



**Intercity West Coast Rail Franchise
Research Report**

October 2015

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

The InterCity West Coast franchise is a hugely significant part of the UK's rail network. The franchise provides train services along the West Coast Main Line from Euston in the heart of London to Glasgow in Scotland. It serves the key cities of Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh and Glasgow as well as servicing the North of Wales to Holyhead.

Virgin Trains won the franchise for InterCity West Coast in 1997. The franchise was awarded for 15 years but at the end of this period (2012) the competition for the new franchise was suspended. Virgin Trains was granted a further contract to operate the franchise until November 2014 (known as a direct award). Another direct award was announced in June, allowing Virgin to continue to run the service until September 2017 when a new franchise will start¹.

Given the above, Transport Focus wished to conduct research to establish the passenger perspective on a new InterCity West Coast franchise and their aspirations for it. This will feed into the Department for Transport (DfT) consultation process and will ultimately be used to inform prospective bidders for the new franchise.

Transport Focus already has a substantial body of knowledge about passenger experience of InterCity West Coast services. Therefore, a particular requirement for this project was to generate additional understanding to supplement the data available from the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS)² and the Rail Passengers' Priorities for Improvement study³.

1.2 Research objectives

The overall aim of the research was to establish what passengers wanted from a new franchise. This required understanding of passengers' current experiences with InterCity West Coast and their aspirations for any future operator. Specific objectives included the following:

- To investigate passengers' overall experiences with InterCity West Coast in depth, looking at both positive and negative interactions, as well as key frustrations or sticking points
- To identify usage of and attitudes towards other modes of transport as well as what is weighed up / considered when choosing transport mode
- To understand the end-to-end passenger experience on Virgin West Coast, from the planning and ticket purchase stages to the station and on train experience

¹ In November 2015, after the conclusion of the research project, the DfT decided to re-time the franchise to align better with the HS2 programme. Virgin Trains will therefore now continue running services on the West Coast until April 2018.

² <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/national-rail-passenger-survey-spring-2015-train-operating-company-toc-reports>

³ <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/rail-passengers-priorities-for-improvements-october-2014>

- To investigate the specific challenges that may exist for passengers whose travel experience is impacted by a range of disabilities.

1.3 Research methodology

The research needed to deliver an in-depth understanding of passengers' experiences and attitudes and to capture the language and feelings of customers in relation to their experience of InterCity West Coast. As such, the more discursive and response-led approach of qualitative research was taken.

This approach consisted of:

- 16 x 2 hour focus groups each attended by eight respondents, the locations of which were chosen to reflect a representative cross-section in regards to the InterCity West Coast coverage. Focus group discussions are a very useful way of generating discussion and interaction between individual respondents (and between the moderator and respondents). As such, they help to highlight consensus/diversity of experiences on a topic.
- 10 x 1 hour depth interviews with disabled passengers (with a focus on those experiencing visual impairment and mobility issues), split across the geographical locations where the focus groups took place for logistical convenience. This one-on-one interview approach also provides a more supportive environment than a focus group for discussing issues that may be sensitive.
- We also conducted an extra four depth interviews, since some commuters in the relevant focus groups proved to be less frequent travellers than hoped.
- All respondents completed a pre-task questionnaire in preparation for the research. This involved a short 'audit' of a recent rail journey on West Coast, which was brought along to aid and be discussed within the research groups.

Fieldwork was conducted between 7th and 17th September 2015.

1.3.1 Recruitment criteria

The locations selected were chosen to cover a broadly representative cross-section in regards to the West Coast coverage. Thus groups and depth interviews were conducted in London, Birmingham, Colwyn Bay, Manchester, Liverpool, Preston and Glasgow.

In addition, while we were aware that many travellers use the railway in multiple capacities, for the purposes of recruitment we focused on their primary usage i.e. leisure, commuter or business⁴.

The focus groups and interviews were split by ticket class i.e. frequent first class user, frequent standard user and also by age group.

⁴ Throughout the report, verbatim comments are attributed according to the location where the focus group or in-depth interview took place and the respondent's primary use of InterCity West Coast (leisure, commuter, business). However, respondents' experiences could and did cover a range of locations and types of journey.

Additional recruitment criteria included the following:

- A mix of genders in each group
- A mix of distance – approximately under 1 ½ hours and over 1 ½ hours
- A mix of those boarding/alighting at large stations (generally category A stations) and those boarding at “smaller” stations along the route
- A mix of frequency of use of the service
- A mix of travelling on different price tickets –e.g. advance, off peak, walk up price
- For longer distance business travellers, to include representation of people who use InterCity West Coast and East Coast as well as some who use air as well as rail for similar journeys.

A detailed breakdown of the specific recruitment criteria and quotas for the group discussions and depth interviews can be found in Appendix i. A copy of the field materials used in the research (recruitment screener, topic guide and pre-task) can be found in appendix ii.

2. Choice of travel mode

2.1 The availability of choice of travel mode

For most of those included in this study, realistic alternatives (be that by car, coach, air or other train operators) are available and have been considered for most of the journeys they make. However, the choice of rail - and InterCity West Coast more specifically – is an *active* one for most passengers. Overall, InterCity West Coast compares positively against alternatives on a range of key criteria including value for money, overall journey experience, reliability and punctuality and the level of amenity on offer.

Of course, to some extent, the benefits of using InterCity West Coast as opposed to another mode of transport are generic to rail travel *per se*. In addition, our respondents' preference for rail simply reflects the fact that they are rail users. The research did not include non-users or rejectors of rail travel. Nonetheless, it cannot be gainsaid that the InterCity West Coast experience is seen as mostly better than that offered by alternative means of transport.

2.1.1 Train vs. coach travel

Coach travel is rarely a seriously considered alternative to train by those participating in this study. That being said, a few (typically younger and cash constrained passengers) use or consider coach travel as an option. However, coach travel compares unfavourably to rail in most respects.

“It’s very, very cheap to go via coach, but I can’t think of any other benefits!” (London, Leisure)

- **Value for money:** It is conceded that coach travel is almost always cheaper than train. Sometimes it is considerably cheaper, for example, in comparison to a walk-up rail fare. This is, however, seldom sufficiently motivating for any but the most financially pressured to choose coach. It is generally agreed that while the cost differential between coach and train can be significant, the journey experience by coach is almost always worse.

“I kind of got stranded in London. I thought I’d either get the train or the bus and there was a train due which I could’ve got but it was going to cost me a fortune and I was a bit tight for cash... So I ended up paying a lot less and it was horrible. It was the night bus and it was just a horrible journey. But I still did it because I thought the train at that point was extortionate as I hadn’t booked in advance.” (Glasgow, Leisure)

- **Journey experience:** Similar to rail, coach travel does not involve the individual stress and responsibility of driving, which many see as a significant benefit.
- **Reliability and punctuality:** The train is typically seen as much better than coach in terms of reliability and punctuality. Coach travel is, of course, usually much slower than rail and subject to the same problems as driving in terms of congestion, road works etc. impacting on journey predictability.

“I once went on a coach to watch England at Wembley. We had a nightmare of a journey there because the driver decided to go the wrong way, and even worse on the way back because of diversions. At least on the train you know you are going in the right direction!” (Birmingham, Commuter)

- **Amenity:** While it is acknowledged that coach travel has improved in recent years (e.g. seating, toilets, WiFi etc.) the journey experience is often seen as stressful and uncomfortable when compared to rail.

“I would never normally catch buses because I always have this thing about ‘oh it’s dirty, it’s packed’, but it was actually quite pleasant. It’s not as bad as you think once you’ve done it.” (Birmingham, Leisure)

“We took a coach last year. We had to go to Gatwick, and our times were very awkward and they didn’t fit in very well with the trains, and we had a lot of luggage with us. It was torture! Never again.” (Birmingham, Leisure)

2.1.2 Train vs. car travel

While car is a viable alternative for many, the train has significant inherent advantages.

- **Value for money:** On a straightforward cost comparison, driving seldom offers better value than the train, especially for journeys over 60 minutes (particularly in comparison to advance fares). Both fuel and parking are typically cited as significant cost elements for a car journey. However, the car can be more economical when two or more people are travelling together and costs can be shared, unlike the train where there is limited financial benefit from group travel. That said, of course, a crowded car with multiple passengers plus luggage can be seen as quite uncomfortable when compared to rail.

“Trains seem expensive at first glance but when you look at the distance you would travel by car to make that journey and the cost of petrol, plus parking which is never cheap in city centres, trains are worth it.” (Colwyn Bay, Leisure)

“Me and my boy went down in April there. Some went down [to London] in the morning, we went down in the afternoon and it cost us £17 for the two of us to go down, so that was buying it 12 weeks in advance.” (Glasgow, Leisure)

- **Journey experience:** While many people like the autonomy and personal space offered by car travel, driving (and parking) is frequently described as stressful and tiring in comparison to train travel.

“I do probably about 50,000 miles a year, and during the week I wouldn’t use the train because normally they’re very busy and it’s very expensive. First thing in the morning

*I'm not really good company, so I'd rather be in my own car, my own space.”
(Birmingham, Leisure)*

*“The drive to Birmingham, which I have done many, many times is just bloody awful.
So the train is definitely the lesser of the two evils.” (Glasgow, Leisure)*

- **Reliability and punctuality:** Notwithstanding occasional ‘mishaps,’ the train almost always wins in terms of both speed and predictability against what is seen as an increasingly congested road system. The car does, however, offer the benefit of a door-to-door journey.

“You know the train is going from A to B, on a single line, there really isn't that much that can go wrong in between. I've driven back when there's road works and you end up in some country villages and you don't even know where you are.” (London, Leisure)

- **Amenity:** The train is seen as offering much more in terms of amenity than driving, in terms of opportunities for both relaxation and / or work. That said, the presence and / or behaviour of other passengers on the train can, at times, undermine these benefits.

*“Obviously if you're driving you're not able to check your emails even on your phone, so you're actually losing time in the car, whereas you're not when you're on the train.”
(Manchester, Businesses)*

“I go and do a marathon walk every year and that's going into Euston then you're going out to Hyde Park. So you would never be able to take a car with you, where would you leave the car? And your friends are with you and you're drinking and socialising, so that whole getting on the train, getting a magazine out, sitting on a table, I like that.” (Birmingham, Leisure)

2.1.3 Train vs. air travel

The train compares well to air travel in most respects for those journeys where it is seen as a realistic alternative i.e. primarily Scotland to London. Rail performs well against most criteria but there are aspects of airline customer service that stand out positively and are appreciated.

- **Value for money:** Rail and air fares are seen as broadly comparable, albeit air travel is often described as having more possible extra cost above the headline fare, for example, the costs of getting to / from the airport, parking, baggage fees etc. There are, of course, also costs in getting to and from rail stations, but since stations are usually closer to passengers' journey start and end points, these costs tend to be lower for rail travel.

“Booking a first class train from Glasgow to London on the day is about £350, and I can get a British Airways flight there for about £400. There’s not much in it!” (Glasgow, Business)

“The flights might look great when you see them advertised, but by the time you add in maybe having to get from Stansted or Gatwick into Central London it all adds up.” (Glasgow, Leisure)

“If I get an advance ticket and it's obviously cheaper than buying it on the day, then I haven't got a problem with that, when I look at what it could cost if I'd flown. I mean, I know you can get some cheap flights, but sometimes the flight on BA from Manchester down to Heathrow could be £300 odd and I could get an advance ticket for £50.” (Manchester, Business)

- **Journey experience:** Air travel is seen as having a number of stress points. These can include:
 - having to get to and from airports which are located a significant distance from the city centres which are usually closer to the start and end points of most passengers’ journeys
 - having to arrive well in advance of flight times
 - having to go through increasingly onerous security procedures.

“When I go up to Glasgow it’s usually to see my brother and we like to have a drink...so no way do I want to be flying into Stansted and have a drive ahead at the other end!”(London, Business)

“Its cost and time, because maybe you save a bit in time, by the time you then transfer to where you’re going to stay, it doesn’t seem feasible.” (Manchester, Business)

“Yeah, I mean I get on the train, get on, get the laptop out, start working. You know when I'm in an airport I can't just crack open the laptop in the middle of the waiting lounge.” (Manchester, Business)

- **Reliability and punctuality:** Overall, flying is seen as more prone to severe delays or cancellations than rail. While flying is quicker ‘point-to-point’, the travel to and from airports and the time needed at the airport, (for security etc.) make total journey times more directly comparable.

“If delays or cancellations happen with flights you know you are in for a disaster! At least with the trains, once you reach your destination you are off walking into the city within minutes.”(Glasgow, Business)

- **Amenity:** Airlines do perform better than rail on various aspects of the customer experience including, for example pre-boarding amenities at the airport, providing a seat for all passengers, a more seamless ticketing process, a degree of

personalisation / choice (e.g. selecting seat, meal), the recognition and rewards provided by many airlines.

“If you’re carrying luggage you don’t want to be changing trains three times, not getting the service that you’re used to, not getting a seat - so I will take the worst airline in the world and maybe fly to get the service I want. That does happen.” (Glasgow, Business)

2.1.4 Virgin West Coast vs. other train operators

Most InterCity West Coast users have experienced other TOCs and a significant number can choose between TOCs for at least some of their journeys. In this context, Virgin West Coast is typically seen as a better, if sometimes more expensive, service.

“You can just count on Virgin West Coast trains – you always see them at the stations, they are regular, always arriving on time. And like their airlines, they give service with a smile.” (Glasgow, Leisure)

When compared to ‘lower cost’ operators (such as London Midland out of Euston) Virgin West Coast is seen as significantly more expensive, but also offers an enhanced experience and as such, represents a reasonable cost-benefit trade off. Against other operators more broadly, Virgin West Coast is seen as on a par in terms of pricing, but in most respects is seen to offer a better experience and compares well on most aspects of the journey, such as speed and reliability, rolling stock, overall service ethos.

“With East Coast everything is different; in terms of standards, the First Class, the service, the look. The last time I was on, you have to get up to go to the buffet cart, it was like ‘What, you’re not bringing it to my table?’ ‘No, you need to get up and get it yourself.’ It was just, like, okay.” (London, Leisure)

“The Tamworth train into New Street is CrossCountry and generally there’s more space to sit down on the Virgin trains because they’re more frequent and they’re generally cleaner as well.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

“I think also when you compare it against other train lines, it’s still cheaper on London Midland but they stop at every single stop going. It will be longer and you can go on Virgin, pay a bit more and get there on time.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

3. The InterCity West Coast experience

3.1 Journey planning

Passengers report few problems in terms of accessing information for journey planning.

3.1.2 Websites

Website(s) are typically first port of call when planning a journey and searching for fares. There is no clear consensus on which particular sites are better or worse and indeed, many use a combination of, or switch between, Virgin West Coast's site, National Rail and the various aggregator sites (Redspottedhanky, Trainline, Raileasy etc.). The choice of site most often used seems to be driven more by habit than by any objective evaluation of each site's features and most passengers appear to stick with the site they have got used to.

There is a general (though not universal) assumption that the same fares are available through different sites, albeit there is some awareness of the booking fees charged by some sites.

"I use Trainline in general, but sometimes when I know I'm definitely travelling I will go to their [Virgin] website directly. I don't know why, because the Trainline is independent and gives you the same price, I just automatically go straight to Virgin West Coast if I know that's who I'm going with." (Glasgow, Leisure)

"I find it straightforward online, if you're doing it a few times and you do it quite regularly you get used to it, and you're aware to make sure that's a direct route or is that a fast train, concentrate on the train times which is really good; the length of the journey times; I think that's useful." (London, Business)

In terms of the Virgin Trains website⁵, there are mixed opinions with there being both advocates and critics. On the positive side, many describe the site as generally clear and easy to use. More negatively, some feel there is too much Virgin brand promotion, that it is hard to navigate, and that it appears to offer fewer journey options than other website providers e.g. Trainline.

3.1.3 Other media

As indicated, websites are the dominant medium for journey planning and feedback on other channels is relatively limited.

There are some app users, typically more regular travellers and more likely to be somewhat younger (though not exclusively). Again there is no leading app; once passengers find an

⁵ It should be noted that during the period within which the research was conducted, Virgin West Coast was in the process of changing website and introducing the choice of seat reservations and most passengers were still unaware of this development.

app that ‘works for them,’ they tend to stick with it. Apps are mostly used for planning and ‘up to the minute’ information, although one or two also purchase tickets via an App.

*“I do a lot of stuff online via the Trainline and things like that, so I do a lot of my planning through there because all your tickets are saved on your app and then I can claim all that stuff back via expenses, so I’ve got to have the physical ticket, but then I always have that on there as well just in case I do lose my physical ticket.”
(Manchester, Business)*

Very few use direct phone contact for information and journey planning; those who do describe a generally friendly and helpful service.

3.1.4 Improvements in journey planning

Overall, journey planning information is not seen as a priority area for improvement. However, some potential enhancements were suggested including more pro-active / outbound communication from the train operator, particularly with regard to service disruption and in terms of fare offers and fare optimisation suggestions.

“There’s nothing worse than leaving work and walking to New Street to find out your train is delayed by 15 or 20 minutes when actually I could have got 15 or 20 minutes extra work sat at my desk. Whereas if I got a text message... just to let you know it’s going to be at least 15 minutes late it would allow you to plan. I think that’s a really good idea.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

Longer term, passengers envisage an ‘Amazon’ type approach to journey planning or copying some of the innovations that have been developed in the airline industry to better personalise journeys. Thus, it is suggested that passengers might be able to develop an individual profile, containing relevant details of their travel history and preferences. This could include, for example, a record of regular journeys made, seating preferences, who they typically travelled with (e.g. children) and even requirements with regard to food or entertainment choices.

*“There’s always space for more personalisation and options to get your journey just how you want it. For example I really hate going backwards, and I feel the website or app should remember that and always give me forward facing where possible.”
(London, Commuter)*

3.2 Station experience

Intercity West Coast does not, of course, operate all of the stations served by the West Coast route. However, whilst passengers typically know very little about who controls stations, the station experience is an important aspect of their overall journey.

3.2.1 Acknowledged improvements

There is widespread acknowledgement of the recent and ongoing investment at stations and resulting improvements for customers. This is, perhaps unsurprisingly, particularly the case with regard to key hubs such as Manchester Piccadilly or Birmingham New Street. Passengers report better quality and a wider choice of retail and food and drink outlets. Many are also positive about the increasing presence at stations of mainstream High Street brands such as M&S, Boots, Sainsburys, Pret a Manger etc. Indeed, for some passengers, station bars and restaurants are becoming attractive venues in their own right e.g. bars found at Manchester Piccadilly.

“They're better than they used to be aren't they, the chains and stuff.” (Manchester, Business)

“I'll tell you now, I'm knocking on, and I remember when it was like years ago, and compared to years ago now is a different class. It's excellent now; you've never had it so good.” (Manchester, Business)

“It is nice that it's no longer just 'Pumpkin Café' and you can treat it a bit like a shopping centre, which can be quite pleasant if you have a bit of time on your hands.” (London, Leisure)

3.2.2 Problems with stations

Passengers do have some important complaints about stations. Charging for toilets causes a great deal of annoyance, particularly as passengers report that facilities often leave a good deal to be desired in terms of cleanliness. Paying for using toilets in stations is more a point of principle than an issue regarding the cost *per se*, with passengers saying that it is something that feels uncivilised and archaic in the 21st century, with the added inconvenience of having to find the correct change. Paying for toilets can seem particularly invidious when set against the significant amounts passengers have already spent on buying their train ticket.

“You're paying to use a toilet...what is it, 30p now? What! Seriously! It's a joke, if you haven't got the change or whatever, then they just don't let you use it and you think, 'I've got a pound, just take the pound'. 'No, sorry, I can't help you'.” (Glasgow, Leisure)

Staff at stations are generally (although not universally) described as helpful (some very much so), when approached. Similarly, staff at information desks in larger stations are also seen as mostly helpful and knowledgeable. However, there is little sense of proactivity or of there being clearly identifiable customer service staff at stations who are 'primed and ready' to help. The point being made here is that, unlike for example the best retailers, there is not a sense in stations that there are a sufficient number of staff – and staff with the right sort of customer service focussed attitude - to provide help and information to passengers when they need it.

“I think the staffing is variable, the training seems variable to me because sometimes at Central Station I’ve asked questions and the service, the response that I get isn’t so good, at other times it’s perfectly fine. I think it varies from person to person, which I don’t think it should. It shouldn’t be varying but it does.” (Glasgow, Leisure)

“There’s people just standing there just having a chat. I mean, there’s literally no point in them being there. I’ve never had an absolutely terrible experience or a terrible encounter with one of them, but I don’t really know why they’re there.”(Glasgow, Business)

This issue is compounded by passengers not knowing which staff do what at stations, which in turn can be exacerbated by their being different staff from different companies in different uniforms all at the same station.

“I struggled to get staff the last time. Eventually I found two guys sitting at a table in a corner. And they did have the uniform on and they did point me in the right direction, but to see folk running about, they’re sitting down and they’re not that visible.” (Glasgow, Leisure)

“Station staff sometimes don’t know, because you’ve got three different companies that work in Glasgow Central station, so you don’t know who represents who and [some] are some of the worst people I think you’ll ever encounter in customer service.” (Glasgow, Business)

During disruption, it can sometimes seem that staff, while trying their best, are not always very much better informed than customers themselves.

“That’s the most frustrating thing about it; I don’t mind if I know why, but it was just an endless string of “We apologise for the delay. The train will start soon,” or whatever it was, but I’d rather be given a reason; it, sort of, manages the expectation then of what’s going on and how long it’s going to take really.” (Birmingham, Leisure)

Passengers also describe a lack of station seating other than at retail environments as an irritant. As well as being inconvenient, this can feel like a clumsy attempt to manipulate passenger behaviour.

“There are areas towards the top at New Street where you can go and sit, however, they probably only hold about 30 people. So if there’s a lot of people going in then you’d have a problem.” (Birmingham, Leisure)

There was relatively little comment about specific stations other than the major ones. That said, while there is recognition of the improvements made at key stations, smaller stations

often feel rather forlorn and neglected. Specifically, it is pointed out than some small stations (e.g. Warrington Bank Quay) have very limited facilities while at others (such as Coventry) facilities are outdated and 'tired'. The sometimes poor perceptions of smaller stations are perhaps exacerbated by a widening gap with the flagship hubs.

*"You've got Preston and Warrington and you're like, 'Is there anybody here?' Warrington, which is a bit of a hub, has got like a vending machine and that's it."
(Glasgow, Business)*

3.2.3 Problems with Euston

Passengers from all across the route have strong views about Euston. In line with views about other stations, feedback on Euston is by no means universally negative. Thus, there is recognition of recent improvements in terms of a range of retail and food & drink outlets and the development of the outside piazza. There is also recognition of the limitations of the site and the challenges of its role as a very busy central London hub. In addition, Euston perhaps inevitably also suffers in comparison with its nearby neighbour, St Pancras.

However, Euston shares many of the 'generic' problems of stations (paid for toilets, lack of visible customer service staff etc.). But in addition - and even for those who use Euston very rarely - crowd management at the station is a major bugbear. Passengers describe as stressful and unpleasant the pre-departure 'scrum' on the congested concourse with everyone focussed on the departure board and with there being very little time between the platform announcement and departure. This is exacerbated for many by what can seem an irritating and time consuming pre-boarding ticket checking process. The process is seen as particularly disagreeable for infrequent users and anyone with mobility issues or with heavy luggage.

"Of course it's one of the major rail hubs in London, so you have to expect a certain level of 'chaos' every now and again!"(Colwyn Bay, Leisure)

"It was like a herd of buffalo heading down the ramp at Euston. It was the most appalling thing." (Birmingham, Leisure)

"Always at Euston it's virtually the entire concourse all looking up waiting for the time to appear on the boards and then they flip, trains are ready, and it's a mass of people galloping downhill, gathering speed towards the barriers. It isn't very nice at all, especially for the ticket inspectors."(London, Leisure)

"I think one of the problems at London Euston is when they actually put the platform on the board and it is like a stampede, you've got five minutes to get on that train, and you've got to go down and you're forced down this little chute, and there's people there that are like 'ticket, ticket' and you're like 'I've got five minutes and you're going to go without me.'"(Manchester, Business)

3.2.4 Getting to and from the station

A further issue for some passengers is simply getting to and from stations. Here it is argued that connections with other rail or public transport services are not always well-coordinated. Particular problems can be getting to the station for an early morning train (leaving some passengers with no option but to drive and pay for parking) or finding onward transport (other than an expensive Taxi) from a late arriving train. In this context, the idea of some sort of 'ride sharing' scheme was suggested as a possible remedy if public transport services cannot be extended (e.g. minibuses that could serve key local destinations).

“One thing I find is quite annoying is, I live on the south side of Glasgow, but I can’t get a local train, I can’t go and get my local train in to Central to get the train down so you have to drive, park and sometimes that’s just an added hassle, whereas it would be easier if you could just get a train, but it’s just because it’s too early.” (Glasgow, Business)

3.2.5 Improvements to the station experience.

As just discussed, stations are an area where passengers see a need for significant improvements. Key requirements in this area include:

- ensuring more visible presence of staff with a clear customer service remit
- free (or at least free for rail ticket holders) cleaner, smarter toilets
- continuing to expand the range of retail and catering choices
- providing more seating at stations, not just in retail outlets
- better co-ordinated links for onward (or inward) travel
- addressing Euston boarding issues, relieving the 'crush and rush' currently involved, which may in part be delivered by improved ticketing processes as is discussed in the next section.

3.3 Ticketing

There are two major issues with ticketing: a complex and opaque fare structure and a ticket checking and issuing process that is increasingly seen as outmoded and complicated.

3.3.1 Fare structure

Most of the passengers who took part in this study were booking in advance online. As such, they are familiar with (or at least have been conditioned to) yield management pricing approaches. However, while accepting variable pricing in principle, many people struggle to understand its application in practice and thus, how to get the best deal. Passengers often feel that the very large price differences that can exist between seemingly very similar journeys can seem rather arbitrary, making it difficult to know if one has achieved the optimum price or what strategy one should adopt in order to do so.

“Booking train tickets is a bit of a minefield, you never know what price you are going to get for the ticket that you are trying to book!” (Manchester, Business)

“Tickets are so complex and the prices don’t seem to be tied to distances. I would love to know how they go about calculating them!” (Manchester, Leisure)

“I’d like to know exactly when peak and off-peak times are, you never seem to be able to get a clear answer when you’re looking for it, and no one informs you of it unless you ask.” (Colwyn Bay, Leisure)

“You feel so pressured to be booking tickets the ‘right’ way in order to get the correct price. Why can’t there just be one single way to book which gives a fair price to everyone?” (Colwyn Bay, Leisure)

“I know other people have told me they’ve booked in advance where it’s been cheaper in First Class. I haven’t been that lucky. I don’t know how that sort of stuff works. Obviously that’s something in their pricing methods that they’ve worked out.” (Manchester, Business)

The absolute cost of tickets on InterCity West Coast is mostly seen as reasonable value for money (as is discussed in more detail later in this report) but this is against the context of most passengers in this research booking in advance and therefore being able to take advantage of discounted fares. That said, many passengers had, on occasion bought or considered buying a ‘walk up’ price ticket. The price of these tickets is seen as expensive, indeed sometime ‘extortionate.’ The lack of flexibility in terms of the ability to change trains if one’s plans changed can also be a problem. While there is a broad acceptance of the principle of having to travel on a pre-booked train, many passengers would like there to be some more flexibility in these situations

“I used to have to take the afternoon off work to get a ticket for under a £100 otherwise I was paying nearly £200 to travel at those busier times.” (London, Leisure)

“The appointment we went to, we were told it was going to take four hours and it took two hours, so we had two hours to waste. And we desperately wanted to come home because it had been a long day and so we were just trying to ask them if we could go on the earlier train. They weren’t having it, but they were very polite telling us we definitely couldn’t get on the earlier train.” (Birmingham, Leisure)

However, passengers seem to look upon fares in the round. That is, there appears to be a (perhaps grudging) acceptance for some that high cost walk-up fares are to some degree the ‘price one has to pay’ for having good value advance fares.

“I mean, if you’re going to go to buy a ticket to London on the day then you’re going to expect to pay well over £100 and that’s just the price that it is, but if you are organised enough you can get them sometimes for £9, or £15. It just depends on you, really, so I think there is enough choice, they do provide those priced tickets but they then give

the responsibility to you to be organised enough to buy them.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

“I think it’s okay. I mean, if you’re booking last minute you know you’re going to pay the full hit, but if you have got the ability to book a month or two months in front, then you’re always going to get decent value for money.” (Manchester, Leisure)

Notwithstanding the above, people can feel that walk-up fares unfairly take advantage of passengers who have no choice but to buy them.

“I’ve got a bit of an issue. I still can’t see how some of the tickets I buy can be so much more versus when I plan in advance...sometimes I feel as a customer I’m being penalised.” (Manchester, Business)

“I’m a little bit annoyed that Virgin holds the monopoly on the Manchester to London train because it’s expensive, especially when you work and you travel Friday night to Sunday. You have no choice.” (London, Leisure)

3.3.2 Ticket issuing

The perceived convenience of booking online beforehand is undermined for many passengers by the need to queue, physically present a card, input a complex code and print out tickets at machines in the station. (Few of those who took part in the research were printing their tickets at home). Similar ‘clunkiness’ is seen as evident in the frequent checking of physical tickets (pre-boarding, on board, on exit etc.).

“You’d think booking in advance would be job done, but there’s so many more obstacles you have to go through to actually be able to use that ticket for your journey!” (Birmingham, Leisure)

“You get too many print outs at the ticket machines; you get your reservation, ticket and receipt, when all I want is one ticket for my one journey” (Colwyn Bay, Leisure)

3.3.3 Improvements to ticketing

Ticketing is an area that is seen as needing significant improvement. Key requirements in this area include:

- greater transparency on ticket pricing to help passengers understand how and why fares may differ so widely
- making the ‘rules’ simpler and clearer, such that passengers are able to make better informed choices about tickets and how to get the best fare for their journey.

In terms of the ticketing process, passengers want something that 'is much slicker' and many see the better use of technology as the way to deliver this. Ideally, passengers want a seamless online process, removing the time consuming and inconvenient practice of printing tickets at station machines and having them checked repeatedly. Ultimately, the desire is for ticketing that establishes the passenger's right to travel and contains all relevant information about the journey and the passenger and that can encompass purchase of other services (meals, onward travel etc.).

"I think with bookings stuff, the technology's set up for like e-tickets, every festival, everything's developing around you, just have your smartphone and you just scan it."
(Manchester, Business)

"Because on a flight you get a manifest so it tells you if there's anybody who's a vegetarian or suffers from allergies or anything like that. Maybe if the train staff had that then that would be a way for them to check the right person is in the right seat."
(Birmingham, Commuter)

"I think the app could do a lot more. It could tell you if you're running on time or not and maybe give an alarm if you're over a certain number of minutes delayed. It could tell you what the cab numbers are and restaurants and cafes nearest you when you arrive in your destination – useful stuff like that – just take it a bit further than looking up the times and buying a ticket." (Birmingham, Leisure)

3.4 Train service and performance

There was relatively little comment about issues with the West Coast train service. Passengers did not voice any concerns about the frequency of the service. Punctuality and reliability was generally considered to be acceptable.

3.5 On train experience

For the most part, the on-train experience is a positive one. The rolling stock is seen as modern and although West Coast trains are perhaps beginning to show a few signs of age (e.g. the lack of sufficient power points) they are still often seen as better than those of the competitors.

"I'm extremely positive about Virgin, to be honest. They set a precedent that I think other companies need to compete with." (London, Commuter)

"It definitely needs to be better, because things like my phone, after a long day of work on the iPhone you're pretty much running out of battery, then you have to make sure you've booked a table seat to get a plug." (Manchester, Business)

Trains are seen as generally offering at least reasonable levels of comfort and space and overall passengers describe themselves as feeling safe and secure. That said, Pendolinos are not to everyone's taste and some complain about motion sickness. Some also complain

that Standard Class seats can feel somewhat cramped, particularly if one is not at a table and want to use a lap top.

“I’ve got an issue with the Pendolino, as you are coming down country, probably around Milton Keynes, Watford Junction, down to Euston it really tilts. I mean, I know that’s its design, but it gives me motion sickness, it really badly does.” (London, Business)

“I find that when you’re not sitting at a table, the table that comes down just isn’t big enough. So if I’ve got my laptop or something, it has to be on my lap.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

There are a number of aspects of the on-train experience that some – though by no means all – passengers find problematic. One of these concerns temperature with some finding the trains too hot at times and others too cold so there may be merit in considering individual climate control.

Also in relation to train layout, it was noted by some that it can be difficult to move through the train if one has a lot of luggage or are travelling with children. This can also represent a challenge in terms of getting on or off the train without help, which is not always available. In addition, as noted earlier, it was often argued that given the number of electronic devices that most people carry nowadays, the number of power points available on InterCity West Coast trains was insufficient.

While the above issues were raised by various groups of passengers, there are four issues that are raised consistently and that are seen as requiring attention as a matter of priority: congestion, luggage, toilets and WiFi.

3.5.1 Congestion

Congestion can be an issue. While most passengers in this study (many of whom were travelling on advance tickets with associated seat reservations) reported only a few instances of themselves not having a seat for their journey, most had experienced congested trains with other people having to stand. This was noted as being a problem for passengers joining at stations on route e.g. Birmingham or south of Glasgow and also when particular events, such as football matches, were taking place. In addition, some London commuters reported more regular occurrences of congestion and of themselves having to stand for some or all of their journey.

Insufficient seating is seen as largely unacceptable, with concerns expressed over safety as well as comfort and a feeling that such overcrowding illustrates a lack of care on the part of the train company.

“I’ve seen someone stand from Manchester to Edinburgh all the way and she sat on her bag in the toilet and she’s paid the same price as we had, but just wasn’t quick enough to get a seat.” (Manchester, Business)

“Tickets are not cheap no matter how you look at them and you’re paying for the service. If you’re paying for the service to travel two and a half hours you’ve got to have a seat.” (Manchester, Leisure)

“Buses have a rule on amount of people allowed standing, so why can’t trains? They need to create some sort of rules and policy on this as it is getting beyond ridiculous, and is often putting people in danger.” (London, Commuter)

3.5.2 WiFi

For many passengers the provision of good quality and free WiFi is increasingly becoming a base level expectation. Paying (in Standard Class) for a patchy service is frequently seen as unacceptable and while 1st Class passengers appreciate the complimentary service provided, many point out that the quality of service is variable and unreliable.

“I just think you pay more than enough for a ticket, then they make a profit off all the other things on the train – teas, water, coffee – couldn’t they just include WiFi?” (Liverpool, Leisure)

“It’s not as if it’s a good standard, it drops in and out, so you’re paying for something you can’t really use properly.” (Glasgow, Business)

The train is often unfavourably compared to the ever-growing range of retail, hospitality and transport environments where free WiFi comes ‘as standard.’

“It quite often drops out and you’re paying. It’s free on the bus so why are you paying five quid an hour for something that you can get everywhere else free?” (Birmingham, Commuter)

“I think like the trams in Manchester they all have free Wi-Fi, and the cafés all have free Wi-Fi and all these different things. It just becomes part of an expected service.” (Manchester, Business)

3.5.3 Luggage

The limited amount and inaccessibility of luggage space is a frequently cited frustration for many passengers. It is argued that the minimal overhead space means anything but the

smallest bags need to be stowed in end or mid carriage racks (and as such, luggage is not only an issue for those taking larger or lots of bags).

“Why are the luggage racks above your heads so small and insufficient for your personal belongings? It makes no sense.” (Glasgow, Business)

“Luggage is a big thing because sometimes whatever little area there is, people cram things in and you could have something in there that you don’t want to have somebody piling something on top of.” (Manchester, Leisure)

It is clear that many people feel very insecure about being parted from their bags and fear damage or theft. That being said, only two respondents who took part in this study had any direct experience of a stolen bag. (In the context of security, it is worth noting that few passengers appear to be aware of on-board CCTV). It is also suggested that overall train design is not conducive to managing large amounts of, or cumbersome luggage (such as a child’s buggy) because of the limited overall space, narrow aisles and limited help available.

“Why can’t they make the seats higher so we have underneath storage, or lower the racks above our heads so we have more storage there? These are simple improvements they can do that will help us so much.” (London, Leisure)

“Personally, I don’t like it when I can’t see my luggage, so I don’t like sitting in the middle because I’ve noticed it before when somebody gets on the train for example, and you’ve got a soft bag and they’ve got a hard bag and they’re just moving your bag and putting theirs up there; don’t throw my bag down there; you don’t know what’s in it. That’s my thing, so I don’t like that side of things.” (Glasgow, Business)

“I take my little boy’s buggy constantly and it’s hard to get it on if I’m on my own.” (Manchester, Leisure)

3.5.4 Toilets and cleanliness

No one is altogether happy with toilets on trains, but there are varying degrees of unhappiness. The key issue is cleanliness, with it being argued that while toilets are usually in a reasonable state at the start of a journey, the lack of ongoing cleaning means they are often found in a very poor state later on. As such, it is suggested that toilets – and indeed the train overall – should have some cleaning on route. There are also many complaints about unpleasant smells in toilets and corridors.

“I’m not being funny you don’t expect them to be like your toilet at home do you know what I mean? But you expect them to be a certain standard, yes.” (Manchester, Leisure)

“Another downside for me is obviously the toilets. They are just poor.... It’s the smell, the door opens and a waft of.... Cleanliness, generally just could be better.” (Glasgow, Business)

“Smelly toilets are part and parcel of any train journey. I think you’d be lucky to find someone who thinks otherwise!” (London, Leisure)

The large WCs with electronically closing doors on Virgin trains polarise opinion. On the one hand there are passengers who like these toilets because they are spacious and include baby changing facilities. However, the door closing mechanism remains a source of anxiety for some, with there being confusion between the passenger alarm for the door opening / close button.

“But I don’t like the electric ones because I’m worried I don’t press the lock button and you’re sat there. You need a good old fashioned lock that you can turn.” (London, Commuter)

Overall train cleanliness is seen as reasonable, although trains are described as not altogether spotless and again, tend to become grubbier as the journey progresses. Regular rubbish collection is seen as important and seems to be a feature on many, but not all, trains. It is also suggested that:

“The trains really are sometimes unnecessarily messy – all it takes is a minute or two for a cleaner to quickly blitz the train down the aisles. It should be happening more often.” (Liverpool, Business)

“If you go to a Cafe Nero, which I think as a franchise, as a business, and Costa, spot on. And you’ve got essentially in my mind, the rolling stock equivalent of Costa, so why can’t you have a couple of cleaners employed constantly on the train?” (Manchester, Business)

3.6 Other aspect of the on-train experience

3.6.1 Reservations

There are a number of issues with reservations. These include ‘clustering’ of reserved seats in a small area even on an uncrowded train and the lack of ‘policing’ of reservations by staff on trains, leading to awkwardness and embarrassment for some passengers when people have taken the wrong seat.

“The only point of friction I have seen on the train is on the odd occasions when the seat reservations don’t come up above you...on a busy train that can cause a slight challenge if you know you’re in someone’s seat and they’ve actually reserved it but it

doesn't say so on the display. So I've seen a couple of arguments over that."
(Birmingham, Commuter)

"I think most people chance it taking a reserved seat that isn't theirs, hoping that the person is either not turning up or getting on at a station after they have got off! You can see why they do it; there is no one stopping them."(Manchester, Leisure)

"I think, London Midland lets you choose which direction you want to sit while you're travelling and when you go into the Virgin one, you don't have that option and you just get shoved anywhere." (Glasgow, Business)

On the whole, passengers seem to be unaware of new facility to choose seats on InterCity West Coast trains, but cite this as a useful improvement.

3.6.2 Catering and retail

The on-board catering / retail offer is seen as having improved in recent years, with passengers citing the wider choice of both food and non-food available. However, many feel there is room for further improvement. It is also often argued that on-board prices are high compared to standard retail outlets. Suggested improvements include:

- more healthy options
- food choices that better acknowledge dietary diversity (vegetarian, 'free-from', allergies etc.)
- providing key nutritional information (calories, fat content etc.) is increasingly the norm in food service outlets and would be welcomed on trains as well
- ensuring the shop is sufficiently well-stocked for the entire journey. (There were reports of the shop running out of food entirely or at least of certain items e.g. vegetarian food and sometimes closing unannounced).

"Weatherspoon's at Heathrow airport, if you have a look at the menu it will tell you what calories and everything that's in it. So you have all your nutritional information."
(Glasgow, Business)

"I actually love the burgers on a Virgin trains, I deliberately don't have anything before I get on so I can have one!" (Birmingham, Leisure)

The 1st Class food offer is generally well-regarded. 1st Class passengers describe it as plentiful and as offering a good choice and frequent service. It is, however, also noted that, 1st Class food service can be somewhat limited on weekends and late evenings.

3.6.3 Staff

Staff on board trains (and at boarding) are typically seen as friendly, helpful and approachable and are often contrasted favourably with station personnel.

“They also keep you up to date with what’s happening, so maybe started off late but then we made up the time so they’ll remind you that we’re going to come into Euston on time. I think they’re always well informed. Again, sometimes they’ve got a sense of humour but I think they’re good. (Birmingham, Commuter)

However, it is suggested that staff could be more *visible*, particularly on late night services with few people travelling. While passengers do not typically describe themselves as feeling insecure (notwithstanding isolated incidents of anti-social behaviour by other passengers) there is a degree of nervousness about what assistance might be available *if* something did happen and there was a need to summon staff. In this context, some suggest the installation of communication points as on Underground platforms. Again, it is worth noting that there is limited awareness of CCTV on train carriages.

“Sometimes you don’t see any staff walk past during the entire journey. It would be nice to just see a presence, for personal reassurance of security more than anything.”(London, Business)

“Well last time I did a long-haul I only saw them come up once. It’s usually when I get to Birmingham they come on and I don’t see them again.” (Manchester, Business)

3.6.4 Quiet Zone

Most people approve of the idea of the Quiet Zone. The only qualifications mentioned in respect of the Quiet Zone are that there are occasional incidents of passengers not complying and the concept can be undermined by not being ‘policed’ by staff.

“A lot of people choose to be on their mobiles at some point when on the train, and we all have this thing where we decide to talk a little bit louder when on the mobile phone, so the more availability of quiet zones the better!”(Manchester, Leisure)

3.6.5 Communications and disruption

On board communications are rarely an issue and indeed, are usually only top of mind during periods of disruption. In this context, and in line with other research, clear and regular updates during disruption are a key requirement. There were positive reports of InterCity West Coast staff trying hard to keep passengers informed. However, it can sometimes feel that on-board staff, while doing their best, are little better informed than passengers themselves about the causes and consequences of disruption.

“As soon as they found out they came back in, and rather than just announcing it over the tannoy they were actually working their way through the train to speak to people about their concerns or whatever, connecting stuff. So I thought it was a really, really good service.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

“Instead of giving so many announcements over the speakers why don’t Virgin West Coast substitute some of these for informing their staff face to face, so that we can get personal and human updates when they walk past?”(London, Leisure)

Few passengers are aware of their delay-repay rights. In fact, there is a tendency to assume that compensation for delay will be much less generous and will involve a much more onerous process than is the case in reality. Given this, the several examples cited of Virgin West Coast proactively advising customers on compensation (handing out forms etc.) is very well received. Passengers are genuinely surprised and pleased by these actions and potentially ‘miserable’ moments can be changed into ‘magic’ ones. (On this point it should be noted that during the period within which the research was conducted, Virgin West Coast was in the process of introducing Automatic Delay Repay but most passengers were still unaware of this development).

“It’s nice to get something back for a delayed journey. You actually feel like Virgin West Coast value your custom on their train, and you’re more than just a paper ticket.”(Birmingham, Commuter)

“Well when we were delayed the first time, luckily the train guy who walks up and down for the tickets, he actually was saying to everybody – because on that occasion we were delayed by about two and a half hours, it was a really long delay – he said ‘don’t forget, contact Virgin, you can get your money back’ so when we got home we went on the internet.” (Manchester, Business)

3.6.6 Improvements to the on-board experience

Priorities for improvement to the on-board experience tend to focus on fixing things that are currently sub-optimum. As such, key priorities include:

- improved storage and security for luggage
- enhanced toilet facilities
- free and reliable WiFi

Longer term aspirations for the on-board experience centre on the idea of personalisation. As mentioned earlier, passengers envisage the ability to build their own bespoke journey, which better reflects their personal preferences, perhaps more akin to the sort of experience that is increasingly being offered by airlines. This might include being able to choose from different options (for example, in terms of seating, food entertainment etc.) so as to help passengers make the most of their time on board (however individuals define this). This is partly about providing (or enabling the passenger’s own) technology to facilitate work and relaxation. But it also about providing different environments and experiences e.g. family zone, child free zone, work zone etc.

3.7 The views of some key passenger segments

3.7.1 Passengers with a disability

The experience of passengers with disabilities is in many respects, very similar to those of other passengers. However, some of the general frustrations of travel on InterCity West Coast can have a more marked impact on the disabled community and, of course, disabled passengers face a number of unique additional challenges.

As for many passengers, the experience of arriving at and navigating through, the station is the most difficult part of the journey for passengers with disabilities. Extreme anxiety is a side effect of a scenario in which the disabled passenger may not find it easy to get around or see their way, or are dependent on assistance (which can be of variable quality), and fear missing their train altogether. Crowding at Euston poses a particular challenge. Although most passengers with a disability leave plenty of time before departure to make sure they can access the help they need, most found the crowding at Euston (and fact the car park is on the lower level) difficult to manage.

The other key issue at stations is the availability and quality of assistance on offer. While most experiences with staff providing assistance at stations are positive, some problems do occur on occasion. Examples cited include; staff with a poor command of English making communication difficult; staff being late (or trying to combine the needs of different disabled passengers, meaning one can be late for their train having dropped someone else off!), and simply not being there to support at agreed time / location.

“My gran recently had a stroke, she’s 81. I got on the train at Glasgow and my mum and I went down to Manchester for the weekend and on the train we’d booked all this assistance before because it’s the first going out since she had this and when we got to, the conductor said to us “Get off at Oxford Road, it’s closer to your hotel, you need to get off; I’ll organise it and phone ahead.” We stopped at Oxford Road station and it literally was doors opened, people pushing in and out, nothing, you know, you couldn’t even walk; lots of other people had to help us off the train with the wheelchair, go in it, we got to the station and there was four flights of stairs; people had to lift and carry and on the way back the exact same thing happened again, despite going through the station manager.” (Glasgow, Business)

On board experiences are generally described as good, although marking out the priority seats as reserved for the disabled is preferable – most found it annoying to have to ask people to move for a seat.

“It’s not very nice when you are forced to ask someone for a seat, especially if your disability isn’t obvious or apparent to anyone.” (Manchester, Business, Disabled Passenger)

Staff on board are also generally good, although it is suggested that they could perhaps do more on busy services in terms of making themselves known to the disabled passenger.

Training staff on the buffet trolley to ensure they specifically ask those with a sight/mobility impairment if they need anything would help, as this is the only chance most get to access refreshments on board

“When people come up and offer help it’s very useful to me if they can clarify that they are staff. Being blind I don’t know if it’s a member of the public being kind or someone who is there to help me onto the train.” (Manchester, Business, Disabled Passenger)

“It varies based on whether I use my chair or the crutches. You get much more help in the wheelchair but you need it so much more on the crutches – staff seem oblivious when you’re on crutches sometimes.” (London, Leisure, Disabled Passenger)

3.7.2 Virgin West Coast 1st Class

There were broadly two types of regular 1st Class passengers included in this study. Some are primarily business travellers and as such do not pay fares with their own money, although many have to operate within a budget. Others were planned leisure travellers, able to take advantage of advance fares and /or weekend upgrades, which are often seen as offering very good value. In this context, 1st Class is generally seen as worth the premium either from a productivity or relaxation perspective. Both business and leisure travellers highlight the benefits of 1st Class in terms of more space and comfort, less crowded, table space, plentiful and (at least) reasonably good catering.

“In my experience, First Class on Virgin West Coast is fine. It’s kind of eight or nine out of ten for me.” (Glasgow, Business)

“I do love the deals, I go on that red spotted hankie.com and use my Tesco vouchers, you can get First Class travel so cheaply; it’s unbelievable, yes, and then at weekends you pay £15 for an upgrade.” (Manchester, Leisure)

“ When I book sufficiently in advance I can justify First Class and get the deals...it’s just nice to just not have to worry about how crowded it’s going to be because there tends to be plenty of first class carriages.” (Manchester, Leisure)

“That £15 thing is brilliant. That’s worth its weight in gold because it’s just such a lovely thing to be able to do because I can’t always afford to buy First Class, but that’s a nice little cheap benefit.”(London, Leisure)

Notwithstanding the above, 1st Class passengers share many of the same concerns as Standard Class passengers. Thus, there are complaints about the condition of toilets and the fact that WiFi – while complementary in 1st Class – is still far from robust. The lack of luggage space on trains is also noted by 1st Class passengers. However, as there are typically far fewer passengers in 1st Class than in Standard, finding space for luggage tends to be less of a problem. Initially, relatively few improvements to the on train experience are

suggested by 1st Class users. However, this view did shift somewhat during the course of the discussion. In particular, 1st Class business passengers who were often travelling at peak hours and were often paying full price fares could become more demanding as the discussion progressed. These passengers are most likely to compare InterCity West Coast to air travel and to argue that rail travel should seek to emulate airlines in terms of service delivery. Examples of this include, staff that are generally more customer-focussed, slicker and more technologically enabled ticketing, more personalised services and (in common with other passengers) some form of loyalty scheme.

“It’s just as you were saying the train service to get you there is fine but the service as in customer services is something that needs to be addressed. There needs to be somewhere you can actually compare it to, like when you think about air travel and you compare it.” (Glasgow, Business)

For non-users, what can be seen as the ‘excessive’ provision of 1st Class seating compared to Standard Class on crowded trains can be irritating.

“That’s another thing for me, is the crowding on there and in the coaches, there’s like ten First Class coaches with three people on one and the rest are all spare, then all the cattle class coaches are just crammed.” (Manchester, Business)

In addition, some passengers (both 1st Class users and non-users) suggest there is room for an intermediate class e.g. with the benefits of 1st Class space and comfort, but without the catering.

“There’s a midway piece because there’s almost kind of like an instant upgrade to business class that doesn’t give you everything on First Class, but if you’ve got empty First Class carriages maybe you say to passengers as you get on it, ‘Look, it’s a £10 upgrade to business class; you can get free Wi-Fi, free coffee’”. (Birmingham, Commuter)

“I remember a long time ago when I started working for a company that was also London based in 1988 and there used to be something called Silver Standard and the Silver Standard was like halfway between Standard and First Class and it was fantastic.” (Manchester, Leisure)

3.7.3 The commuter perspective

Commuters tended to be very positive about the service, reporting generally comfortable and efficient journeys for the most part, albeit, as indicated earlier, there were some complaints about overcrowding from London commuters. Commuters rely on rail travel and are acutely aware of how it compares to the alternatives in terms of speed, cost and convenience, and against this backdrop, tend to be extremely positive about the service.

“It’s not perfect but when you compare it to driving to Liverpool from Manchester....you just wouldn’t think of it. It wins on every level, and I don’t think the cost is unreasonable at all when you compare driving and parking.” (Commuter, Manchester)

“When you consider how much your fuel would cost, parking and congestion, convenience and everything; there’s probably not that much difference if you’ve got a decent economical car, but it’s just so much less stressful.” (Commuter, Birmingham)

Commuters on InterCity West Coast generally felt the trains were less crowded than other forms of transport, and were hugely advantageous over other modes in terms of providing space and facilities to work. Many who took the same journeys regularly recognised staff and felt acknowledged in return. Delays and disruption were issues generally accepted as occasionally unavoidable, and considered well-managed for the most part. Commuters are, of course, generally very familiar with station and train environments, and tended to have ‘workarounds’ for the things that frustrate e.g. bringing food and drink with them or purchasing before they get to the station.

“I’m a creature of habit so I get a Quiet Zone table and power point, so I always go for the same type of seat and nine times out of ten I will get it, so absolutely fine.” (Commuter, Birmingham)

“I’d describe myself as their Number One Fan. They’re right up there for service, information and facilities; I actually enjoy travelling with them. It’s such a contrast to the Metro where you’re dying to get off from the moment you get on.” (Commuter, Manchester)

3.7.4 Variation by route

As noted, the research was conducted in a range of locations to reflect the diversity of the West Coast franchise. However, in terms of the overall service experience and passengers’ priorities for improvement, there was very little regional variation.

3.8 Value for money

While Virgin West Coast is not considered cheap, it is seen as offering value for money overall, but perceptions of value for money are inextricably linked to perceptions of *choice*. There are two facets of choice: whether one has the *choice of different modes* for a particular journey and whether one can *choose the time* of one’s journey.

Passengers who have a choice in terms of both mode and time of travel tend to be the most satisfied. InterCity West Coast generally stacks up well against alternative modes and flexibility in journey planning opens the opportunity for low cost fares.

“It’s just an easy way to travel where you have very little to worry about, and I enjoy the down time where I can read a book or take in the scenery, so it’s always a positive choice for me to go by train.”(Manchester, Leisure)

“I book advance, so if I'm going to London and I book three weeks in advance sometimes I can only pay £17 for a ticket.” (Manchester, Business)

Passengers who have a choice in terms of time of travel, but not in terms of mode are still mostly satisfied with value for money. While they may not have alternative benchmarks, they are still able to benefit from low fares meaning the train still represents good value.

“I've always travelled by train and it really is a good service on the whole. People only remember when things go wrong on the train. They forget how good it is for servicing the main cities across the country every day.”(Glasgow, Business)

Those with a choice of mode but with little choice over time of travel (often business travellers) are, of course, unlikely to benefit from bargain fares. However, in a rational evaluation of alternatives, rail is typically still seen as attractive, although this group feels entitled to be particularly demanding about the service provided.

“To be fair, what you get for your money is, on the whole, a reliable and trusted service that will get you from A to B, often over a long distance. But they should be rewarding us more for choosing them regularly, as the money they take out of our pockets is substantial.” (Glasgow, Business)

“I mean I'm not asking to upgrade or whatever. I'm coming back but you see what annoys me is you'll get to something like ten past eight in the morning because it drops tremendously I just don't understand why they can't make it a little less punitive.” (Manchester, Leisure)

Those who believe that they have no choice in terms of either mode or time of travel, tend to be the least satisfied. The mind-set of these passengers is perhaps more similar to the archetypal commuter, with a tendency to feel somewhat 'exploited' as a captive audience. That said, there is a general acceptance (or perhaps one could argue, a degree of conditioning) that one has to accept being 'stung' in terms of high walk-up fares if one can't plan in advance.

“They know we choose them when we need to get to the centre of busy cities like Birmingham and Manchester quickly for meetings on the day, so why would they put the ticket prices down? We have very little choice for speed and convenience on the day.” (Manchester, Business)

Notwithstanding the above, the absolute level of walk-up fares (and the sometimes huge differences with discounted fares) can be difficult for passengers to rationalise. It can sometimes feel opportunistic and profiteering on the part of the operator to charge such fares.

A further point made with regard to value for money is that (aside from those with Family or Two Together Railcards) train fares do not offer any discount for group travel, unlike for example, a car journey.

“Another thing - you know I appreciate it’s a profit making organisation - but one thing about being very hard and fast about pricing is that they are putting themselves out of the business, because if it’s cheaper to drive a car full of people. They’ve lost all that business. So they need to make it more attractive for more than one person.”
(Manchester, Leisure)

“I think a couple of times it happened to us where rather than just one or two of us going, it’s been whole team and I think if there was an option that if you buy so many in one go there’s a provision to give you a different rate on it. Something like that would really help.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

3.8.1 Recognition and reward

While Virgin West Coast’s fares are mostly seen as value for money, many passengers complain that little is given back to the customer. Here it is argued that in other environments, including travel (e.g. airlines) and retail, customer reward programmes are increasingly the norm and that Virgin West Coast - and rail in general - is lagging behind. It should be noted that few passengers were aware of the ability to collect Virgin Airmiles or Nectar points via Virgin West Coast. That being said, there were a few examples from frequent travellers of Virgin West Coast proactively making special offers to customers, which were appreciated.

“What about frequent traveller rates that the airlines do because I use it a lot and I never get those deals...but that would be great if you could do it like the airlines.”
(Manchester, Leisure)

“I did get a nice email from them recently to say ‘You’re one of our most frequent travellers, so here’s an offer’ which was totally unsolicited but it was quite nice to get something like that, even though work pays for it so I wasn’t actually going to take it out, but it’s nice to get something like that. The recognition was there.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

If you’ve got an organisation like Virgin trains, part of the Virgin group, the airlines and all the rest of it, why can’t your account with one part of the company move into the other part as well? So, for example, as a frequent train traveller, why can’t you get air miles off that or if you’re an airline payer, why can’t you get train miles?” (Glasgow, Business)

Passengers offer a range of suggestions as to how the rewards issue could be approached including developing a points schemes (‘Rail Miles’), ‘freebies’ for regular passengers (e.g.

food benefits, upgrades etc.) and special offers for regular customers. It was seen as important that any reward scheme should deliver against a number of criteria, specifically:

- it should be **worthwhile** i.e. deliver a genuine benefit, not gimmicks
- be **attainable** i.e. provide rewards that can be achieved within a realistic time frame and spend level
- be **inclusive**, providing something for everyone.

“Any sort of loyalty scheme that encourages us to use them more, and be happy to use them more. Just like Sainsbury’s do with Nectar – it makes you want to buy from them again, and feel satisfied in doing so.” (Glasgow, Business)

“I stay in Hilton hotels quite a lot and they’ve got Hilton loyalty points where I tend to get an upgrade to an executive room...If Virgin were clever about it and said, you know, ‘Every sixth ticket or, whatever, tenth ticket we’ll give you an upgrade to First Class’ you’d soon start to get used to that luxury and I think they’d probably end up selling more seats potentially in First Class.” (Birmingham, Commuter)

3.9 Additional enhancements to the overall passenger experience

There are two areas that passengers identify as important priorities that are not specific to a particular element of the InterCity West Coast experience but which underpin all aspects of the service more holistically.

3.9.1 Customer service ethos

First, it is consistently argued that the importance of staff in delivering a truly enhanced service cannot be overestimated. It is believed that staff need to embody and personify a wider brand commitment to the customer, exemplified by:

- taking ownership
- being proactive
- being empowered

“For me, you can install all those things on a train. Those are great ideas, but customer service is the number one. It can’t just be someone who chucks on a high viz vest with a name badge and that’s it; they stand about and if someone comes up and asks them a question they might know the answer. It needs to be people in uniform, people who understand the purpose of that job and they relish a customer service atmosphere. The job needs to go from being a minimum wage job to an ‘I-quite-fancy-that’ job, you know?” (Glasgow, Business)

3.9.2 ‘Everything the same, but nicer’

Here passengers are thinking about innovation beyond efficiency benefits i.e. thinking about how what exists can be made a little better, rather than pushing to something completely radical and new. This can involve looking to address niches or currently underserved needs

and reflecting the desire of consumers to have fresh experiences, but also services that deliver more in terms of ease and convenience.

“The whole thing needs lifting up, as does everything; you go into a restaurant or go and buy a new car, the new Audi garage, which is all glass and TVs and everything else. I think the whole experience should be improved, from toilets to staff to everything. It’s quite good, but in two years’ time again, should there be on-train, or in-train entertainment? Should there be an iPad that’s attached? ... I think the service generally needs to be upped.”(Glasgow, Business)

4. Conclusions

4.1 Summary

- The InterCity West Coast experience is mostly a positive one for the large majority of passengers. While the research was, of course, qualitative rather than quantitative, when asked in the focus groups and in-depth interviews to rate the service overall, Virgin West Coast is typically marked as '7 or 8 out of 10'
- InterCity West Coast also holds up well in comparison to other modes of transport (and for a large proportion of journeys, other modes are viable alternatives) and in comparison to other rail journeys.
- InterCity West Coast is generally seen as offering value for money, particularly for those on advance tickets. That said, the fare structure is often described as opaque and some fares can feel like opportunistic profiteering.
- There are issues with the on-board experience (including some quite fundamental ones, such as providing a seat for all passengers) but many of the more significant concerns are centered on pre-journey requirements such as fares, ticketing, and stations.
- Furthermore, in certain important areas, InterCity West Coast is seen as increasingly lagging behind what are becoming expected norms in retail and travel environments (for example, the provision of free WiFi).
- While InterCity West Coast is good – even very good – as a rail service, it is not perceived as being outstanding when compared to the best service brands.

4.2 Improvement priorities

Against the backdrop above, passengers do identify a range of improvements that they would like to see in terms of the InterCity West Coast experience. These improvement priorities tend to focus on the 'here and now' and on fixing things that are currently sub-optimum. Looking across all aspects of the journey, required improvements can be summarised as follows. The most important priorities center on fares and ticketing, on-board experience and stations, with increased personalisation, recognition and reward and journey planning being secondary requirements. Passengers want these improvements to be underpinned by an ingrained and genuine customer service ethos and by a constant striving for incremental improvements to all aspects of service.

4.2.1 Ticketing

Ticketing is an area that is seen as needing significant improvement. Key requirements in this area include:

- greater transparency on ticket pricing to help passengers understand how and why fares may differ so widely
- making the 'rules' simpler and clearer, such that passengers are able to make better informed choices about tickets and how to get the best fare for their journey
- establishing a seamless online ticketing process, removing if possible the time consuming and inconvenient process of printing tickets at station machines and having them checked repeatedly.

4.2.2 Stations

Stations are another area needing improvement. Key requirements in this area include:

- ensuring more visible presence of staff with a clear customer service remit
- free (or at least free for rail ticket holders) cleaner, smarter toilets
- continuing to expand the range of retail and catering choices
- providing more seating at stations, not just in retail outlets
- better co-ordinated links for onward (or inward) travel
- addressing Euston boarding issues, relieving the 'crush and rush' currently involved, which may in part be delivered by improved ticketing processes.

4.2.3 On-board

Key priorities on-board include:

- improved storage and security for luggage
- enhanced toilet facilities
- free and reliable WiFi

4.2.4 Recognition and reward

The key priority here is to 'give something' back to passengers that is:

- a worthwhile benefit, not a gimmick
- attainable: realistically achievable
- inclusive: something for all types of passenger.

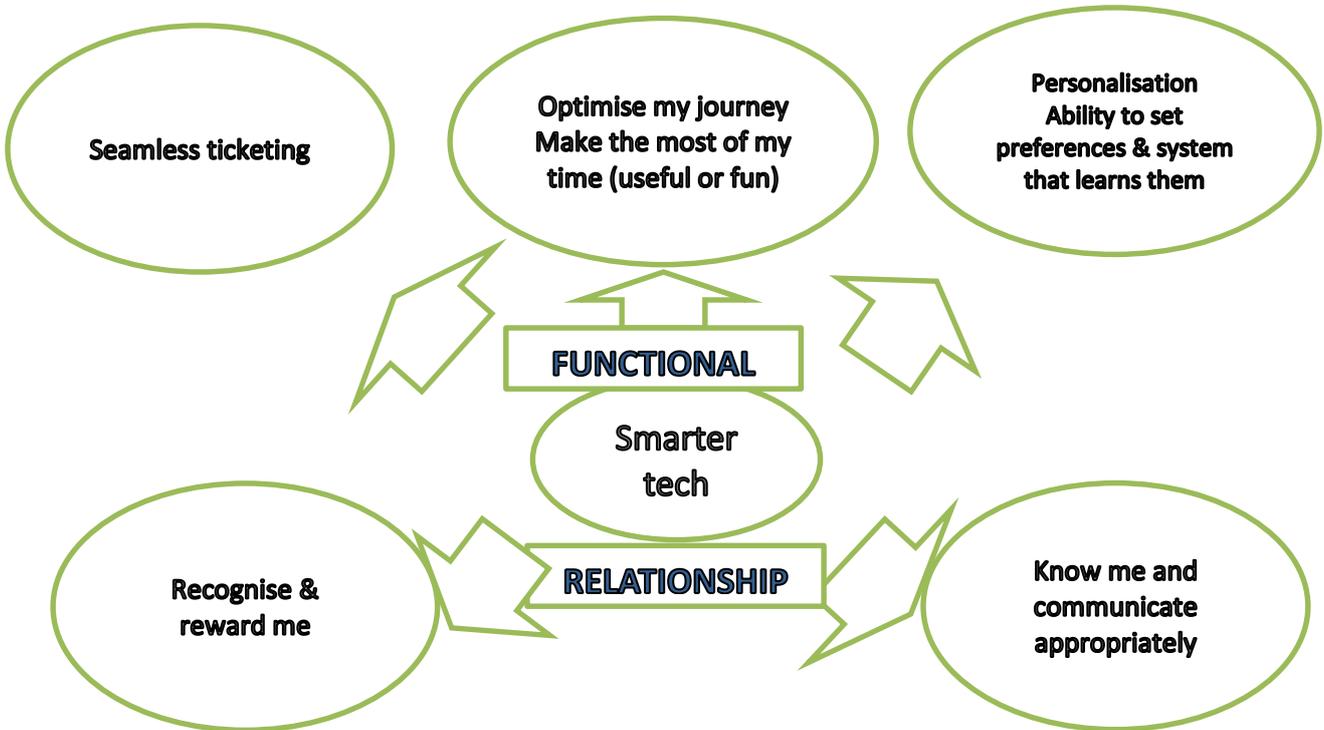
4.2.5 Journey planning

Journey planning is not an area that is seen as a major a priority for improvement. However, some potential enhancements are suggested including more pro-active / outbound communication, particularly re service disruption and in terms of fare offers and fare optimisation.

5. Longer term aspirations

When discussing unmet needs and longer-term aspirations, several recurring and overlapping themes emerge, with better use of new technology a key driving force. This is summarised in figure 1, below.

Figure 1: Aspirations for the future



5.1 Functional benefits

Functional benefits (on the top half of the figure) centre on *building more bespoke experiences*. The utilisation of smarter technology is seen as key to enabling such enhanced services. In this context, passengers are primarily drawing on existing technology paradigms (e.g. airlines, retail, hotels) rather than imagining entirely new applications. Key desired outcomes include the following.

5.1.2 Seamless ticketing

The start point for the customer experience is a simple ticketing process and, for most, this means on-line. Passengers want a process that:

- is one-stop
- establishes the passenger's right to travel and contains all relevant information about the journey and the passenger
- can encompass purchase of other services (meals, onward travel etc.).

5.1.3 Optimisation

This encompasses the ability to make the most of one's time (however defined). This is partly about providing (or enabling the passenger's own) technology to facilitate work and play. But it also about providing different environments and experiences e.g. family zone, child free zone, work zone etc.

5.1.4 Personalisation

Here passengers envisage the ability to build their own specific journey and to build a travel profile with the train service by being able to set preferences via a system that learns about them e.g.

- regular journeys
- seating
- meals entertainment
- who else they travel with etc.

5.1.5 'Soft' innovations

'Softer' innovation also needs to be cultivated. Rather than looking to create something radical and new, this is about making 'everything the same but nicer' i.e. looking at improving the existing experience beyond efficiency benefits and thinking about how that which exists can be made incrementally a little better. Softer innovation often looks to address niches or underserved needs. This is a reflection of the increasing wealth of the marketplace and the desire for consumers to have fresh experiences, but also services that deliver more in terms of ease and convenience.

5.2 Relationship benefits

The above functional benefits delivered via new technology can help facilitate a sense of *relationship* by way of the following.

5.2.1 Know me and communicate appropriately

Linked to and building upon the point made above about personalisation, by understanding the passenger's habits and preferences, the train operator will be enabled to anticipate their needs and make appropriate interventions e.g.

- special offers
- alerts & notifications
- seeking out my feedback

5.2.3 Recognise & reward me

This involves showing passengers they are valued as customers by giving something back and using knowledge about customers to develop relevant and targeted propositions.

5.2.4 Providing a customer-centric experience

Staff delivering an enhanced service is vital to improving the overall experience. In order to do this, they need to embody and personify a wider brand commitment to the customer.

This can be achieved by each staff member undertaking the following behaviours:

- taking ownership
- being proactive
- being empowered

Established and emerging models of consumer-business interaction from the worlds of retail, leisure and travel are pointing the way towards new paradigms for the rail industry to deliver improved services and an enhanced relationship with the customer. While often underpinned by technology, the key driving force behind these aspirations is the desire for a more genuinely customer-focused and personalised experience.

6.0 Appendices

6.1 Appendix 1 recruitment criteria

| Location | Age | Journey Type | Frequency | Ticket Class | Focused criteria | Other soft criteria. Mix of..... |
|------------|---------|--------------|------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| London | Mix | Business | Frequent | Standard class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length; 4) Ticket bought self / someone else. |
| London | Younger | Leisure | Occasional | Standard class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Manchester | Mix | Business | Frequent | Standard class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length; 4) Ticket bought self / someone else. |
| Manchester | Older | Leisure | Frequent | First class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Birmingham | Younger | Commuter | Frequent | Standard class | | 1) Station to station |
| Birmingham | Mid age | Leisure | Occasional | Standard class | Weekend travellers | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Liverpool | Mix | Business | Occasional | Standard class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length; 4) Ticket bought self / someone else. |
| Liverpool | Younger | Leisure | Frequent | Standard class | Student/younger end of age band | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| London | Younger | Commuter | Frequent | Standard class | | 5) Long commute / short commute on VWCT |
| London | Older | Leisure | Occasional | First class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Glasgow | Older | Leisure | Frequent | Standard class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Glasgow | Mix | Business | Occasional | First class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length; 4) Ticket bought self / someone else. |
| Preston | Older | Leisure | Occasional | Standard class | Older end of age band/more retirees | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Preston | Younger | Leisure | Frequent | Standard class | Weekend travellers | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Colwyn Bay | Younger | Leisure | Frequent | Standard class | | 1) Station to station; 2) Ticket type; 3) Journey length. |
| Colwyn Bay | Older | Commuter | Frequent | Standard class | | 1) Station to station |

6.2 Appendix 2 field materials

Recruitment screener

35721- InterCity West Coast Rail
RECRUITMENT SCREENER VERSION FV

Respondent: _____

Introduce Illuminas: Good morning/afternoon, my name is and I'm calling from Illuminas, an independent market research company.

Introduce research: We are presently undertaking a research study on behalf of Transport Focus, the non-departmental public body responsible for protecting the interests of Britain’s rail and bus passengers and road users, who are conducting a project across the UK.

The aim of this piece of research is to better understand passenger needs and perspectives when it comes to train travel

Would you be interested in taking part in a 2 hour focus group at a local viewing facility to share your views on this topic?

| | | |
|-----|---|---------------------------------|
| Yes | 1 | Continue |
| No | 2 | Thank and close - seek REFERRAL |

We are able to provide a £50 incentive as a thank you for taking part

There is also a small pre-task for you to complete prior to the interview, which you will need to bring along completed with you to the interview. This will comprise of a small paper diary with some questions relating to a train journey that you have made recently or will make in the lead up to the group discussion/interview. We are able to provide you with an extra £15 as a thank you for completing this.

Explain Market Research Society code of conduct: All information remains absolutely confidential and no individuals or organisations will be mentioned in our findings documents; and we would like to re-assure you that there will be no sales follow-up.

Would you mind answering a few questions for me to check your suitability for inclusion in this study?

| | | |
|-----|---|-----------------|
| Yes | 1 | Continue |
| No | 2 | Thank and close |

INTRO

QA. Have you ever taken part in a market research group discussion or depth interview on any subject?

| | | |
|-----|---|----------|
| Yes | 1 | Go to QB |
| No | 2 | Go to QE |

QB How many group discussions or depth interviews have you attended in the past 5 years?

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|-------|---|---|---|---|----|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9+ |
| Continue | | | | CLOSE | | | | | |

If the respondent has attended more than 3 group discussions / depth interviews in the last 5 years, DO NOT RECRUIT

QC. When did you last take part in a market research group discussion or depth interview?

| | | |
|------------------------|---|----------|
| In the last 6 months | 1 | CLOSE |
| More than 6 months ago | 2 | Go to QD |

QD. What subjects have you been interviewed on before?

WRITE IN: _____

QE. Please could you tell me...

READ OUT AND CODE ACCORDINGLY

- a. ...Do you work or have you ever worked in any of the following occupations or industries?
- b. ...Does any member of your family or close friends work or have they ever worked in any of the following occupations or industries?

a.

b.

| | | |
|------------------|---|---|
| ADVERTISING | 1 | 1 |
| MARKETING | 1 | 1 |
| MARKET RESEARCH | 1 | 1 |
| JOURNALISM | 1 | 1 |
| PUBLIC RELATIONS | 1 | 1 |
| BUS COMPANY | 1 | 1 |
| TRANSPORT FOCUS | | |
| RAIL COMPANY | 1 | 1 |
| NATIONAL RAIL | 1 | 1 |
| <hr/> | | |
| NONE OF THESE | 2 | 2 |

If respondent says "YES" to any of the above coded 1, DO NOT RECRUIT

MAIN SCREENER

ASK ALL

Q1. How old are you? WRITE IN AGE _____
SINGLE CODE - CODE TO FRAME

| | | |
|----------------|---|--|
| Under 18 years | 1 | CLOSE CONTINUE WITH THE FOLLOWING DEFINITIONS YOUNGER (18-45) OLDER (45+) |
| 18 - 25 | 2 | |
| 26 - 34 | 3 | |
| 35 - 45 | 4 | |
| 45-55 | 5 | |
| 56 - 59 | 6 | |
| 60 + | 7 | |

WITHIN THE YOUNGER AND OLDER BANDS THE FOLLOWING AGE QUOTAS APPLY TO CERTAIN GROUPS (CHECK QUOTA TABLE):

VERY YOUTHFUL / STUDENT: UNDER 25 (GROUP 4)

MID AGE: 35 TO 55 (GROUP 6)

RETIREES: 60/65+ (GROUP 9)

ASK ALL

Q2a. Do you use Virgin WestCoast trains for any of the following reasons...
SINGLE CODE -READ OUT

| | | | |
|--------------|---|----------|----------|
| To Commute | 1 | CONTINUE | COMMUTER |
| For Business | 2 | CONTINUE | BUSINESS |
| For Leisure | 3 | CONTINUE | LEISURE |

ALL MUST BE EITHER COMMUTER / BUSINESS / LEISURE USERS
REFER TO QUOTA TABLE BELOW FOR GROUP SPLIT
 Respondents must be recruited based on the reason they use the train most often

RECRUITER NOTE: ENSURE RESPONDENT ANSWERS THE REST OF SCREENER QUESTIONS WITH REGARDS TO THE WAY THEY USE THE TRAIN MOST OFTEN
ASK IF COMMUTER

Q1a. How often do you use Virgin WestCoast Trains to make your journeys?

| | | |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|
| At least once or twice a week | CONTINUE | FREQUENT |
| Less | CLOSE | NON USER |

JUST FOR LONDON

Q1b. Is the time you spend on Virgin WestCoast Trains typically

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|----------|------------------|
| Up to Milton Keynes | 1 | CONTINUE | SHORTER DISTANCE |
| Or to a further away destination | 2 | CONTINUE | LONGER DISTANCE |

AIM FOR A MIX WITHIN THE LONDON GROUP 1

ASK IF BUSINESS

Q2a. How often do you use Virgin WestCoast Trains to make your business trips?

| | | |
|--|----------|------------|
| At least once a fortnight or more frequently | CONTINUE | FREQUENT |
| Less than this but more than once a quarter and you have made a journey on Virgin WestCoast Trains in the last 6 weeks | CONTINUE | INFREQUENT |
| Less / Never | CLOSE | NON-USER |

FREQUENT GROUPS 3, 11,
INFREQUENT GROUPS 8, 15

Q2b. How do you usually travel on Virgin WestCoast Trains when making these train journeys?
SINGLE CODE

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|----------|
| In standard class most of the time | 1 | CONTINUE |
| In first class most of the time | 2 | CONTINUE |

STANDARD CLASS GROUPS 3,11,15
FIRST CLASS 8

Q2c And now thinking about the average time you spend on Virgin WestCoast train when you make these journeys, how long does it take

| | | | |
|------------------------------|---|----------|------------------|
| Up to an hour and a half | 1 | CONTINUE | SHORTER DISTANCE |
| More than an hour and a half | 2 | CONTINUE | LONGER DISTANCE |

AIM FOR A MIX WITHIN EACH GROUP

Q2d. What type of ticket do you usually travel on Virgin WestCoast Trains?
SINGLE CODE - READ OUT

| | | |
|---|---|----------|
| Advance for a specific train | 1 | CONTINUE |
| Lower cost regular fare e.g.any train off peak | 2 | CONTINUE |
| Higher cost e.g. flexible / any train during peak | 3 | CONTINUE |

AIM FOR A MIX WITHIN EACH GROUP

Q2e. Thinking about your journeys on Virgin WestCoast Trains, do you typically only travel between big city stations or do you often board / alight at smaller stations as well

| | | |
|---|---|----------|
| Big city station: London, Manchester, Birmingham, Preston, Glasgow, Lancaster, Liverpool, Edinburgh | 1 | CONTINUE |
| Smaller train stations at well | 2 | CONTINUE |

RECRUITER NOTE: CHECK LARGER MAIN TRAIN STATIONS ARE THOSE THAT ARE THE MOST BUSY / POPULAR STATIONS IN THE CITY

AIM FOR A MIX WITHIN EACH GROUP

Q2f. Who usually buys your Virgin WestCoast train tickets?

SINGLE CODE

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|----------|
| I do - myself | 1 | CONTINUE |
| Someone else buys them for me | 2 | CONTINUE |

AIM FOR A MIX WITHIN EACH GROUP

ASK IF LEISURE

Q3a. How often do you use Virgin Trains West Coast Trains to make your trips?

| | | |
|---|----------|------------|
| Once a month | CONTINUE | FREQUENT |
| At least three times a year and you have made a journey with Virgin West Coast Trains in the last six weeks | CONTINUE | INFREQUENT |
| Less / Never | CLOSE | NON USER |

FREQUENT GROUPS 4, 7, 9,12,14,

LESS FREQUENT 2, 5, 6, 16,

Q3b. How do you usually travel when making these train journeys on Virgin WestCoast Trains?

SINGLE CODE

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|----------|
| In standard class most of the time | 1 | CONTINUE |
| In first class most of the time | 2 | CONTINUE |

STANDARD CLASS GROUPS 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14

FIRST CLASS 9, 16

Q3c. And thinking about the average time you spend on the train when you make these journeys on Virgin WestCoast Trains how long does it take?

SINGLE CODE

| | | | |
|------------------------|---|----------|------------------|
| Up to half an hour | 1 | CONTINUE | SHORTER DISTANCE |
| More than half an hour | 2 | CONTINUE | LONGER DISTANCE |

AIM FOR MIX ACROSS ALL GROUPS

Q3d. What type of ticket do you usually travel on Virgin WestCoast Trains?

SINGLE CODE - READ OUT

| | | |
|---|---|----------|
| Advance for a specific train | 1 | CONTINUE |
| Lower cost regular fare e.g.any train off peak | 2 | CONTINUE |
| Higher cost e.g. flexible / any train during peak | 3 | CONTINUE |

AIM FOR MIX ACROSS ALL GROUPS

Q3e. Thinking about your journeys on Virgin WestCoast Trains do you typically only travel between big city stations or do you often board / alight at smaller stations as well

| | | |
|---|---|----------|
| Big city station: London, Manchester, Birmingham, Preston, Glasgow, Lancaster, Liverpool, Edinburgh | 1 | CONTINUE |
| Smaller train stations at well | 2 | CONTINUE |

RECRUITER NOTE: CHECK LARGER MAIN TRAIN STATIONS ARE THOSE THAT ARE THE MOST BUSY / POPULAR STATIONS IN THE CITY

AIM FOR MIX WITHIN EACH GROUP OF THOSE TRAVELLING BETWEEN BIG CITY TRAIN STATIONS AND THOSE BOARDING / ALIGHTING AT SMALLER TRAIN STATIONS

Q3f Do you mainly travel on week days or at weekends on Virgin WestCoast Trains?

SINGLE CODE

| | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|
| Mainly on week days | 1 | CONTINUE |
| Mainly on weekends | 2 | CONTINUE |

MAJORITY TO BE WEEKENDS FOR GROUPS 6, 14 OTHER LEISURE GROUPS MAINLY WEEKDAYS

DO NOT ASK

Q9. Note gender

| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| Female | 1 | CONTINUE: RECRUIT AN EVEN SPREAD IN EACH GROUP |
| Male | 2 | |

PLEASE RECRUIT A MIX OF GENDER WITHIN EACH GROUP

ASK ALL

Q10. Are you willing to be contacted again for Market Research purposes?

| | | |
|-----|---|--|
| Yes | 1 | |
| No | 2 | |

Please ask this question to ensure that we are adhering to the data protection act in the event of needing to re-contact the respondent again for market research.

PLEASE INFORM RESPONDENTS THAT:

- THE GROUP DISCUSSION / DEPTH INTERVIEW WILL BE AUDIO and/or VIDEO RECORDED FOR LATER ANALYSIS
- GROUPS / DEPTHS BEING HELD IN A SPECIALIST VIEWING FACILITY WILL BE AUDIO / VIDEO RECORDED
- THE AUDIO & VIDEO RECORDINGS ARE THE PROPERTY OF THE RESEARCH COMPANY & CANNOT BE USED FOR ANY OTHER PURPOSE THAN MARKET RESEARCH WITHOUT THE RESPONDENTS' PRIOR WRITTEN CONSENT
- CLIENTS MAY BE VIEWING FROM BEHIND A ONE WAY MIRROR IN A SPECIALIST VIEWING FACILITY
- ALL RESPONDENTS WILL BE REQUIRED TO TURN OFF THEIR MOBILE PHONES FOR THE DURATION OF THE INTERVIEW / DISCUSSION

PERMITTED METHODS OF RECRUITMENT:

[PROVIDE DETAILS]

Freefind _____

From lists _____

INTERVIEWER'S DECLARATION

I CERTIFY THAT THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED WITH A PERSON PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN TO ME AND THE INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED ACCORDING TO THE PROVISIONS OF THE MARKET RESEARCH SOCIETY'S 'CODE OF CONDUCT', THE DATA PROTECTION ACT AND THE BRIEFING INSTRUCTIONS FROM ILLUMINAS.

INTERVIEWER NAME: _____

INTERVIEWERS SIGNATURE: _____

DATE: _____

SUMMARY OF FIELDWORK

Please refer to Group quotas spreadsheet

Incentive: £50 + £15 for completed pre task

Discussion guide

1. Welcome and Introduction (5 minutes)

Thanks so much for agreeing to help out with the work we're currently undertaking. Let me just run through a few quick points:

- ✦ **Introduce Illuminas:** an independent market research company.
- ✦ **Abide by MRS Code of Conduct:**
 - All information remains absolutely confidential and no individuals will be mentioned in our findings.
 - The session will be audio and video recorded for our reference – nothing will be attributed to an individual and the recordings will not be used in the future.
 - Introduce anyone sitting in the room
 - **IF IN STUDIO:** Some of our clients may be viewing today's session. They're interested in hearing about your experiences, but will simply be listening.
 - There will be no sales follow-up.
- ✦ We are undertaking a research study on behalf of **Transport Focus**, the independent body responsible for protecting the interests of Britain's rail passengers.
- ✦ The aim of this piece of research is to better understand your experiences and perceptions of the **InterCity Virgin West Coast** service as well your aspirations for it. **To be clear this only for the train lines shown on the chart [have big A1 or A2 chart of the network]**

2. Background (10 minutes)

- ✦ Respondent background: Age; Family structure; Occupation / employment status
- ✦ For what purpose(s) do you use **InterCity Virgin West Coast**?
 - ⊙ Journeys they do most often and about that journey:
 - What times of day / days of week)?
 - Journey purpose
 - Which stations do you travel to/from most frequently
 - ⊙ Ask same for less frequent journeys
- ✦ Explore use of other trains and modes of transport?
 - ⊙ Travel on any other trains - what type of travel is this for?
 - ⊙ Access/attitude to car
 - ⊙ Views on long distance coach and air travel
- ✦ How train savvy are they

3. Mode of transport choice (10 minutes)

3a) this is for business and leisure

- ⊛ When deciding transport for long distance (business and leisure) journeys; how do you trade off the benefits and drawbacks of each option:

Ensure price; speed; timetable/frequency; journey start & end segments are considered;

Ensure that car and coach travel are particularly covered; also plane where sensible

How their trade-off differs with respect to journey purposes

How does past experience feed into decisions

If there is a choice of train service e.g. VT versus London Midland

3b) this is for commuters

- ⊛ When deciding transport for (commuting) journeys; how do you trade off the benefits and drawbacks of each transport option:

Ensure price; speed; timetable/frequency; journey start & end segments are considered;

Ensure that car, bus, and slower trains are considered

4. Baseline assessment of InterCity Virgin West Coast – performance (30 minutes)

Here I suggest they refer to their Journey Audits as well as personal experience

⊛ PLANNING THE JOURNEY

Cover: adequacy of the timetable [frequency and destination availability], if any gaps when are they,

Cover: Availability / comprehensiveness of information across channels / media (websites/ apps/ at station etc.); Overall ease/ difficulty / effectiveness

⊛ STATION EXPERIENCE

- ⊙ The station infrastructure

Cover arrival: Car and bike parking; linkage with other modes of transport including changing trains onto VT; general accessibility.

Cover comfort: shops/eating/waiting facilities; toilets; ease of getting around the station

Cover information: signposting to platforms; general info levels

Cover: separation between pre gate-line and post gate line

Cover: station staff – need for and performance

- ⊙ Waiting for the train

Cover: how long they wait; info when late; ease of locating place to wait.

✦ ON TRAIN EXPERIENCE

- ⊙ Comfort/the journey itself

Cover: Seating (availability/ comfort/ layout); Crowding; Cleanliness; Temperature

Cover: other passengers; noise; quiet carriages

Cover: availability/expectations of train staff

- ⊙ Facilities

Cover: Toilets (availability/ cleanliness); catering

Cover: customer service staff

Cover: security of belongings; storage of luggage

- ⊙ Enjoyment - usefulness

Cover for leisure: pleasantness; how they relax and enjoy journey

Cover for business: wi-fi; getting work done; any space limitations?

- ⊙ Disruption - delays

Cover: counts as disruption (how late); when it is 'serious'

Cover: what are reasonable expectations from TOC and staff in the moment; and financial compensation.

Cover: information needs channels.

✦ INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

Cover: rate current info and channels; and contact with VT - response to general enquires and complaints;

5. Baseline assessment of InterCity Virgin West Coast – tickets and value for money (10 minutes)

I would now like to talk about ticketing and value for money

- ✦ Ask across group type of ticket(s) bought:

Cover; Why bought that ticket; views on choice of tickets available: clarity of ticketing; understanding of the terms and conditions; class of travel; any issues with 'incorrect' tickets

Cover: purchase process – at station, Virgin own website; other train website.

- ✦ Discuss value for money:

Cover; how do they assess this criterion, what features associated with journey rank positive and what negative; do they compare with coach; do they compare with car and plane where applicable

6. Overall rating of what is on offer today (5 minutes)

Let's quickly go round the room – scores on the doors for your total experience

7. Next generation of train travel (35 minutes)

Transport Focus has a role in saying what the passenger wants in the future when travelling by train. By that we mean over the next ten years or so.

This research is about doing this for travellers on the InterCity West Coast services, which you all have used.

I want you to consider the following:

(List below will be displayed on A2 card as a prompt. Stress not an exhaustive list)

- What could be improved
- What could be entirely new
- What would make the ideal train service
- Think about technology - as we can best imagine it
- Which other industries should we look to for inspiration?
- Anything else you think is important

I want you to break out from thinking just today plus a bit. That said we do need to be reasonably realistic – e.g. travel won't be free, trains won't be twice as wide. But be bold in suggesting what you think would be better. Don't worry if anything too way out I will ensure we stay on a realistic line.

I want to cover the same areas we discussed earlier. Use flip chart to brainstorm suggestions under the following headings:

✦ PLANNING THE JOURNEY

- ⊙ Adequacy of the timetable
- ⊙ Sources of planning information

✦ STATION EXPERIENCE

- ⊙ The station infrastructure
- ⊙ Waiting for the train

✦ ON TRAIN EXPERIENCE

- ⊙ Comfort/the journey itself
- ⊙ Facilities
- ⊙ Enjoyment – usefulness for business
- ⊙ Disruption - delays

✦ INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

8. Priorities for improvement (10 minutes)

You have mentioned many improvement areas. Let us debate which are the most important. Establish consensus or vote on top one or two priorities per area.

9. Summary and thank you (5 minutes)

- ✪ Quick summary
- ✪ Thank you for taking part

On behalf of Illuminas and Transport Focus, thank you very much for your time.

Pre-group task

Page 1

The slide features the Illuminas logo in the top right corner. The main title is '.....'s Diary', with a red dotted line preceding the apostrophe and the word 'Diary' in red. Below the title is the instruction 'write your name here'. A large orange box contains the text 'Your recent journey on Virgin West Coast Trains - an audit'. At the bottom, there is a map of the West Coast of the United Kingdom with various train routes and stations marked.

Thank you for taking part in this study: the first part is to fill out this booklet.

We have an exercise for you on Page 2 which involves a straightforward scoring exercise.

On page 3,4,5 we'd like you to tell us about a train journey on Virgin West Coast that you have recently made or will make in the lead up to the group discussion/interview.

If you need more space for your answers, feel free to add pages to the document.

You can begin filling out this workbook straight away and you will be paid £15 for completing this booklet when we meet you.

All information collected from the workbook will remain completely confidential.

We look forward to meeting you at the group session!

Instructions

Thinking about that Virgin West Coast train journey, how well did you feel Virgin West Coast performed on each of the aspects below? In addition, how important is each one of these aspects to you? Please rate each aspect out of 10, where 10 is the best score and 1 is the worst score.



| On train facilities | Performance / 10 | Importance / 10 | On train comfort | Performance / 10 | Importance / 10 |
|--|------------------|-----------------|--|------------------|-----------------|
| Accommodation for wheelchair users | | | Quiet / peaceful atmosphere | | |
| Assistance for disabled / elderly passengers | | | Quiet zones provided | | |
| Buffett service | | | Restaurant | | |
| Catering available | | | Space / facilities available for laptop/phones / other devices | | |
| Clean and tidy train cars | | | Station staff | | |
| Clear information | | | Storing luggage | | |
| Comfortable seating | | | Sufficient seating capacity | | |
| Customer service staff available | | | Train Management Staff | | |
| Easy to move around | | | Trolley service | | |
| Help and support when required | | | Well maintained toilets | | |
| On-board catering | | | Visual and audio information available | | |

1: PRE-JOURNEY TASKS

Again, thinking about the Virgin West Coast journey that you have made recently...



How did you purchase the tickets? (i.e. on the day, at station, advance booking) and what was your method of purchase?

What did you think about the facilities and staff at the station and why?

2: PLANNING FOR THE JOURNEY

ON BOARD THE VIRGIN WEST COAST TRAIN; JOURNEY QUESTIONS



What did you think about the provision of information for your journey?

Overall, how would you describe your on-board experience?

Is there anything that would have made that Virgin West Coast train journey a better/different/improved experience

4: ON-BOARD AUDIT-CONT

Page 6

Which Virgin West Coast journey are your answers based on?

| | Respondent write in: |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Date and time journey started | |
| Station left from | |
| Station arrived at | |
| Journey duration | |

JOURNEY DETAILS

Page 7

**That's it! Thanks for completing this
workbook.**

We look forward to meeting you!

**(Don't forget to bring your completed
workbook with you!)**

Thank you!