



What passengers want from the new East Midlands franchise – an executive summary

September 2006

Introduction

In June 2006, the Department for Transport consulted on its proposals for the new East Midlands franchise, due to start in November 2007. This executive summary of Passenger Focus' detailed response sets out the key improvements that passengers want the new franchise to deliver.

Our recommendations for the new franchise are based on comprehensive research with thousands of passengers, looking at the passenger viewpoint on fares, satisfaction and wider rail issues, using large-scale route-specific research conducted in spring 2006 on the following routes:

- Liverpool – Norwich
- Crewe – Derby
- Nottingham – Skegness
- Derby – Matlock.

We have also used data from the National Passenger Survey (NPS) and engaged with a wide range of stakeholders in the region to identify initial thoughts on areas for improvement. In addition, Passenger Focus considered previous research and publications produced by the former Rail Passengers Council (RPC) and supplemented this with new desktop research from a wide variety of sources.

Background

The numbers of people travelling by train are increasing. Performance on the railways is steadily improving, and passenger satisfaction is rising. We expect changes to franchises to further improve performance, improve passenger satisfaction, and allow for continued growth; so do passengers. In general, passengers want a safe, reliable, affordable railway that meets their expectations of service quality for the price paid.

Although the use of railways in the East Midlands is growing, satisfaction levels for users of these services are, in some aspects, falling. The new franchise for the East Midlands should present the opportunity for services to be developed, leading to increased numbers travelling, and increased satisfaction. Passenger Focus expects franchises to address the link between passenger satisfaction and actionable improvement.

We note that on many routes listed in the new franchise, the Department for Transport proposes no change in the number of trains operated, or number of calls at stations, although the timings of individual trains may change in the December 2008 timetable.





Passengers' priorities in the East Midlands

1. Stations

Passengers tell us they expect better information, cleaner stations, improved security and improvements to the accessibility of stations. As a result, Passenger Focus expects the franchise to include a clearly defined commitment to develop and improve stations and integration, with targets for improvement in passenger satisfaction scores.

The passenger survey questionnaire covered a wide range of station issues and the results were examined alongside stakeholder comments. This research is underpinned by the findings of the National Passenger Survey (NPS) and previous Passenger Focus research on what passengers want from stations.¹

Passengers consistently ranked the availability of information, and the cleanliness, upkeep and repair of stations as amongst the most important aspects of the total journey experience, along with personal security. When passengers were asked to identify areas where they would see the most benefit from any improvement, the top two, by some margin, are better ticket buying facilities and overall enhancements to the cleanliness, upkeep and repair of stations. Passenger groups commented that improved staffing at station ticket offices would also create a greater perception of personal safety as well as potentially improving revenue collection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passenger Focus expects the franchise to include a clear commitment to improve the accessibility and quality of stations, enhance integration options and for stations to be subject to an appropriate monitoring regime.

2. Service patterns

Passengers tell us that frequencies on some routes are acceptable, but many passengers on other routes identify more trains as their top priority (in particular Derby – Matlock and Nottingham – Skegness). Passengers and stakeholders cite the need for more evening and Sunday services to reflect changes in demand. The lack of timetable detail in the franchise consultation document concerns Passenger Focus, and the Department for Transport (DfT) should agree to robust

consultation with stakeholders and passenger groups as the level of detail is developed.

Bidders are asked to bid against a base case specification which will largely be based on the timetable operated today, and changes to be introduced at the end of 2008, but we note that no detailed timetable proposal yet exists to enable Passenger Focus to comment on the exact timings of trains or the quality of connections.

Passenger Focus acknowledges that overall, the proposed new timetable pattern on the Midland Main Line maintains existing links, and provides some additional capacity; however, the major concern is the halving of off-peak services at Market Harborough. Passenger Focus recommends that the Department for Transport should re-evaluate a number of alternative suggestions put forward by stakeholders that would enable the off-peak frequency to Market Harborough to be retained, by, for example, stopping the standard hour St. Pancras – Derby/Nottingham train hourly at Market Harborough. In the Spring 2006 NPS Midland Mainline passengers reported an 86% rating for frequency which indicates that, on its core routes, frequency is more acceptable. The proposed first and last trains will run to the same times as present, but stakeholder comment suggests that later services to/from London and Nottingham would benefit passengers.

On the Derby – Matlock route passengers ranked the importance of service patterns highly and clearly noted this as the priority for improvement. When asked specifically for their view of the current frequency of services, over half of passengers agreed that frequency should be improved. On the Nottingham – Skegness service, when specifically asked, the majority of passengers wished for later evening services, with a smaller number asking for earlier morning services. Again, a similar majority requested later evening services between Derby and Nottingham. Passenger groups want a more extensive operating pattern to include provision of Sunday services on the Mansfield-Nottingham line and a review of operating hours on the Lincolnshire network.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passenger Focus recommends that the invitation to tender for the franchise clearly specifies the level of service that is to be provided and seeks assurances that the specification will be arrived at following a robust consultation process.

¹ "What passengers want from stations", published by RPC (2005)

3. Information

The evidence gathered on the four Central Trains routes surveyed supports general Passenger Focus research into the availability of information at stations as detailed in 'Passenger Information: What, Where, When and How', published in September 2004, but notes that the style and content of information provided, as well as the way in which the information is provided, must be appropriate to passengers' needs.

This issue also covers the marketing of railway services to existing customers and reaching out to potential customers. Passenger Focus would like to see a requirement to promote rail services properly and professionally, including a financial commitment to set aside adequate funding to promote services to non-users and to retain existing users, and would also expect a commitment from bidders to undertake an ongoing programme of market research to ensure that products and services are constantly developed to meet customer needs.

Passenger Focus' response to the Community Rail Strategy has shown that where lines are actively marketed, patronage can grow. This is well demonstrated by the growth in patronage on the Chester – Shrewsbury line, where passenger numbers have grown by 300% over a seven year period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passenger Focus would like the Department for Transport to require the franchisee to have a clear policy on passenger information, in line with industry best practice.

Passenger Focus also suggests that the Department for Transport requires the franchisee to properly promote rail services, and to ensure that products and services are constantly developed to meet passengers' needs.

4. Value for money

During 2006, Passenger Focus undertook quantitative and qualitative research² into passengers' perceptions of fares. Over 2,000 passengers were interviewed and the results can be summarised as:

- Many rail fares do not represent good value for money
- The fare structure is complex and confusing
- It is unfair for today's passengers to pay in advance for future investment
- The industry needs to exploit fare incentives to attract passengers to travel at times when there is greater capacity. However, we oppose putting up fares to price off demand
- An affordable turn up and go strategy must prevail, though pre-book low cost fares should be available to those whose journeys are flexible
- The industry must control its costs so that more is not passed on to the passenger in higher fares
- The industry must ensure it collects the revenue that is due to it.

In this context, we welcomed the decision by Midland Mainline in the last year to introduce a system for purchasing combinations of single fares, and to reduce the booking horizons for some fares

which have produced benefits for passengers. The new franchise should have arrangements that are at least as good.

Nationally in the last NPS wave, only 53% of Central Trains passengers consider the price of their ticket represents value for money, and only 45% of Midland Mainline passengers are satisfied with value for money. Passenger research on the four routes surveyed indicates value for money and fares remain key issues, albeit with variation on the routes surveyed. Passengers travelling from Norwich to Liverpool considered this to be the second most important area for improvement, whereas passengers between Derby and Matlock rated it the 14th most important.

Revenue protection – the issuing and inspection of tickets – is a subject that always generates adverse comments. Passenger Focus constantly stresses the need to collect all fares. Not only does the failure to collect all the fares depress the true revenue figure, it also causes the actual number of passengers to be under-reported. Various "mystery shopper" exercises have shown that upwards of 40% of some journeys within the East Midlands have no ticket inspection.

In the light of the strongly critical response to the changes recently made to cheap day return ticket restrictions by First Capital Connect, Passenger Focus believes that bidders for the franchise should exclude such measures from their plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The DfT should require bidders to clearly set out their proposals for fares, including ways of simplifying ticketing and finding ways to incentivise off-peak travel. Bidders should also be required to include targets for improving passenger perception of value for money.



² Fares: What Passengers Think, July, 2006

5. Getting a seat

Local overcrowding occurs within the East Midlands, both on sections of routes and during seasonal peaks. When surveyed, roughly one third of passengers are not satisfied that they can always get a seat. Therefore the Department for Transport needs to ensure they procure enough seats for passengers, to cope with both current and future demand.

Demand and revenue growth across both Midland Mainline and Central Trains has been consistently strong over the last ten years and, in particular for Midland Mainline, is forecast to remain strong. New passenger research shows that passengers had little difficulty in finding a seat on the four Central Trains routes surveyed, with this issue ranking low across all these routes. The Spring 2006 NPS data supports this, with 68% of MML passengers satisfied and 65% on Central Trains – both broadly average for the type of rail journey.

However, localised crowding does exist. It is likely that if the Nottingham-Skegness survey had been undertaken on a peak travel day, passengers would have commented on the overcrowding that regularly occurs. Despite the commitment from Central Trains to provide extra carriages at the busiest times, additional capacity is often insufficient. The Liverpool – Nottingham segment of the Liverpool-Norwich route is often similarly overcrowded. Loadings can regularly exceed train capacity in the East Midlands. Data supplied by Central Trains shows morning peak trains departing from Dronfield towards Sheffield are consistently overcrowded, up to 154% of capacity. Specific trains between Leicester to Lincoln have been recorded with 125% loading – 185 passengers aboard a train with 148 seats – and Peterborough to Doncaster with 154% loading – 116 passengers aboard a train with 75 seats.

The base case specification in the franchise consultation document indicates that the length of off-peak Nottingham to London trains will be reduced. The number of seats provided may be sufficient for current occupancy, but should present growth levels continue, or rise, extra capacity would be needed. Passenger Focus believes that with the growth of weekend travel, and changes in the leisure market, strengthening of regional services with under-utilised main line trains should be required at weekends.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passenger Focus seeks assurance that the Department for Transport will satisfactorily address capacity problems within the East Midlands franchise. The DfT needs to clearly define how many additional seats it needs to procure to tackle the acknowledged crowding problems that passengers currently experience and how many are predicted to be necessary across the lifetime of the franchise.

Conclusions

Based on the extensive evidence presented in the full report, Passenger Focus would make the following recommendations to the Department for Transport concerning the new East Midlands franchise.

- Evidence from passengers clearly shows the importance they place on the provision, maintenance and upkeep of station facilities. Therefore the Department for Transport needs to ensure there is a commitment from the franchisee to contribute to the development of stations. The franchisee should also commit to a regime based on frequent and regular inspections of stations and trains, where the company is incentivised to repair faults promptly and to implement remedial measures where performance is below acceptable levels. The regime should be included in a framework of continuous improvement.
- Passenger Focus has concerns that the changes planned for Midland Mainline services in the December 2008 timetable will not provide the best possible service for passengers. Without detail it is impossible to comment on the benefits or disbenefits of the proposed timetable. Passenger Focus therefore recommends that the Department for Transport starts the consultation process for the December 2008 timetable as soon as is practicable – it should be detailed; inclusive, and responsive to identified passenger needs. However, the opportunity to accommodate timetable aspirations in the December 2007 timetable should not be lost.
- Passengers attach a high priority to clear information regarding train running times and platforms. Passenger Focus presses the Department for Transport to require the franchisee to have a clear policy on passenger information, in line with industry best practice.
- Many passengers and non-rail users are not aware of the range of products and services available. Passenger Focus suggests that the franchisee is required to promote rail services effectively and develop more products to meet passengers' needs.
- With the use of rail services in the East Midlands growing, and forecast to continue to grow, the Department for Transport must demonstrate that the franchise will be sufficiently resourced to deal with localised overcrowding without pricing off demand, and to reassure passengers that they can get a seat.
- Passenger Focus welcomes the fact that the franchise consultation document includes a number of priced options, and expects the DfT to include an evaluation of the wider societal benefits when determining whether the proposals are value for money.



Contact us

For a copy of our full consultation response to the DfT's proposals for the new East Midlands franchise, go to:

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