



The Great Western franchise 2013 onwards: an initial submission from Passenger Focus

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1. Passenger Focus

Passenger Focus is the independent public body set up by the Government to protect the interests of Britain's rail passengers, England's bus and tram passengers outside London and coach passengers in England on scheduled domestic services. We are funded by the Department for Transport (DfT) but operate independently.

Our mission is to get the best deal for passengers. With a strong emphasis on evidence-based campaigning and research, we ensure that we know what is happening on the ground.

We use our knowledge to influence decisions on behalf of passengers and we work with the industry, passenger groups and government to secure journey improvements.

Passenger Focus welcomes the opportunity to provide an initial analysis and recommendations for the franchise. We will make a further submission during the consultation period drawing on additional research on a number of Great Western routes.

2. Introduction

Revised franchise policy indicates the Government intends to let longer franchises where possible and also issue less central specification, giving bidders greater flexibility in how they specify/develop the service offered to passengers.

Passenger Focus believes that when the requirements of the franchise are established, it is vital that the needs of passengers who use and pay for rail services are placed squarely at the heart of the contract. We will identify and vigorously promote the passenger agenda and will work closely with DfT and short-listed bidders to ensure passenger requirements are evidenced and addressed both during the franchise competition and at all stages of the ensuing contract term.

It is imperative that there is no repeat of the failures of the early stages of the current franchise. The specification must build on the existing framework of services and seek progressive improvements in all areas of performance. It is important that the franchise ensures that existing demands are adequately addressed and, that at appropriate stages, franchise reviews can respond to any changes or inaccuracies in planning assumptions.

It is envisaged that longer franchises will bring the welcome prospect of increased investment. It is equally important that, throughout its duration, the franchise remains responsive to changing passenger needs. This means that not only must there be a clear understanding of passenger requirements at the outset but that there is an ongoing emphasis on consultation and engagement with stakeholders and a set of output measures that reflect passenger satisfaction. The National Passenger Survey should be included within the franchise monitoring mechanisms.

Longer franchises require firm commitments to be met by the operator on given dates and these must be transparent, clearly defined and monitored. The franchise should focus on outcomes for passengers and ensure that there are sanctions available to reflect any failure in delivery. The ultimate sanction should be termination

3. Overview of the franchise

The Great Western franchise is large, complex and geographically diverse. Passenger rail services provide for a variety of needs and are delivered through three distinct service groups¹, each of which has a number of additional sub-sectors within it.

Within the territory covered by the franchise there are some significantly different socio-demographic factors. The age and income profile of the far south-west, for example, contrasts strongly with some of the characteristics of the urban and suburban commuter belt around London.

Some Great Western services are busy and highly profitable. Other elements of the network fulfil important social functions and underpin economic activity. Local authorities and other agencies have a role to play in identifying particular needs in specific areas and need to be engaged in the ongoing plans for the franchise.

A submission by TravelWatch South West² covers these issues in some detail and provides a useful regional perspective on the future franchise.

The scale of change that will occur during the life of the franchise is immense. The future operator must demonstrate excellent skills in planning and project management and in collaborative working.

¹ Thames Valley, Long Distance, West

² Greater Western or Lesser Western, September 2011

4. Passenger research and implications for the franchise

This submission is informed by two specific strands of research, both of which evidence passenger perspectives and priorities. These form the basis for our recommendations for the franchise.

A national study of passenger priorities³ shows that the top five requirements of the South West region and Wales are directly reflected by the national sample. However, a further analysis of the views of passengers on First Great Western illustrates some differences that should be considered in assessing the requirements for the new franchise.

The National Passenger Survey (NPS), together with an analysis of the drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, is another comprehensive source of information about passenger perceptions and can also be broken down to show variations across the three main Great Western service groups.

³ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, Passenger Focus, 2010

Table 1 - Passenger Priorities for Improvement

First Great Western Priorities ⁴	Value	Aspect	National Priorities ⁵
1	1.11	Price of train tickets offer excellent value for money	1
2	1.00	At least 19 out of 20 trains arrive on time	2
3	0.97	Sufficient train services at times I use the train	3
4	0.89	Passengers are always able to get a seat on the train	4
5	0.78	Company keeps passengers informed if train delays	5
6	0.71	Information on train times/platforms accurate and available	6
7	0.69	Seating area on the train is very comfortable	9
8	0.66	Maximum queue time no more than 2 minutes to purchase tickets	7
9	0.64	All train staff helpful and have a positive attitude	17
10	0.63	Station staff are available whenever required	10
11	0.63	All trains have staff available to help passengers	16
12	0.62	Trains consistently well maintained/ excellent condition	8
13	0.61	Journey times reduced by 5 minutes, on average	11
14	0.61	Connections with other train services are always good	18
15	0.59	Good easy connections with other forms of transport	15
16	0.58	Passengers experience a high level of security on the train	12
17	0.58	The inside of the train is cleaned to a high standard	13
18	0.56	Useful information is provided throughout the journey	19
19	0.54	All station staff are helpful and with a positive attitude	20
20	0.53	The train travels at a fast speed throughout the journey	21
21	0.53	Personal security improved by CCTV/ staff at stations	14
22	0.51	There is sufficient space for passengers' luggage	25
23	0.50	Station facilities and services plentiful and good quality	23
24	0.50	There are good quality toilet facilities on every train	24
25	0.49	Always a quick response to information requests at stations	22
26	0.42	Car parking available and at reasonable cost	27
27	0.36	Train companies reduce pollution/ carbon footprint of travel	28
28	0.34	All station building cleaned and maintained to a high standard	26
29	0.33	Accessibility station entrance to boarding train step-free	29
30	0.15	Safe and secure cycle parking available at station	31
31	0.12	The outside of the train is cleaned to a high standard	30

⁴ Sample size = 301

⁵ Sample size = 3056

4.1 Passenger priorities

The core priorities the Great Western franchise must address are the fundamentals for all passengers. These are:

- delivering value for money
- providing a punctual and reliable service
- provision of sufficient capacity, both in terms of frequency of service and sufficient seating on the train
- effective management of any disruption, especially through information to passengers
- making available accurate information about trains and platforms.

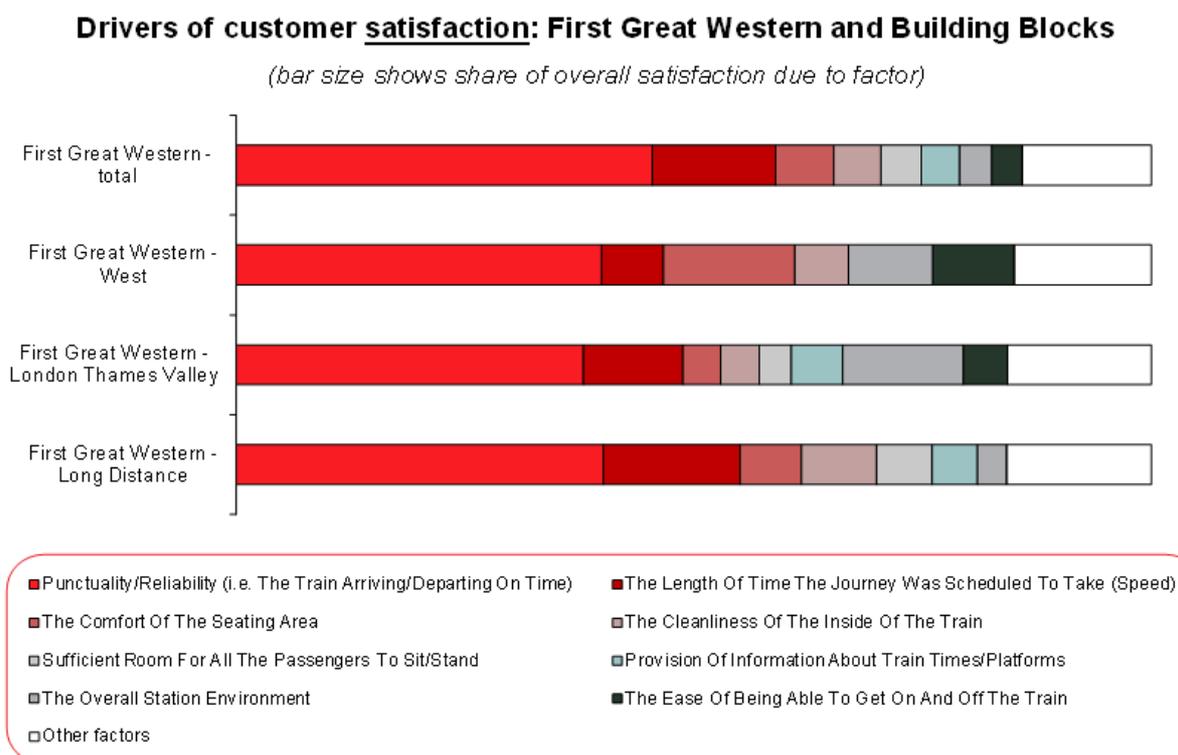
Further priorities illustrate some differences between the requirements of passengers using services provided by the current franchise and the national market. Seventh ranking for comfort of seating area is likely to reflect the longer distances travelled and/or localised crowding that some Great Western passengers experience. The importance of swift service for ticket purchase is just one rank lower.

Staffing factors also feature prominently in Great Western passengers' priorities, with relatively high ranks for availability of, and help from, train and station staff. Other work by Passenger Focus⁶ has demonstrated the importance of staffing to passengers' sense of personal security.

4.2 National Passenger Survey and drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction

Evidence from the NPS reinforces the importance of some of the highest priorities identified for the franchise.

Figure 1 Drivers of satisfaction: Autumn 2010/Spring 2011



⁶ Passenger perceptions of personal security on the railways, March 2009

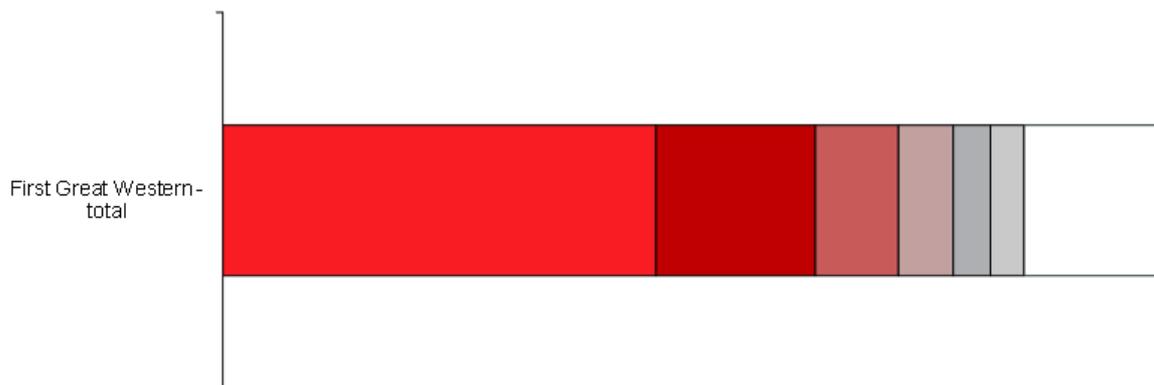
Figure 1 shows the dominance of punctuality and reliability as a driver of satisfaction for passengers on all three parts of the Great Western franchise. This is followed by the length of time for the journey and then comfort of the seating area. Capacity and provision of information are also drivers of passenger satisfaction. Other notable factors include the train and station environments.

An analysis of the factors that drive passenger dissatisfaction also echoes the importance of key factors to passengers. Where delays are not dealt with well, passengers will be dissatisfied. Poor perceptions of punctuality and reliability and sufficient room for passengers are also notable in driving dissatisfaction. Other factors that clearly influence passengers are speed of journey, connections with other train services and personal security on the train.

Figure 2 Drivers of dissatisfaction: Autumn 2010/Spring 2011

Drivers of customer dissatisfaction: First Great Western

(bar size shows share of overall dissatisfaction due to factor)



NB. This analysis is not produced for dissatisfaction at Building Block level. This is because the number of people who are dissatisfied with their journey as a whole is usually relatively low, meaning that the sample size for building blocks is not robust enough for this type of analysis

- How Train Company Dealt With These Delays
- Punctuality/Reliability (i.e. The Train Arriving/Departing On Time)
- The Length Of Time The Journey Was Scheduled To Take (Speed)
- Connections With Other Train Services
- Sufficient Room For All The Passengers To Sit/Stand
- Your Personal Security Whilst On Board The Train
- Other factors

4.3 The core factors

4.3.1 Value for money

Passengers are paying an increasingly high proportion of the costs of the railway and this makes the delivery of value for money a significant challenge. The Passenger Focus fares and ticketing study⁷ investigated the influences on passenger perceptions of value for money. It found that whilst intrinsically linked to the price of the ticket, value for money is also influenced by several other significant factors. These link directly to the findings of priorities research and NPS drivers and are:

- Punctuality and reliability
- Being able to get a seat
- Passenger information during service disruption.

Improving passenger satisfaction with these core elements of the train service must be a high priority for the Great Western franchise.

Another important factor to assist in delivering value for money is to ensure that fares and ticketing processes are fair, impartial and clear, enabling passengers to purchase the cheapest appropriate ticket for their journey. Other high-level recommendations relating to fares and ticketing are addressed in section 4.3.6.

4.3.2 Punctuality and reliability

Table 2 shows that around one quarter of passengers on Great Western services are less than satisfied with punctuality and reliability and each of the building blocks performs worse than the average for comparable operators in the applicable sector. Improving performance is a high passenger priority for improvement and the next franchise should address this significant issue.

Table 2 NPS punctuality and reliability spring 2011

FGW building block score	Comparative sector score	Building block index
FGW Long Distance 79	Long Distance Average 87	91%
FGW Thames Valley 76	London and SE Average 79	96%
FGW West 76	Regional Average 82	92%

Research by Passenger Focus⁸ found that commuters appear to notice lateness from the first minute, not just after the five or ten minutes allowed by Public Performance Measure (PPM). It was also found that the average passenger lateness in the evening peak was worse than the average train lateness. This was because of the effect of cancellations and because many trains were late arriving at intermediate stations even if on time at their destination.

Passenger Focus's principal conclusion from the research is that Britain's railway must in future focus on 'right time' arrival at all stops. We recommend that this is carried into the new Great Western franchise.

⁷ Fares and Ticketing Study Final report, February 2009

⁸ Towards a 'right time' East Anglian railway, March 2010

4.3.3 Transparency

Another study⁹ found passengers felt that increased transparency of information about punctuality and reliability, as well as other aspects of rail services, would assist in the scrutiny and accountability of the rail industry. They were aware that overall averages masked highs and lows on different services and wanted information broken down into meaningful measures that would reflect the experiences of their own rail travel.

The measures that passengers felt captured their experience were punctuality and reliability, investment, comfort, fares, staff, station facilities and journey times.

Passenger Focus recommends that steps to increase the transparency of information about a range of service factors, particularly performance, should be a requirement of the new franchise. Information should be disaggregated as far as possible and efforts made to present data in a simple and easily understandable manner.

4.3.4 Capacity and frequency

The severe crowding on certain Great Western services is well-documented and, even with the planned interventions on infrastructure and enhancements to the train fleet, provision of sufficient capacity will remain an ongoing challenge. It is imperative that provision of an effective response to capacity needs throughout the term of the contract is made a core requirement of the new franchise.

Tables 3a and 3b show current passenger satisfaction levels with frequency of service and room for passengers to sit and stand. The low level of satisfaction recorded by peak passengers, especially in the Thames Valley, illustrates the scale of the capacity challenge.

Table 3a Peak and off-peak satisfaction with frequency and capacity spring 2011

Factor	FGW All	FGW Peak	Thames Valley Peak	FGW Off peak	Thames Valley Off peak
The frequency of the trains on that route	76	81	72	75	71
Sufficient room for all passengers to sit/stand	69	50	42	72	69

Table 3b Commuter/Business/Leisure satisfaction with frequency and capacity spring 2011

Factor	Commuter	Business	Leisure
The frequency of the trains on that route	68	80	79
Sufficient room for all passengers to sit/stand	59	69	76

⁹ Putting rail information in the public domain, Passenger Focus and Office of Rail Regulation, May 2011

It is important, however, that capacity is not seen as just a problem in the Thames Valley. Pressures on other services are also evident e.g. in and around Bristol and at pinch points on the route from Cardiff to Portsmouth. The franchise should require improvements to capacity to be delivered wherever possible in all parts of the network where need is demonstrated.

The franchise should also consider passenger aspirations in planning future service provision. There must be a requirement to consult fully and meaningfully with the range of stakeholder groups and demonstrate that the needs of differing groups of passengers have been considered when timetable proposals are brought forward.

4.3.5 Dealing with disruption and provision of information

Effective management of disruption and keeping passengers informed must be a key requirement for the next franchise. Table 4 sets out First Great Western NPS scores for dealing with delays. Despite some improvement over the past four years, by spring 2011 only just over a third of passengers on Thames Valley and West services were satisfied, while just over half of passengers on long distance services were satisfied. There remains significant room for improvement.

Table 4 Satisfaction with how well the train company dealt with delay spring 2007 -2011

	Thames Valley	Long Distance	West
Spring 2007	26	37	28
Spring 2008	22	44	38
Spring 2009	32	48	33
Spring 2010	44	55	42
Spring 2011	34	52	38

Passenger Focus supports efforts by the industry to tackle the challenge of improving the management of disruption and also to raise standards of information provision. Research into a number of aspects of disruption and passenger needs for information¹⁰ has identified the problems to be addressed and shown how solutions may be found.

We recommend the next Great Western franchise includes a requirement to fully adopt all elements of the ATOC Approved Code of Practice on passenger information during disruption and information Good Practice Guides and sets challenging targets for year on year improvement in passenger satisfaction with management of disruption and the provision of information.

The next franchisee must also be required to show what practical steps they will take to improve how passengers are looked after during service disruption, particularly demonstrating their focus on people rather than simply processes.

¹⁰ Delays and Disruption – Rail passenger have their say, Passenger Focus, December 2010

Reading station engineering works – what passengers want, Passenger Focus, May 2011

Information: Rail passengers' needs during unplanned disruption, Passenger Focus and Southern, August 2011

4.3.6 Fares and ticket retailing

Passengers have experienced years of above-inflation fare increases and that is set to continue for the foreseeable future. Passenger Focus supports the concept of fares regulation as it provides some degree of protection to passengers, many of whom are captive consumers. For the next Great Western franchise, Passenger Focus recommends:

1 – The level of flexibility that can be applied to increases in individual fares should be restricted to a maximum of +/- 2% which will allow the train operator to correct any anomalies between fares and address market issues where appropriate but will limit the ability to drive large differences between fares relating to specific routes/stations.

2 – Increases to unregulated fares should be capped at the same level applied to regulated fares.

The next Great Western franchise must make ticket purchase easier for passengers, many of whom are confused by the complexity of the fares system. Clear information about the validity of tickets and any applicable restrictions must be readily available. Passengers should be able to buy the most appropriate ticket for their intended journey, regardless of whether this is purchased at a ticket office, online, at a ticket vending machine (TVM) or through any other method. Research has identified a number of issues with both TVMs and websites and these problems are set out, with recommendations about how to improve retailing through these channels, in:

- Ticket vending machine usability, Passenger Focus, June 2010
- Ticket retailing: website usability, Passenger Focus, June 2011

Passenger Focus recommends that the next Great Western franchise incorporates these recommendations on ticket retailing within the requirements.

The new franchise should provide a wider range of tickets for passengers. Developments in ticketing such as smart-cards and mobile telephone products should be incorporated into the franchise. The franchise should also require the introduction of innovative new products such as carnet-style tickets that will enable passengers who cannot benefit from season ticket discounts to achieve some economies from repeat travel. Schemes to spread the cost of annual season tickets should also be available.

5. Equity and access

The new franchise must incorporate requirements to ensure that the needs of all potential passengers are recognised and addressed. The specific needs of passengers who are disabled or who have other access needs must be considered and appropriate adjustments made to ensure stations and trains can be utilised safely at all stages of the journey, with necessary assistance provided when required.

6. Conclusion

This initial submission on the next Great Western franchise considers the key requirements of passengers and sets out our high-level recommendations on core elements of the service.

6.1 Further research and analysis

Passenger Focus has commissioned additional research on a number of Great Western representative routes on the Great Western franchise. This will report in the New Year and will provide further, more detailed information about specific issues to address on different parts of the network. We will provide this information at the earliest opportunity to DfT and bidders and will also utilise the findings in our more detailed response to the franchise consultation.

7. Contact for further information

For further information about this submission or other aspects of Passenger Focus work on the Great Western franchise please contact:

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