

# Rail passenger complaints backlogs: lessons for the future

July 2017



# **Rail passenger complaint backlogs: lessons for the future**

## **1. Introduction**

Over much of the second half of 2016 and early 2017, Great Western Railway (GWR) had problems with their ability to respond to passenger inquiries, claims and complaints. This resulted in a backlog that caused frustration and inconvenience to many passengers who had to wait several months for a response or compensation they were entitled to.

The problem was caused by the transition to a new supplier for their contact centre service, which coincided with an incident on the network creating yet more pressure on their customer service team.

We became aware of the issue when our contact team, who handle rail passenger complaint appeals, saw unprecedented numbers of people contacting them with complaints linked to GWR's backlog.

We raised our concerns with GWR and First Group, monitoring progress of the recovery plan and urging improvements for passengers. Transport Focus's Board were particularly keen to understand more about the background and reasons for the delay as well as GWR's approach to goodwill payments. We therefore invited GWR's managing director to attend the Transport Focus Board meeting in March 2017.

Transport Focus and GWR are keen that the lessons can be learnt, both in the process of transitioning from one customer service supplier to another and also how backlog recovery plans are formulated, managed and communicated. We also believe that these lessons could have a wider application to the franchise change process where mobilisation and transition planning is critical.

This report sets out our understanding of the problem and what we see as the key learning points for other rail companies.

## **2. Background**

Capita were awarded First Group's contract to run GWR, TransPennine Express (TPE) and Hull Trains contact centre in 2016. They were chosen because GWR wanted to bring contact centre operations back to the UK and Capita's work with high quality brands such as M&S. However, this was the first rail contract that Capita had been awarded.

The new contact centre was phased in over the summer of 2016. However, the handover period coincided with the derailment of a train at Paddington on 16 June, triggering a 35 per cent increase in contacts and claims. For an inexperienced team this would have been particularly challenging. The impact of Storm Angus later in the year combined with passengers re-contacting GWR due to the lack of response to their earlier letters and emails, further added to the problem, doubling the size of the backlog by the autumn.

We understand that GWR receives 192,000 formal contacts annually. 47,000 of these contacts are by phone, 145,000 by email, letter or comments forms. There are a further 221,000 contacts through social media.

Train operators are required to respond to complaints within 20 working days, in line with the revised Complaint Handling Guidance issued by ORR in September 2015. In addition, GWR have also committed, through a call handling Service Level Agreement (SLA), to answer 80 per cent of calls within 20 seconds of the caller choosing an option.

At the worst point, the backlog was around 50,000 cases, with some passengers having to wait up to eight months for a substantive response from GWR. It also became apparent that there was a backlog with the processing and issuing of payments, which also added to resolution times.

### 3. Impact on passengers

Whilst our own complaint appeals caseload does not reflect the scale of train company complaints, it can give an indication of a problem. The table below shows the increase in complaint appeals that Transport Focus received from GWR in each of the last two years.

<b>Reason</b>	<b>2015-16</b>	<b>2016-17</b>
Lack of response or follow up	12	654
Other	402	511
<b>Total</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>1165</b>

Many of the passengers who complained to Transport Focus were very frustrated by months of repeated attempts to contact GWR with a complaint or a claim for a delayed journey only to receive no response. Others were disappointed by the lack of an additional 'goodwill' gesture for the poor service they had received. Here are some quotes to highlight the feelings:

"I am at a loss as to what to do as your response centre has shown no interest in responding to the three emails and claims I have been sending since August. I said

the last time I wrote to them that if I heard nothing back I would next write to you and to Transport Focus, so here we are. I am also including the Office of Rail and Road as I am new to what is clearly a more complex process than I had anticipated and still haven't worked out the most effective route to obtaining a) a response and b) compensation. I am, in short, exasperated.”

“GWR sent an automated response saying they'd come back within 3 weeks. That was 3 months ago and I've repeatedly chased them since. I also followed up via Twitter but they can't tell me when I'll get a proper response. That's really not good enough and I shouldn't have to spend hours chasing them to get a response - I want to be compensated for the poor complaint handling as well as the partial ticket refund I'm entitled to.”

“I'm afraid I'm losing faith in all concerned in this matter and feel as if I'm repeatedly being 'fobbed off' to the extent that I may now seek other avenues by contacting consumer watchdogs in the media or taking legal advice.”

#### **4. Steps taken by GWR**

First Group flagged the problem with the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) at a relatively early stage and a detailed recovery plan was shared. It was also apparent that it was given senior management attention at Group and train operator level.

Some train operators in this situation send out large scale mailings with a goodwill gesture in order to deal with the situation quickly. In this instance there was a focus on getting more and better trained staff within the customer service contact centre as well as better quality assurance and management support.

We understand that GWR met all of the milestones in the recovery plan. The telephone service came within the call handling SLA standard on 7 January and complaint correspondence by the 31 March target.

#### **5. Lessons learnt**

While the scale of the GWR backlog was relatively unprecedented and the contributing factors somewhat unique (the transition to a new contact centre coinciding with a major incident at Paddington station) it is not uncommon for train companies to experience complaint handling problems. Many of these issues are highly relevant to train operators in general. In this section we identify a number of observations based on what we know of the GWR backlog as well as our experience with other train operators in this area.

## **Transition arrangements**

The transition between one supplier and the next is inherently complex with changes to IT systems, working processes, along with new staff and management structures. They all have the potential to undermine the quality of customer service and require detailed planning.

It may be tempting to accelerate the handover in order to deliver the benefits of a new contract quickly or to avoid a potential decline in service quality from an outgoing supplier as they wind down. But a long enough period should be built in to ensure that technical and process transition is robust and every aspect of knowledge and experience can be shared. This may require close management alongside the right incentives for the departing supplier.

Often it is the 'human glue' that ensures processes work (for example, knowledge of the issues, the systems and databases). So it is critical that corporate knowledge is captured and retained as part of a successful transition. This may include recruiting experienced staff from the former supplier to support new teams as an understanding of the complexity of the railway can take time to acquire.

The derailment at Paddington would undoubtedly have posed a significant challenge to any experienced customer service team. But on this occasion it was a new team without previous experience of dealing with rail issues, so the problems were magnified. As it was, GWR ended up re-recruiting experienced staff from the former supplier to support the new contact centre team.

It is therefore important to have robust resource requirement assumptions during a transition phase. Given that major disruptive incidents are not uncommon on our rail network, a degree of resilience needs to be built into resource and contingency planning in case a major disruption takes place.

It is also important that appropriate levels of management and quality assurance are considered from the outset, with flexibility built in to react to any unforeseen problems should they arise.

## **Backlog handling**

Unfortunately, customer service backlogs, in varying degrees of severity, occur periodically with train operators and can be triggered by a range of different factors, not just transition from one supplier to another. From our experience, identifying the problem quickly and reacting in an organised and systematic way is critical, as is good passenger communications and the management of expectations of key industry stakeholders.

**Understanding the scale of the problem:** Accurate indexing is fundamental to identifying and understanding the scale and nature of the problem at an early stage and being able to develop a recovery plan. We understand initially GWR logged

each contact as a new case even if it was a re-contact about an existing case. This may have been why we also saw evidence of multiple responses to people who had contacted GWR about the same case on different occasions. This creates more work and a confused and poor customer experience.

**Approach to clearing the backlog:** We have seen varying approaches used by train operators to clearing largescale backlogs. Some resort to a blanket mail out with a compensatory gesture to deal with passenger claims. This has the benefit of ensuring passengers are responded to quickly. However, this may not satisfy passengers' requirement for a specific explanation or response to an information request. There is also the possibility that it may not address the underlying reason for the backlog, particularly if the delay in response has become considerable.

The alternative approach is to invest in increased staffing and training. While this potentially aids the long term sustainability of the operation it is unlikely to result in a swift resolution of the problem as new staff require training to gain competency.

Every backlog has its own unique circumstances and consideration needs to be given to the most appropriate approach. Depending on the nature and causes of the backlog there may be an argument for a dual approach. This would involve responding to all passengers quickly, noting that it may not satisfy all of them, and showing willingness to address any remaining issues, as well as looking to build resilience and quality into the operation

**Offers of goodwill:** It is not unreasonable for a passenger who has received a poor service to expect to receive a gesture of goodwill. They may have had the frustration of long call wait times, had to wait a long time for compensation, or simply had no response at all for many months. It is worth bearing in mind that a train operator who does not respond within its SLA may be in breach of its licence.

In the past we have seen some train operators take a blanket approach to providing goodwill gestures as a matter of course. In this case, we were concerned about the consistency in the application of this policy given the complaints we saw from disappointed passengers who received nothing while others did. We asked for clarification on goodwill gestures that related to the delay in replying.

We believe that turning a bad situation into a good one is a key consideration when developing a recovery plan. It can have a big influence on a passenger's perception of a train operator and their trust in them to 'do the right thing'. An offer of money, rail travel vouchers or money off a next trip provides a clear signal that the train operator recognises its poor service and wishes to make amends.

**Communication:** Transparency and accurate communication are essential in managing the impact of a backlog on passengers. They need to be told what they can expect, when and why. Otherwise there could be high levels of repeat contact which can further swamp an already struggling system and diminish passenger trust in the train operator. Vague messages that simply suggest that response times are taking a bit longer due to high volumes of inquiries are inadequate.

## **Regulatory oversight**

Both the ORR and Transport Focus have distinct roles in representing the interests of passengers on complaints. In this case, each worked to address the backlog with First Group and the affected train companies. So we brought pressure to bear on First Group and GWR's senior management while ORR monitored progress of the recovery plan shared by GWR.

Transport Focus and ORR have agreed to work more closely to monitor and manage issues relating to train operators' customer service operations. In that way Transport Focus will be better sighted on the regulatory situation and able to input into it if necessary with ORR also benefitting from a wider view of the problem. Closer working should also help drive early awareness of problems, help identify trigger points for intervention and inform effective support in tackling emerging issues effectively.

We commend GWR for formally alerting the ORR about the backlog and would urge train companies in a similar situation to do the same. We would also suggest early and honest communication is also important with Transport Focus and London TravelWatch so that escalated appeal cases are also encompassed in any recovery plan.

## **Escalated cases**

Consideration also needs to be given to the prioritisation of cases where passengers are unhappy with the response (or lack of it) from the train company and resorted to representation through MPs or watchdogs such as Transport Focus and London TravelWatch.

These cases can be some of the longest running and are, by their nature, complex. As such it is important that there is some dedicated resource in place to work with us and other third parties to help resolve the relevant issues as quickly as possible. GWR has a team dedicated to dealing with escalated complaints, however in this instance they also struggled with the significant number of this type of complaint they were having to deal with.

## **Mobilisation of a new franchise**

Many of the issues raised could also have valuable application to the franchise process where mobilisation and transition planning is key. For example the desire to ring the changes at the start of a new franchise are many fold and in many ways understandable. Marking the change of a new era or pressure to incorporate existing group level systems are just two potential drivers of rapid change.

However careful consideration is required, as it is important that enough time is built in for a (potentially) new management team to plan and manage any transition carefully. Changing franchise from one operator to another is inevitably a time of widespread change and transition from one contact centre provider to another requires close attention, further adding to the pressures and risks to a successful start to a franchise.

If consideration is being given to moving a contact centre out of the franchise operational area then steps need to be taken to ensure that the new contact centre staff understand the network and acquire local knowledge/understanding of local issues. That is not to say it should never happen, simply that there needs to be a plan to ensure that the new centre staff have a good understanding of the area they are serving.

## **6. Conclusion**

The analysis of the experience of GWR's recent complaint handling problems have highlighted some lessons for train companies, including those embarking on franchise mobilisation. These lessons include:

- It is important to ensure there is a long enough transition period between one supplier and another to ensure all knowledge and experience can be shared and captured. This might require incentives for the departing supplier.
- There should be robust resource and contingency requirement assumptions to ensure the new contact centre is able deal with potential problems, such as the consequences of a major disruption on the network.
- Accurate indexing of cases should ensure that passengers are not re-contacted unnecessarily so creating a poor customer experience and extra work.
- How a company communicates with passengers about the backlog should be considered each time according to the circumstances driving the complaints. But they should be told what they can expect, by when and why problems have arisen.
- Each backlog should be dealt with individually, considering the issues driving it and the most effective means of clearing the backlog swiftly whilst ensuring passengers receive the response they require.
- Affected third parties including Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, should be alerted and involved in the development of any recovery plan.

July 2017

© 2017 Transport Focus



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

0300 123 2350  
[www.transportfocus.org.uk](http://www.transportfocus.org.uk)  
[info@transportfocus.org.uk](mailto:info@transportfocus.org.uk)

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council