



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

September 2006

Introduction

In June 2006, the Department for Transport consulted on its proposals for the new West 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:

- Stafford to Stoke-on-Trent
- Worcester/Kidderminster/Stourbridge Junction to Dorridge/Shirley
- Stratford-upon-Avon to Stourbridge Junction
- Birmingham to Hereford/Great Malvern

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 West Midlands is growing, satisfaction levels for users of these services are, in some aspects, falling. The new franchise for the West 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 West Midlands

1. Stations

Passengers tell us they expect better information, cleaner stations, improved security and improvements to the accessibility of stations. The franchise needs to include a clearly defined commitment to develop and improve stations and integration.

The passenger survey research covered a wide range of station issues, and the results have been examined alongside stakeholder comment. Passengers on the four routes surveyed consistently ranked the availability of information, the cleanliness and the upkeep and repair of stations as amongst the most important aspects of the total journey experience, along with personal security.

These findings reflect the generic Passenger Focus position on stations, which concludes that passengers need to be able to find their way to and around the station; that they need to be able to get to the station by various modes; they need to be able to find the right platform easily; and they need to feel safe and have adequate light and shelter.

The passenger transport executive (PTE) in the West Midlands is Centro. Its SQUIRE¹ regime may no longer be applicable if Centro is not a co-signatory to the franchise, but whatever regime replaces it should provide similar statistical information based on frequent and regular inspections of stations, carriages and trains. The franchise holder should be incentivised to repair faults promptly and implement remedial measures where performance is below acceptable levels. Passengers will see benefits if this scheme is enforced at stations beyond the current Centro boundaries.

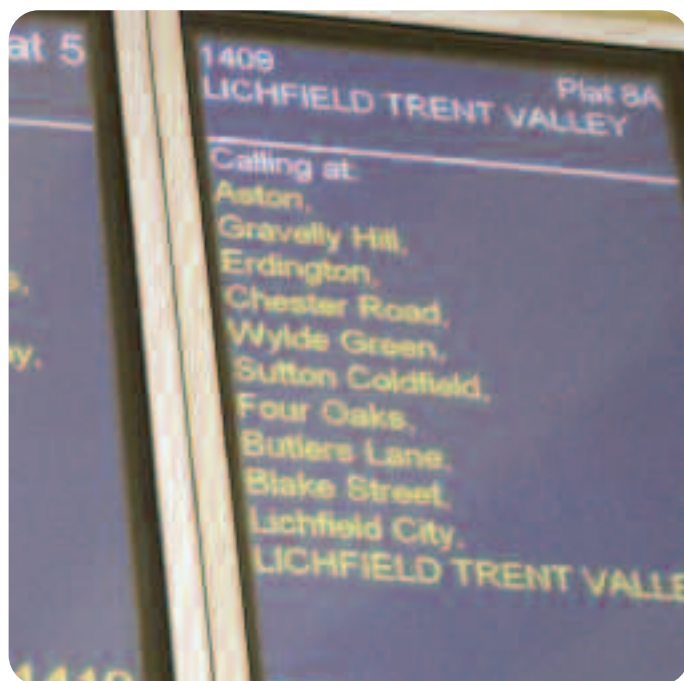
Birmingham New Street station

The passenger perception of changing trains at Birmingham New Street is considered in greater detail in Passenger Focus' response to the Cross Country franchise consultation,² however additional passenger flows resulting from any loss of current through services will also impact on commuter flows. Bidders should ensure sufficient resources are allocated to provide adequate customer assistance.



¹ Service Quality Incentive Regime: a financial incentive regime, comprising rewards and penalties, designed to ensure that Central Trains delivers certain quality standards, included in the franchise agreement in respect of services operated by Central Trains on behalf of WMPTA/Centro.

² See Passenger Focus' response to the new Cross Country franchise consultation, submitted 7 August 2006



Car parks

Evidence³ from passengers shows only 56% of Central Trains passengers are satisfied with facilities for car parking and comments from stakeholders suggest that the lack of car parking at some stations acts as a constraint on growth at some locations and on some routes in the West Midlands. For example, of the 169 passengers surveyed on the Dorridge to Worcester route, just under half said they travelled to the station by car as a driver and one sixth travelled as a car passenger. Of these, 59% reported that they could always or mostly get a space and only 4% reported that they could hardly or never get a space. However, 9% of passengers on the Hereford/Great Malvern to Birmingham route had difficulty in getting a space and a lower percentage, 33%, could always or mostly get a space. Just under a third of passengers travelling on the Birmingham to Stratford route arrived at their departure station by car (either driver or passenger) but fewer than one in ten reported difficulty in getting a space.

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.

Passenger Focus recommends that the franchise includes a commitment to continuous improvements to customer service for passengers at Birmingham New Street. We also expect the franchise to include a requirement to support the redevelopment of New Street, and develop contingency plans to minimise disruption for passengers.

Passenger Focus expects the franchisee to be required to audit the provision of car park spaces against local demand, and to work with local authorities to improve provision where possible, and to have charging regimes that discourage non-railway use.

2. Service patterns

Passengers tell us that frequencies on some routes are acceptable, but many passengers on other routes – such as Birmingham to Stratford – identify more trains as a high priority. The completion of the West Coast Main Line route modernisation will be reflected in major timetable changes in December 2008 but the franchise consultation document provides insufficient detail of this timetable so it is difficult to determine the benefits and/or disbenefits for passengers on the core West Midlands routes which call at Birmingham New Street. Passenger Focus cannot yet, therefore, make any detailed comments on service provision.

Less than a third of passengers on the route to Stratford felt that frequencies are sufficient. Passenger research also indicates that connectivity is an issue for some passengers, particularly the cumulative impact of changes proposed at Walsall, where the curtailing of the Walsall – Stafford service at Rugeley Trent Valley and the proposed withdrawal of the Walsall – Wolverhampton service will result in a population centre of over a quarter of a million losing significant links with the wider national rail network. The franchise needs to include a commitment that robust consultation processes are in place when changes to service levels are proposed.

Recent severe shortages of staff on Sundays have disrupted many passengers' journeys: we expect the incoming franchisee to have a robust action plan to ensure they can run all advertised services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The franchise should address local service needs. Passengers and stakeholders cite the need for more evening and Sunday services. DfT will need to demonstrate that the benefits created for passengers by providing three trains an hour between London and Birmingham outweigh the potential disbenefits to West Midlands' commuters and local passengers.

The lack of timetable detail concerns Passenger Focus, and DfT should agree to robust consultation as the level of detail is developed.

3. Information

The provision of information for passengers at stations was identified to be an area requiring improvement on all four of the routes surveyed. The National Passenger Survey (NPS) shows Silverlink scores 71% for passenger satisfaction with information provision, an improvement over the previous spring wave. For Central Trains, the equivalent NPS score was 67%.

This issue also encompasses both the marketing of railway services to existing customers and reaching out to potential customers. Stakeholders 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 passengers' 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.

Passenger research into information provision also clearly identifies that passengers need timely and accurate information at times of disruption, and the franchisee should be required to include information as one of the key considerations in train company contingency planning.

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

At present, many passengers perceive rail travel as offering poor value for money. The new franchise proposes a significant change in fare regulation, to introduce a commuter fare regulation in Birmingham similar to that in operation in London. This would represent a change in fares policy for Centro-sponsored services in the West Midlands.

Data from the latest wave of the NPS shows that only half of Central Trains' passengers (53%) consider that current ticket prices offer value for money and this percentage has remained fairly consistent over the past five years. Only one third of Silverlink passengers considered that their tickets represent value for money, but this undoubtedly represents the low satisfaction amongst commuters who make up a higher percentage of passengers on these routes. Passenger research with passengers on Central Trains routes travelling inside and outside the Centro boundaries showed that on the Stratford to Birmingham route, value for money becomes the seventh highest priority for improvement; on the Hereford to Birmingham route it is twelfth, but on Kidderminster to Shirley – predominantly commuter traffic – it comes third.

Given that the franchise consultation document identifies fares measures as one way to manage growth, passengers will be concerned that the loss of Centro's powers to limit off-peak fare increases to the retail price index (RPI) (it currently limits peak increases to RPI+1% in line with national policy) could result in the new franchisee seeking to increase farebox revenue over and above what the passenger transport authority would have permitted. Centro's fares policy does create anomalies; across the region both peak and off-peak fares into Birmingham are higher on services which are not supported by Centro. This is particularly noticeable on lines where a high proportion of the route mileage is currently outside the Centro area – the peak hour fares from Tamworth are typically 30% higher than from nearby Lichfield; and peak hour fares from Nuneaton are 27% higher than from Warwick. This discrepancy is even higher for off-peak travel. The Birmingham "travel to work" area is clearly much wider than the former West Midlands county and passengers travelling from neighbouring shire counties will benefit if the franchise can equalise fares policy.

The franchisee should exploit fares incentives to attract passengers to travel at times when there is greater capacity. Stakeholders and passenger groups have supported the requirement for the new franchisee to participate in the current multi-modal ticketing

arrangements and concessionary fares scheme, and for it to explore innovative ways of simplifying ticketing whilst increasing the attractiveness of the product to the consumer. As well as simplifying the fares structure, consistent average prices for the same distances, and similar discounts for reduced rate fares such as cheap day returns, should be part of the new franchise's fares policy.

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.

5. Getting a seat

Passenger Focus welcomes the DfT's acknowledgement that the majority of rail services in the West Midlands are considered value for money and have been specified in the base case for the franchise. However, local overcrowding occurs on sections of routes and up to one third of passengers are not satisfied that they can always get a seat. The Department for Transport needs to ensure it is procuring enough seats for passengers now, and for the future.

Growth is forecast as the West Midlands economy continues to grow and change, with much significant retail and office development in Birmingham compensating for the decline in heavy industry. This will contribute further to crowding issues on the morning peak services into Birmingham New Street. Further growth on the Silverlink County route will be driven by factors including growth in Central London employment and the Milton Keynes/South Midlands (MKSM) growth area contained within the Sustainable Communities Plan.

Passenger Focus surveyed passengers to ask how highly they rated the importance of getting a seat. This aspect of the journey experience is rated in the top third of importance factors. Surveys have confirmed that it is of high importance to those travelling into Birmingham New Street in the morning peak, when it is acknowledged that overcrowding exists. However, levels of growth expected in the franchise consultation document means that more passengers will complain of overcrowding unless more capacity – i.e. more seats for passengers – is provided through the new franchise.



The base case specification shows the available capacity as measured both by Centro's standards and the PIXC (Passengers In eXcess Of Capacity) measure. The Centro measure defines overcrowding at a lower, more passenger-friendly level than the PIXC measure. Therefore, Passenger Focus has concerns that the proposed change to PIXC is not appropriate – as stakeholders note, the characteristics and expectations of the London commuter market differ from the West Midlands and changes to comfort factors may result in a modal shift to car travel.

The recommendations contained in the West Midlands route utilisation strategy to upgrade the infrastructure to be able to run longer trains have broad stakeholder and passenger group support and should be delivered urgently. The recent provision of twelve-car platforms at stations on the Silverlink County route will allow longer trains, when needed, to meet future growth in demand, as will planned new platform capacity at Milton Keynes Central and Bletchley.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passenger Focus seeks assurance that the Department for Transport will satisfactorily address capacity problems within the West 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.

6. Responding to local issues

Stakeholders and passengers have identified a number of issues for further consideration as part of the base case specification.

Passenger Focus expects the Department for Transport to fully evaluate the measures advocated and include viable options in the franchise.

The base case proposes no change to service levels and patterns on many of the routes within the new franchise as they are considered to be appropriate to current demand and represent value for money. However, there are strong stakeholder and passenger reservations concerning several routes, for example:

- On the Wolverhampton – Birmingham – Coventry corridor, the DfT cannot state that the pattern of services between Birmingham and Wolverhampton will not be worsened by the impact of the December 2008 WCML timetable
- It is proposed that two operators will provide services on the Birmingham – Leicester route and users are unconvinced of the benefits of operating a line in that way. The Birmingham – Shrewsbury route is shared by two operators, and passengers are vociferous in their comments on the unreliability of its services
- The Wolverhampton – Walsall route is deleted from the base case specification and stakeholder comment notes the reduction in through-journey opportunities from Walsall, although acknowledging the current low level of use. It is clear that any service in the new franchise would have to drastically improve on the value for money provided by the present service
- Stakeholders want to see the Euston – Northampton trains once more run through to Birmingham.

Conclusions

Based on the extensive evidence presented in the full report, Passenger Focus makes the following recommendations to the Department for Transport concerning the new West 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.
- Given that the timetable proposed for December 2008 is not yet sufficiently developed, Passenger Focus cannot comment on the benefits or disbenefits of that change, except to note that a major change is needed to accommodate a fifty percent increase in West Midlands to London inter-city services. Whilst acknowledging the considerable economic benefits to the regional economy, and the railway itself, from this improvement, Passenger Focus has concerns that journey opportunities within the region may suffer. It 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 platforming. Passenger Focus presses the Department for Transport to require the franchisee to have a clear policy on passenger information, in line with ATOC guidelines.
- With the use of rail services in the West 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.
- 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.



Contact us

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

www.passengerfocus.org.uk

Passenger Focus
Freepost WA1521
Warrington
WA4 6GP
t: 0845 3 022 022
e: info@passengerfocus.org.uk
w: www.passengerfocus.org.uk

