



July 2015

London Midland rail
franchise passenger
research

Introduction

The following was produced for Passenger Focus before its remit was expanded and rebranded to Transport Focus.

Research background

The current West Midlands franchise (LM), operated by Govia-owned company London Midland, expires on 1 April 2016. It is anticipated that the Department for Transport (DfT), will offer a short-term contract, likely to be around 15 months, to Govia. This is known as a direct award and will see Govia hold the franchise until June 2017, during which time the DfT will run a competitive tender to operate the franchise after this date.

Research objectives

The overall aim of the research, which was funded by DfT, was to understand passengers' current experiences with London Midland and, particularly, their aspirations for the future of the franchise. The specific objectives of the research were:

- Understand passengers' use and experience of the railways under the existing franchise
- Obtain passengers' aspirations for the future, including:
 - The environment at the station
 - The environment on board the train
 - The frequency of the train service and capacity that the train runs at
 - The reliability and punctuality of trains
 - Customer service and staff
 - Value for money
- Explore passengers' awareness of the franchising process and their desire for engagement.

The findings from the research are being shared with DfT and used to help inform their specification for proposals from the operator for the direct award period. Longer-term issues will be considered for the next franchise competition.

Research methodology

During December 2014 qualitative focus groups were convened with London Midland passengers and depth interviews were conducted with some disabled users of the service.

Focus Groups - eight, 90 minute focus groups were conducted across three locations (Birmingham, Crewe and Northampton). These locations were chosen in order to ensure that we sampled as much of the LM network as possible, including both main and suburban train lines into towns and cities. Four groups were conducted in Birmingham to sample both the local lines and longer-distance routes. Each focus group contained between five or six respondents.

Depth Interviews – six, 45 minute depth interviews were conducted in the same locations as above with disabled passengers who use the LM service. These included people with

learning disabilities, mobility problems, visual impairment and hearing impairment, who helped us understand some of their specific experiences and requirements when using the railway.

Across both the focus groups and depth interviews, passengers were using the train for either commuting or business/leisure purposes and we divided respondents into those undertaking typical journeys of more, or less, than 30 minutes.

While the research was qualitative only, and so provides no statistics, this report draws on information from other Transport Focus quantitative research to provide further detail and comparison.

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4. Full report

1. Key findings

1.1 Passengers' reported experience of using the London Midland service

Research participants described the London Midland service as one that is reasonably priced, but offers a 'no-frills' service compared to other train operating companies. For example, passengers claim that the service often takes 'the long way round' and not always the quickest, most direct route.

London Midland staff were considered friendly, helpful and always willing to assist when sought out at stations and on trains. The Twitter account was seen as particularly useful during disruption.

Areas where passengers felt London Midland fell short included overcrowding on the train, which was of the greatest concern to the focus group participants and particularly an issue for commuters. Other notable concerns were frequent disruption and delays, and a lack of communication about disruption at stations.

1.1.1 Comparison of qualitative feedback with National Rail Passenger Survey¹

National Rail Passenger Survey (NPS) scores show 82 per cent of passengers rated their overall satisfaction with their LM journey as satisfactory or good. This compares with 80 per cent for London and South East (LSE) sector operators, the comparator service group for LM, and a national average of 81 per cent.

The relatively positive comments about LM being reasonably priced reflect an NPS score of 54 per cent for value for money of the price of your ticket. This is notably higher than the sector average of 41 per cent and the national score of 46 per cent.

London Midland scores for the attitude and helpfulness of staff at stations and on trains are 68 per cent and 60 per cent, respectively, compared to LSE sector scores of 71 per cent and 54 per cent.

Complaints of overcrowding on the train are reflected in low satisfaction scores for sufficient room for all passengers to sit/stand. 67 per cent of all LM passengers are satisfied with this factor. This is higher than the LSE sector score of 62 per cent, but lower than the national average of 72 per cent. However, the LM score for peak passengers is only 31 per cent, whilst the off-peak score is 70 per cent.

Passengers' reported dissatisfaction with the frequency of disruption and delays on London Midland tallies with NPS results for the operator, with only 74 per cent of their passengers satisfied with the punctuality and reliability of their train journeys. The LSE sector scores 75 per cent, which is also the national average.

The LM score of 36 per cent for how well train company deals with delays compares with the LSE sector score of 35 per cent and the national average of 38 per cent.

¹ <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/national-rail-passenger-survey-nrps-autumn-2014-full-report>

1.1.2 Variation in experiences by location and passenger type
 Experiences of travelling on LM services were relatively consistent across each of the groups at the locations sampled (Birmingham, Crewe and Northampton), though there were some areas of dissatisfaction that were specific to certain localities and passenger type. These areas are listed below:

Birmingham group

- Infrequent service
- Limited facilities at smaller, rural stations
- Inconvenience at Birmingham New Street Station due to refurbishment works
- Evening services not frequent enough, particularly at rural stations.

Crewe group

- Lack of staff on trains and platforms
- Short notice given for platform alterations
- Long queues at station ticket machines at peak times.

Northampton group

- Staff lack knowledge and fail to communicate delays and disruption
- Inconvenience caused by Northampton station refurbishment works.

Passenger type

- Overcrowding, disruption and delays are more apparent amongst commuters
- Business/leisure passengers put more emphasis on the lack of staff at stations and on the trains, Wi-Fi/food/drink on trains, and infrequent/disrupted trains at weekends
- Disabled passengers desire more staff at stations and on board trains to provide assistance, more seats and advance notice of platform changes to allow timely transfer to new location.

Passengers in Northampton and Birmingham felt that the amount of disruption and delays, as well as the lack of information about them was influenced by the refurbishment works being undertaken at the station.

1.2 Passenger aspirations for the London Midland service

Passengers were asked to identify the areas where they felt most improvement was needed in the LM service. The results show that of the six areas proposed, improved train reliability and punctuality, followed by an increased train service level (frequency) was most desired.

² <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/rail-passengers-priorities-for-improvements-october-2014>
³ See appendix 2.1 for a full comparison of London Midland passenger priorities and Great Britain passenger priorities

In terms of the train service level, improvement is desired as a result of:

- Passengers on all parts of the network experience frequent delays and cancellations, especially commuters who experience frequent, short delays of around 5-10 minutes
- Passengers have been left waiting as delayed trains 'skip' intermediate stations in order to make-up time
- The communication of disruption at the station is considered poor and often last minute, whilst staff are not always knowledgeable about the situation.

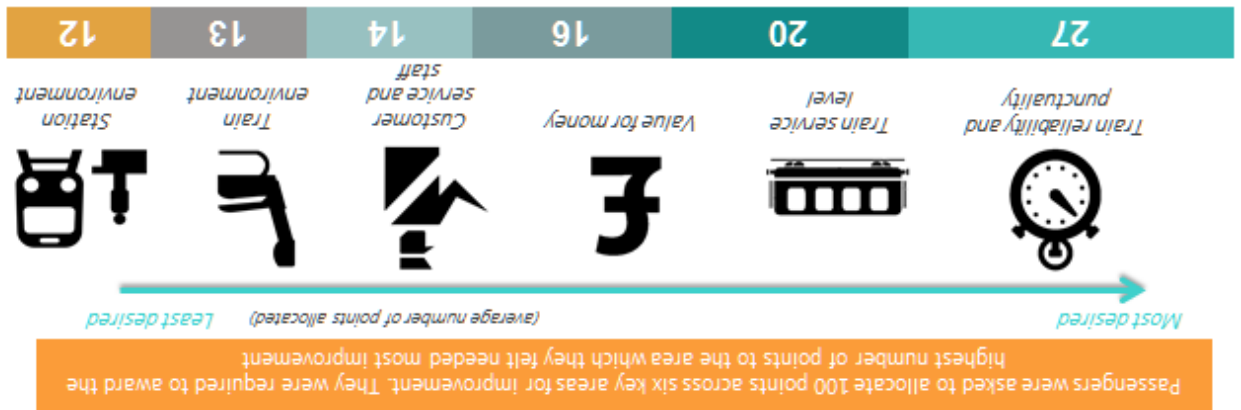
There are several reasons why improved train reliability and punctuality is desired so strongly by passengers:
1.2.1 Why improvement is desired

However, the priorities for improvement study included a number of individual factors relating to punctuality and reliability. More trains arriving on time than now ranked fourth at 192. There were also high scores for less frequent major unplanned disruptions (sixth at 175), fewer trains cancelled (seventh at 151) and less disruption due to engineering works (thirteenth at 100). Taken together these emphasise the importance of reliability and punctuality, as identified by the focus group participants.

At first sight, the order of importance in this qualitative project is not directly reflective of a quantitative Transport Focus study into Rail passengers' priorities for improvements². This found that, amongst LM passengers, the top priority for improvement was 'price of train tickets offers better value for money'. With an index of 473 this was nearly five times more important than a notional score of 100 for the 'average' factor³.

Passengers always able to get a seat on the train and sufficient frequency of train services ranked second and third priorities for improvement, with index scores of 374 and 242 respectively.

Base: Total 48, Birmingham 22, Crewe 13, Northampton 13



Suggested improvements	Area
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplified ticket choices with increased transparency on the best value for money options • Tickets that are valid across different TOCs, in case of sudden cancellation • Price increases reflective of an improved service • Fares reflective of distance travelled, with no disproportionate increases past a certain point • Better communication of offers e.g. family travel card • A loyalty scheme where points are earned for travel • Delay repayment made straightforward and easy to claim, and compensation for shorter delays • 'Oyster-type' smartcards which always deduct the optimal fare • Consistent 'rules' about travelling on the network without a ticket. 	<p>Value for money</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster trains (to make up lost time), or more frequent trains at peak times ensuring another train arrives soon • Increased flexibility so tickets can be used on other TOCs, services and modes of transport • Replacement services e.g. bus • Immediate repayment/compensation • Improved communication of disruption: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communication of delays and cancellations in advance of arrival at the station e.g. through push notifications/text messages ○ More staff at stations and on trains to advise passengers of alternative options 	<p>Train reliability and punctuality</p>

1.2.2 Identifying improvements

Passengers perceived many of the improvements they suggested to be achievable in the short term i.e. the next two years. Therefore they expected to see improvements made to the London Midland service implemented as soon as possible.

Although passengers desired a reduction in disruption and delays most, they found it difficult to suggest or find solutions that might bring this about. Improvements that they were able to suggest centred mainly on the train and station environment as well as to ticketing; including cost, choice and provision.

- Overcrowding on many lines during peak hours, with the situation only getting worse
- Difficulty moving through the train in peak hours due to the number of standing passengers
- Too few services later at night and at the weekends
- Lack of services during large scale events e.g. Football matches.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Information at stations in line and up to date with information on Twitter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More, working ticket machines at the station ● Clearer communication about dates for station improvement works and reasons for renovations ● Improved waiting areas (warmer, with more comfortable seating) ● Cleaner toilets ● Easier platform access for disabled passengers (e.g. more lifts) ● More, free car parking spaces ● Better, more varied choice of food outlets at stations (independent shops) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cleaner carriages and toilets (where available) on board the train ● Better regulated temperature, adapted to outside and what people are likely to be wearing ● Free, working Wi-Fi on board the train ● Plug sockets available at seats ● Information screens on-board to display disruption messages along with next stops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More trains desired at peak times for some stations ● More trains to run on a Sunday, particularly at rural stations ● Trains to run later into the night ● More night services to avoid being left stranded in the case of cancellations ● Clearer timetabling, with better coordinated connections with other TOCs' trains ● More carriages on trains at peak times to avoid overcrowding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More staff at the station, particularly for assistance and security ● More staff on board the train for cleaning and assistance 		Station environment	Train environment	Train service level	Customer service and staff
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- Criteria for evaluating bids, and who sets this criteria
- Who decides which bidder is awarded the contract, or anything about the stages in the process
- How long the contracts are, and that they can be ended early if deemed necessary
- That passengers have some input into the process.

When probed, the majority had no knowledge about any of the following aspects:

Most passengers knew very little about the rail franchise system, and did not have any particular opinions about it. A few mentioned that they knew the government was involved to some extent, but could not elaborate on this

1.3 Awareness of Franchise Process

- Cleaner carriages and toilets on board the train
- Wi-Fi and plug sockets on board trains

Distraction – making disruption more bearable

- Making the delay repayment scheme easier to use and more visible
- Allowing tickets to be interchangeable with other TOCs (e.g. Virgin Trains) if disruption occurs

Problem resolution – resolving problems if they do occur

- Better communication about delays and cancellations at stations and prior to arrival (e.g. Twitter, email, text...)
- More and better informed staff on trains and platforms to assist in the event of cancellations or delays

Information about problems – providing information to improve situation

- Clearer communication of ticket options and fares to avoid the wrong ticket being purchased
- More carriages on existing trains at peak hours to reduce overcrowding
- Better scheduling of trains to avoid delays

Problem avoidance – reducing the frequency that problems occur

Passengers' were asked to prioritise the improvements that they would most like to see, from the list above. The improvements they prioritised can be categorised into four key areas. These areas are ultimately centred on improving the situation if disruption does occur.

1.2.3 Prioritising Improvements

1.4 Level of relationship felt towards LM

Most customers didn't feel a sense of 'relationship' with their operator, despite the amount of time (commuters in particular) spent using the service. Passengers felt that there was a correlation between the amount of interaction that they had with staff and the extent to which they felt a relationship. For example, those passengers who had positive interactions with staff felt more of a connection with London Midland.

This is no surprise given that in the Passengers' relationship with the rail industry research⁴, London Midland do not fare well in terms of the level of trust that their passengers place in them, nor in the extent to which passengers feel they have a strong relationship with London Midland. Of 23 TOCs, LM place 21st in terms of trust and 1th in terms of relationship.

A reason for the higher placing in relationship versus trust may have something to do with customers feeling that London Midland is synonymous with the region and they do describe LM as providing a 'local service'. Passengers felt that trust and relationship could be improved if London Midland did more to show that they valued their customers and rewarded loyalty, for example through loyalty schemes, special offers and discounts.

⁴ <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/news/articles/what-relationship-do-passengers-have-with-train-companies-Passengers-Relationship-with-the-rail-industry-Passenger-Focus-August-2014>

1. Summary

Overall, passengers perceive travel with London Midland to be cheaper relative to other operators, such as Chiltern and Virgin. However, they feel that the service they receive is lacking in several aspects. This is largely because they feel that disruption including delays and last-minute cancellations are too frequent. In addition the levels of overcrowding, particularly during peak hours, does not make for an enjoyable journey experience.

Given the above, it is unsurprising that the most desired improvements are more reliable and punctual trains, as well as an increased train service level. Passengers believe that the situation can and should be improved in the short term, and expect to see changes in the next two years, especially as fares continue to rise.

Introducing a loyalty scheme, discounts and special offers would increase the extent to which passengers feel a relationship with LM and the extent to which they feel valued as customers. In addition, passengers feel that the presence and interaction with staff is vital to creating a stronger relationship between customer and operator.

2. Appendix

3.1 NRPS Autumn 2014: % satisfied, London Midland versus London and South East Sector

Factor	TOC	Sector	TOC Index
Overall satisfaction with your journey	82	80	103%
STATION FACILITIES			
Overall satisfaction with the station	74	78	95%
Ticket buying facilities	74	72	102%
Provision of information about train times/platforms	80	80	101%
The upkeep/repair of the station buildings/platforms	66	70	94%
Cleanliness	71	74	96%
The facilities and services	49	55	89%
The attitudes and helpfulness of the staff	68	71	96%
Connections with other forms of public transport	69	76	91%
Facilities for car parking	54	47	115%
Overall environment	63	68	93%
Your personal security whilst using the station	67	69	96%
The availability of staff	53	60	89%
The provision of shelter facilities	68	67	102%
Availability of seating	49	43	114%
How request to station staff was handled	80	83	96%
The choice of shops/eating/drinking facilities available	44	48	90%
TRAIN FACILITIES			
Overall satisfaction with the train	81	77	105%
The frequency of the trains on that route	79	75	106%
Punctuality/reliability	74	75	99%
The length of time the journey was scheduled to take	86	81	107%
Connections with other train services	76	75	102%
The value for money of the price of your ticket	54	41	130%
Cleanliness of the train	69	73	95%
Upkeep and repair of the train	69	72	96%
The provision of information during the journey	67	67	100%
The helpfulness and attitude of staff on train	60	54	111%
The space for luggage	49	48	101%
The toilet facilities	42	32	130%
Sufficient room for all passengers to sit/stand	67	62	109%
The comfort of the seating area	70	68	102%
The ease of being able to get on and off	81	77	106%
Your personal security on board	77	75	102%
The cleanliness of the inside	71	73	97%

The cleanliness of the outside	76	72	105%
The availability of staff	39	34	113%
How well train company deals with delays	36	35	104%

3.2 Rail passengers' priorities for improvements, London Midland comparison with Great Britain

Factor	Rank	Index	Rank	Index
Price of train tickets offers better value for money	1	473	1	494
Passengers always able to get a seat on the train	2	374	2	367
Trains sufficiently frequent at the times I wish to travel	3	242	3	264
More trains arrive on time than happens now	4	192	4	178
Less frequent major unplanned disruptions to your journey	5	175	6	161
Train company keeps passengers informed about delays	6	166	5	163
Fewer trains cancelled than happens now	7	151	7	136
Accurate and timely information available at stations	8	131	8	132
Less disruption due to engineering works	9	100	13	90
Inside of train is maintained and cleaned to a high standard	10	97	11	93
Accurate and timely information provided on trains	11	90	12	92
Free Wi-Fi available on the train	12	86	10	97
Well-maintained, clean toilet facilities on every train	13	85	14	89
Journey time is reduced	14	76	9	105
Connections with other train services are always good	15	73	15	84
Seating area on train is very comfortable	16	56	17	59
Good connections with other public transport at stations	17	54	16	62
There is always space in the station car park	18	51	26	27
Improved personal security on the train	19	50	21	41
Train staff have a positive, helpful attitude	20	49	18	47
Station staff have a positive, helpful attitude	21	49	19	46
Improved personal security at the station	22	46	22	38
New ticket formats available such as smartcards, ticket Apps, print at home etc.	23	41	20	45
Stations maintained and cleaned to a high standard	24	37	24	36
More staff available at stations to help passengers	25	32	25	29
Sufficient space on train for passengers' luggage	26	30	23	37
More staff available on trains to help passengers	27	22	28	20
Reduced queuing time when buying a ticket	28	22	29	20

London Midland Great Britain

Free Wi-Fi available at the station	29	20	27	24
Access from station entrance to boarding train is step-free	30	18	30	15
Safe and secure bicycle parking available at the station	31	9	31	10

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Transport Focus
Fleetbank House
2-6 Salisbury Square
London
EC4Y 8JX

0300 123 2350

www.transportfocus.org.uk
info@transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council.