket than those who bought an off peak or Anytime ticket.

⁴ Passengers’ Priorities for Improvements in Rail Services, 2010

Chart three - passenger ratings of value for money for price of ticket (%)

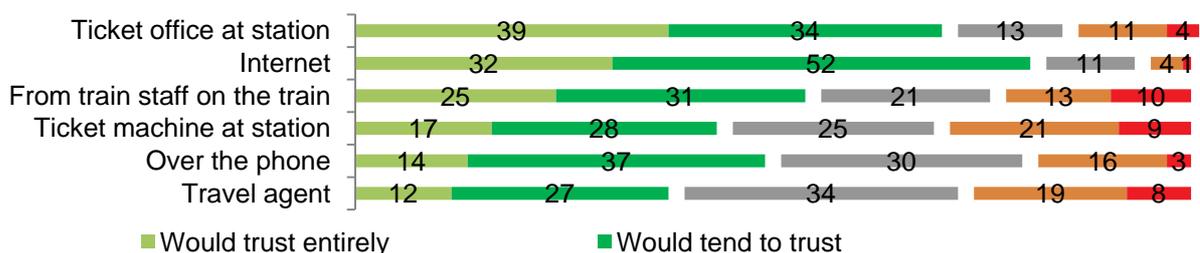
Respondents



Passengers on these routes predominantly bought their tickets using the internet (49%) or at the station from a ticket window/office (24%) while only 7% of passengers bought their ticket from a ticket vending machine.

Chart four, below, shows passengers feel some purchase methods are more likely to provide better value for money than others. Trust ratings for the ticket office and internet are relatively high compared to ticket machines where nearly a third of passengers (30%) said that they did not trust ticket machines to provide them with value for money.

Chart four - level of trust in extent to which purchase methods provide value for money (%)



These findings broadly reflect previous Passenger Focus research on Ticket Vending Machines⁵, which showed that passengers lack confidence when using a ticket machine, as it is often unable to provide the precise information or reassurance needed by the passenger.

Punctuality/reliability

The majority (88%) of passengers said that train punctuality was very/fairly good along these routes. However, the scores did vary between the six routes with London to Liverpool scoring the highest satisfaction score (96% very/fairly good) and London to Wolverhampton scoring the lowest (80% very/fairly good). Commuters in general gave lower ratings (79% very/fairly good) compared to business and leisure users (90% and 91% respectively).

⁵ Passenger Focus 'Ticket Vending Machine Usability Qualitative Research' July 2010

Other Passenger Focus research, undertaken with the Office of Rail Regulation, indicates that passengers would like more data available about how punctuality relates to the specific journeys they make.

Seating

Being able to get a seat on the train is the third highest priority for passengers travelling on all InterCity West Coast routes. Passengers found it easiest to get a seat on the train on weekdays between Monday and Thursday (73% found it very/fairly easy, compared to 15% who found it difficult), and were least able to get a seat on Fridays (58% rating it very/fairly easy compared to 28% who found it difficult).

Passengers travelling on the London to Glasgow route between Monday and Thursday were most likely to get a seat (80% found it easy, and 9% difficult). While those travelling between Birmingham and Edinburgh/Glasgow on Fridays were least likely to be able to get a seat (52% found it easy and 32% difficult).

Other areas of Passenger experience on the InterCity West Coast

Fares and ticketing

We presented passengers with a number of statements relating to rail tickets and fares. The majority of passengers (86%) would travel more on trains if fares were cheaper and would not mind booking early in order to get cheaper fares (82%). However, flexibility was still important to three out of four passengers (78%) and over a quarter (27%) did not understand the range of tickets and fares available.

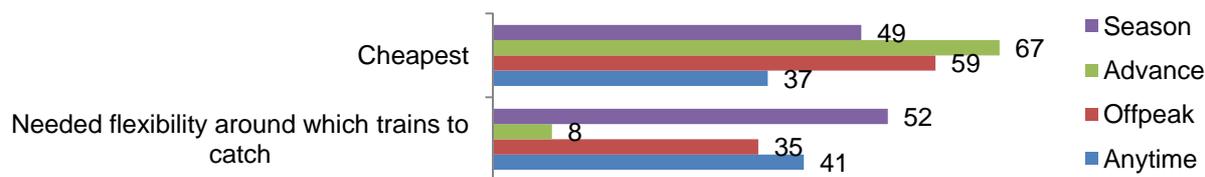
Reason for purchasing ticket

Over two thirds (69%) of passengers were confident that they had the best ticket available, given their travel needs for the journey they were making. Passengers who bought Anytime tickets were less confident (51% confident) than Advance ticket holders (80% confident); this was not surprising given that Anytime ticket holders were least likely to have looked around extensively before purchasing their ticket compared to Advance ticket holders.

Chart five highlights the top two reasons why passengers chose to buy a particular ticket type for their journey - flexibility and cost. Interestingly over a third (37%) of passengers who bought an Anytime ticket said it was the cheapest ticket available.

Although most passengers correctly bought the Advance ticket because it was the cheapest, 8% of passengers did so because they thought it would provide them with flexibility to travel on any train, which is clearly not the case as these require travel on a specific nominated train.

Chart five - Reasons for purchasing ticket (%) (all respondents - 3588)



Understanding of the ticketing structure

Passengers were asked about what restrictions they thought their tickets had. Their responses show a general lack of understanding about restrictions on their tickets. A quarter of Anytime passengers incorrectly thought that there was a time restriction on their ticket, compared to 35% who were not aware of any restrictions, and 33% who correctly said that restrictions did not apply to their ticket. Over half (58%) of off peak ticket holders correctly realised there was a time restriction on their tickets, however 24% were not aware of the time restrictions on their ticket.

Station facilities and services

The top three passenger preferences for new/improved facilities or services at the station are:

- clean station toilets
- accurate visual information about delays
- visible staff at the station

Train frequency

Passengers were most likely to be satisfied with the frequency of train services on weekdays, with 87% of passengers saying they were satisfied with the frequency of service between station boarded and station alighted. Passengers were less satisfied with the frequency of services on Saturdays-(81% satisfied) while only 68% said that they were satisfied with the frequency of service on Sundays.

Passengers were most satisfied with train frequency between London and Manchester throughout the week. Passengers were least satisfied with train frequency on weekdays between Birmingham and Edinburgh/Glasgow, and on weekends they were least satisfied with the train frequency between London and Bangor/Holyhead.

Overall satisfaction

Encouragingly, 88% of passengers rated their overall experience of service on their journey as good. Although there were some reservations, the majority of passengers were happy across each route. Travellers on the London to Liverpool route were happiest with 93% rating their overall experience as good, compared to 83% of passengers on the London and Wolverhampton who rated their journey as good.

Part 3 - Passenger Focus response to the InterCity West Coast franchise draft Invitation to Tender

InterCity West Coast Franchise Consultation Manager
Department for Transport
Zone 5/26 - Great Minster House
76 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DR

16 August 2011

Dear Sir/Madam

InterCity West Coast Franchise – draft Invitation to Tender

Thank you for your letter of 19 May, setting out the Government's approach in taking forward the InterCity West Coast Franchise process and inviting comments on the proposed train service requirement.

We note the proposal to move away from specifying precise service patterns towards just setting out a minimum of stops at each station. The consultation document argues that this will allow bidders greater flexibility when planning services. One of the consequences of the lack of detail, however, is that it makes it virtually impossible to comment on the likely impact on passengers. Even if the quantum of stops is the same, and first and last trains are protected, passengers do not know what is proposed for their route/train.

If DfT is minded to give bidders this degree of flexibility it must go together with a transparent, meaningful and robust consultation process that allows all stakeholders views to be listened to and responded to, prior to changes being implemented.

Passengers have a reasonable expectation that they should normally be able to get a seat on long distance InterCity services. The successful bidder should seek to ensure that they will be able to meet this reasonable expectation and to accommodate all the demand that they have forecast, on all trains on all routes at all times of the day and week, addressing both existing and future crowding needs. Access to high quality loading data across all routes should be delivered to inform those expectations and the consultation process on changes to the timetable.

I attach as an appendix an extract from our response to the initial consultation on the InterCity West Coast franchise which details the priority of passengers' in developing the timetable. Passenger Focus remains committed to working with the Department of Transport and bidders to ensure that the InterCity West Coast franchise recognises and reflects the needs of passengers and we look forward to further dialogue with all parties as the franchise process continues.

Yours sincerely

Sharon Hedges

Passenger Issues Manager

7. The timetable

Passenger Focus's January/February 2011 research⁶ found that passengers' highest priorities for improvement that relate to the timetable are journey time (speed) and frequency. This is despite NPS recording reasonably high levels of satisfaction (especially on the London – Manchester route but less so on the Birmingham – Scotland route).

This indicates that, despite relatively high levels of satisfaction, journey time and frequency remain of great importance to passengers. This was clearly demonstrated through the depth of interest shown, and concern expressed, at the point the new Very High Frequency (VHF) timetable was introduced by Virgin Trains. While many passengers benefited from considerable improvements in journey times some lost out: in particular passengers travelling from Milton Keynes, Penrith and Motherwell.

It will be important that bidders take into account the depth of passenger (and community interest) when developing timetable proposals. In the longer-term the advent of HS2 will provide opportunities to look at the issue of speed versus regional connectivity but in the meantime bidders must engage with stakeholders and demonstrate that they have made efforts to balance the needs of passengers.

One area where our research does show a consensus is in terms of passengers wanting earlier and later services during the week and at weekends.

7.1 Journey time

Passengers are satisfied with existing journey times on all ICWC routes except those between London/Birmingham and Scotland. The WCML Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) includes proposals to improve London to Glasgow journey times, and the ORR has proposed that the WCML timetable should be re-written for December 2013. Bidders for the new franchise should show how they propose to engage fully in that process and improve journey times.

7.2 Frequency

The consultation document raises challenging questions regarding frequency of service. The Passenger Focus response to the WCML RUS⁷ addresses those issues in detail as does our response to the Office of Rail Regulation consultation on Track Access Rights on the WCML⁸. During the consultation period for the WCML RUS, Passenger Focus held workshops for Rail User Groups and passengers in Glasgow, Preston and London. At each meeting local stakeholders requested consideration for an improved level of frequency in their region and at their particular station.

There are clear relationships between frequency, journey time and capacity. More frequent services reduce the wait for the next train and therefore reduce generalised journey times, in effect, speeding up journeys. They also increase the number of seats available; at an hourly frequency by a greater amount than operating longer trains. As train frequency increases lengthening trains can provide more seats – three eleven-car Pendolinos provide more standard class seats than four nine-car Pendolinos.

⁶ What passengers want from the ICWC franchise, Passenger Focus, February 2011

⁷ <http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/news-and-publications/document-search/document.asp?dsid=5042>

⁸ <http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/news-and-publications/document-search/document.asp?dsid=4857>

7.3 Earlier first trains and later last trains

Passengers on the WCML tell us they want earlier and later services as shown in tables 10, 11 and 12⁹. Overall, on all parts of the ICWC franchise around 20% of passengers sought an earlier Monday to Friday first train (between 4am and 6am) than is provided at present. A similar opinion was expressed for later trains on Monday to Friday, with 14% wanting services after 11pm; this was repeated for Saturday and Sunday. This expression for improved services is consistent across all routes as shown in table 12; passengers want earlier services on all routes and this is similar for services southbound as well as northbound.

⁹ What passengers want from the ICWC franchise, Passenger Focus, February 2011

Table 10 – Passengers want earlier first trains

First train	Total
Monday to Friday	
04:00 - 04:59	5%
05:00 - 05:59	14%
06:00 - 06:59	12%
07:00 - 07:59	3%
08:00 - 08:59	1%
From 09:00 onwards	1%
Saturday	
04:00 - 04:59	2%
05:00 - 05:59	4%
06:00 - 06:59	6%
07:00 - 07:59	3%
08:00 - 08:59	1%
From 09:00 onwards	0%
Sunday	
04:00 - 04:59	2%
05:00 - 05:59	2%
06:00 - 06:59	4%
07:00 - 07:59	3%
08:00 - 08:59	1%
From 09:00 onwards	1%

Table 11 – Passengers want later last trains

Last train	Total
Monday to Thursday	
20:00 - 20:59	2%
21:00 - 21:59	3%
22:00 - 22:59	10%
After 23:00 onwards	14%
Friday	
20:00 - 20:59	1%
21:00 - 21:59	2%
22:00 - 22:59	8%
After 23:00 onwards	16%
Saturday	
20:00 - 20:59	1%
21:00 - 21:59	2%
22:00 - 22:59	5%
After 23:00 onwards	14%
Sunday	
20:00 - 20:59	1%
21:00 - 21:59	2%
22:00 - 22:59	6%
After 23:00 onwards	9%

Table 12 – Passengers want earlier trains by route

Mon- Thu	London-Wolverhampton		London-Manchester		London-Liverpool		London-Wales		London-Glasgow		Birmingham-Scotland	
	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South
Between 04:00 and 04:59	15%	18%	12%	19%	14%	15%	14%	17%	13%	33%	13%	14%
Between 05:00 and 05:59	50%	44%	47%	47%	39%	45%	29%	41%	30%	33%	29%	33%
Between 06:00 and 06:59	26%	33%	32%	28%	36%	32%	34%	32%	42%	20%	43%	38%
Between 07:00 and 07:59	7%	4%	7%	4%	8%	6%	10%	6%	11%	10%	9%	12%
Between 08:00 and 08:59	1%	-	0%	1%	2%	1%	5%	3%	2%	3%	4%	1%
From 09:00 onwards	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	0%	8%	2%	2%	2%	3%	3%

Table 13 – Passengers want later last trains by route

Mon - Thu	London-Wolverhampton		London-Manchester		London-Liverpool		London-Wales		London-Glasgow		Birmingham-Scotland		All routes combined	
	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South
Between 21:00 and 21:59	7%	7%	8%	10%	18%	17%	14%	11%	11%	12%	15%	9%	12%	11%
Between 22:00 and 22:59	25%	28%	40%	40%	43%	40%	38%	34%	27%	21%	37%	39%	35%	34%
After 23:00 onwards	65%	56%	48%	43%	34%	35%	33%	31%	30%	42%	31%	28%	42%	40%

7.4 High-speed

DfT are currently consulting on High Speed Rail (HSR), specifically the route for HS2, the first section of a high-speed line to the West Midlands and the North. Potential improved journey times on the ICWC routes after the first section of HS2 opens in 2026 are as follows:

Table 14 – Journey times for ICWC routes

Route	Current Journey Time	Possible HS2 Journey Time
London – Birmingham	1hr 24m	49m
London – Manchester	2hrs 8m	1hr 13m
London – Liverpool	2hrs 10m	1hr 37m
London - Glasgow	4hrs 30m	3hrs 30m
Birmingham - Scotland	3hrs 57m	3hrs 15m

It is clear from the above proposals that the development of HSR shall address journey speed issues in the longer term.

The successful bidder should be proactive in the development of the timetable specification for the WCML after HSR services begin.

Recommendation 4

Improving the timetable

Passenger Focus recommends that DfT includes the following requirements in the specification for the new franchise:

- The successful bidder should exploit the full potential of the route and bring forward proposals that have a positive impact on passengers
- The successful bidder should fully engage in the process to re-write the WCML timetable
- Proposals to address the demand for earlier and later trains, in particular at weekends
- Proposals showing how the operator will carry out meaningful consultation prior to implementing any timetable changes, particularly when developing their proposed services for the stations listed in the DfT consultation.



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