Minutes

Transport Focus Board meeting	
Date:	**12 June 2018**
Location	**Fleetbank House, 2-6 Salisbury Square, London**

Attended

Board members:

Jeff Halliwell	JH	Chair
Theo de Pencier	TdP	Board member
Philip Mendelsohn	PhM	Board member for Scotland
William Powell	WP	Board member for Wales
Arthur Leathley	AL	Board member for London
Isabel Liu	IL	Board member

Executive in attendance:

Anthony Smith	AS	CEO
Mike Hewitson	MHe	Head of policy
Guy Dangerfield	GD	Head of strategy
Jon Carter	JC	Head of board and governance
Sara Nelson	SN	Head of communications
Nina Howe	NH	Senior stakeholder manager
Keith Bailey	KB	Senior insight adviser
Shelly van der Nest	SvdN	CEO team co-ordinator
Marian Lauder MBE	ML	Advisor to the board
Paul Gratrix	PG	Senior passenger team advisor

Other attendees:

Mark Hopwood	MHo	Managing director, Great Western Railway
Philip Delaney	PD	Sales and marketing director, Great Western Railway
Jane Jones	JJ	Head of public affairs, Great Western Railway

Apologies:

None

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Minutes

transportfocus

Part A: Preliminary

1.0 Chairman's opening remarks; apologies

JH thanked the attendees and welcomed MHo and colleagues to the board meeting in public.

JH explained that NH would give an introduction and then pass over to MHo, followed by questions and answers.

Part B: Public Affairs

2.0 Nina Howe, Stakeholder Manager with Great Western Railway, Transport Focus

NH noted the ongoing issues Transport Focus had had over the year with contact centre and appeals issues, along with other current passenger issues.

It had been around a year since MHo had joined Transport Focus at a special board meeting on the complaints backlog. Transport Focus had published a report on backlog handling based on experiences with the Great Western Railway (GWR) backlog and other ones they had dealt with.

There appeared to be three key issues frequently highlighted by passengers in their appeals and complaints. The primary one was the quality of complaint handling, which caused frustration and generated further complaints. Transport Focus had also been dealing a number of complaints generated by a payment backlog. The audit process also appeared to be slowing the payment process down in some cases.

Poor performance experienced by passengers was increasingly being cited in passenger complaints and appeals. It has been a very difficult year performance-wise with some passengers enduring months of short-formed trains, cancellations, delays and crowding. In addition to experiencing poor performance many also had to deal with disruption to their journeys caused by planned engineering work. Transport Focus had been very active in his area and were keen to know what GWR were doing to improve the situation and support passengers.

T-6 had been discussed at the last special board meeting. It had been noted that Network Rail had made it clear that getting timetables into any planners at T-6 was particularly difficult for GWR on the Western route, due to the level of late notice engineering access requests. Transport Focus were keen to hear what GWR was doing to ensure that the Informed Traveller recovery plan in place for T-6 was successful.

NH also touched on timetable changes. Transport Focus was eager to understand what GWR was doing to ensure their future timetable changes went more smoothly than the May 2018 timetable changes on Northern and GTR routes.

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3.0 Mark Hopwood, Managing Director, Great Western Railway

MHo stated that GWR had radically changed their timetable in January, but because they had run the service in excess of 90% on the first day and delivered largely as promised, not that many people outside GWR had noticed. Although GWR were not seeing the level of punctuality MHo would like, feedback was positive.

GWR's customer relations challenge had lessened after fixing response rates, which had been promised a year previously. However, it was not enough. To achieve that with a 54% increase in contacts was important. MHo believed the two headline areas were train service performance and the informed traveller issue.

Not being able to run the system's timetable for the foreseeable future was a very serious problem. MHo regretted the disruption that had been caused in the autumn, but was equally pleased that GWR had done what was necessary to run the timetable from January.

Getting behind on the informed traveller timescales had made a massive impact on customer relations volumes.

Over the past two years, there had been problems with complaints. GWR had recovered the percentage of cases closed in 20 days and they had been slower to recover the cases closed in five days.

GWR shared the Capita accommodation at Warrington with the Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and O2 accounts. It had been quite clear from talking to the Capita operatives that the complexity of GWR's work was far greater than that on other accounts.

The other area of concern was Transport Focus appeals. Around half were about complaints handling and the other significant area was train service performance.

In terms of main delay causes, there were issues around driver training. MHo had 1,369 drivers in GWR to run the same timetable in a steady state business. Before this started, MHo had had 1,100.

The informed traveller was an issue for the whole railway industry. GWR had agreed, through the supervisory board that NH sat on, to be much tougher with the infrastructure projects team in Network Rail about short-notice engineering work.

GWR were working across the industry and the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) to get T-12 back on track.

The quality of the responses GWR sent out was fundamentally important; they had been focusing on hitting response times and were now additionally focusing on quality and resolution at first contact.

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In the last 18 months or so, GWR had moved from voucher-based compensation to real money compensation. Initially, this had been done by issuing cheques. However, GWR were now creating an opportunity to enter bank account details in a secure way on their web claims form. GWR were also starting to talk to people via telephone. MHo thought it had worked well in other industries. There would be training on support on use of goodwill.

MHo believed GWR were seeing an increased volume of contacts and claims. They understood why that was. They still had some big engineering work projects through the summer and the early part of the autumn, but coming out of that calendar year, it would start to return to the levels that may be seen in a normal rail business.

GWR had done some good work on dealing with volumes, but now needed to focus on the quality of the response and particularly on reducing second contact.

ML noted that MHo had stated that Capita found GWR's contract more complex than many of their others. This resonated with Transport Focus. ML wondered how GWR could use the complexity of the contract to their advantage. PD stated that GWR worked very closely in partnership with Capita. Attrition rates had not been great the previous year, but had improved greatly.

AS asked MHo and colleagues what they thought the impact of the ombudsman was going to be in the autumn, if things went as predicted. MHo believed that it would depend on the extent to which that was understood. GWR thought some things were coming to Transport Focus before they needed to.

WP asked if MHo thought there was going to be scope for better communication between the Route Supervisory Boards to see off avoidable problems in future. WP also noted that MHo may recall some adverse comment around lack of Welsh language announcements; it was an issue that concerned reputation with a section of GWR passengers. WP asked what the current thinking was.

MHo stated that GWR had met with the Welsh language commissioner. The challenge for GWR was that, if they were running services exclusively in Wales or that were 95% in Wales, the answer would be straightforward. However, looking at London-South Wales business, just over a quarter of the passenger revenue was journeys to and from Wales. MHo believed GWR were doing more in terms of bilingual messages on all the screens and there would be some announcements in Welsh in Wales. MHo was going to meet the Wales Supervisory Board and GWR would be working closely with them. MHo has discussed things with Tom Joyner, who is the Managing Director of Arriva Trains Wales and used to work for MHo. GWR is currently talking to Welsh Government about improvements in the future.

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PD asked if GWR were at the point where Delay Repay was going to be implemented. A large number of complaints were to do with the Passenger Charter. MHo accepted there would be a lot of advantages in Delay Repay, but also thought that they needed to think quite carefully about season ticket holders. The reality was that, at the moment, they were paying out discounts. PD stated that GWR had a project team set up in order to be ready to implement it if a decision is made. They were discussing it with the DfT.

On T-12, T-6 and Possession Management handling, PM noted that there would be a lot of political pressure to make sure that the Crossrail opened on time. MHo said he expected to be able to look after his customers and run the train service he had advertised.

JH read a question from Board member AL. AL had stated that the delays in handling complaints were showing little or no sign of abating. It was therefore worth asking GWR if they had considered creating a 'clean slate' by offering no-quibble compensation payments to remove the backlog. MHo disputed that GWR had made no progress. MHo thought a broad-brush, mail-merge-type response would deal with a lot of people, but would not get it quite right for everybody. They had to have the capability to deal with the quantity and the volumes. If someone had written them a letter with six points, they had to be able to respond to the six points.

GD asked how GWR would avoid getting into a situation where the base timetable was so late that he did not have time to do all the crew diagrams. MHo stated that GWR had just had their bid back on Friday for the December timetable with some issues to resolve with Network Rail. The really difficult decision for GWR now was whether, in light of what has happened elsewhere, to proceed with that plan or delay some of the changes. They needed to take the decision quite quickly and on a well-informed basis.

NH stated that performance was something Transport Focus talked about a lot with GWR and Network Rail Western Route. NH asked if MHo thought there was more that GWR could do to support passengers while performance was so difficult, particularly in the hotspots.

MHo thought that, on the ground, there were areas where GWR could work better and they were continually encouraging local teams, including station managers, to look at resource and capability. MHo believed GWR also needed to get to the root cause of some of the issues. MHo believed they had done that well in some areas.

AS highlighted the issues concerning East Midlands Trains and Thameslink around timetabling. AS asked how confident MHo was that the current industry structures could resolve those sorts of conflicts, for example between GWR and CrossCountry. MHo stated that he thought the structures can and do work. GWR had a strong relationship with CrossCountry. GWR had done some good work with Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) on the Welsh timetable. Where it had gone wrong recently, it had been due to last-minute changes. MHo felt that if the proper process is followed there is time to work these things through.

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JH thanked MHo and colleagues for their time.

4.0 Discussion about the 20 May 2018 timetable crisis

JH introduced the board discussion about the current timetabling crisis, mentioning that Mark Carne (Network Rail) and Charles Horton (Govia Thameslink Railway) had been invited but were unable to attend. Transport Focus accepted that it was short notice.

GD stated that – as is well known – the 20 May timetable on Northern, Thameslink and Great Northern had not gone well, primarily because the two TOCs involved had not had sufficient drivers trained with the route knowledge and traction knowledge in order to run all the diagrams. One of the big questions was why the two TOCs had not appreciated the urgency or completed the level of driver training that would be required.

Northern had fairly quickly accepted that they were going to have to do something drastically different. They had prepared an interim timetable taking out 165 of the trains, and that appeared to have stabilised the situation in the north-west. GTR had started on 21 May with some trains removed from the timetable, but at that point they had been suggesting it would be only a few weeks before those would go back in. It had been apparent that even though they had taken out trains, they still could not run all the ones they were promising to run. As a consequence, it remained something of a 'lottery' to passengers.

GD explained what Transport Focus were doing about it. There were two strands. One was highlighting to the industry the passenger impact. The other strand was around communications. The essential things Transport Focus was doing were all about stability. People had to be able to rely on the promised timetable. Information and a realistic timetable were important.

LM noted that GTR had agreed that tickets could be used interchangeably, including on Gatwick Express and other train companies.

LM questioned whether anything was stabilising. The comments received by Transport Focus from passengers suggested that it was not. LM's other frustration was that she had asked constantly for more detail as to which trains would be cancelled, so passengers could plan.

IL stated that there was a huge performance and availability black spot within the Thameslink corridor that affected many London commuters. Her other issue was about how passengers were able to raise complaints, claims for compensation or Delay Repay. IL had had to apply for Delay Repay on probably 50% of her journeys. There had been no way to obtain the intended temporary timetable.

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LM stated that GTR were saying they could still do automatic Delay Repay, but were telling passengers they could also put in manual claims. These should be reviewed against the timetable that had been intended for May 20. GTR had clearly told Transport Focus that they were doing the right thing, but the message had been lost in translation. IL stated that it felt a laborious process for passengers.

GD stated that, in addition to the interplay with EMT, one of the issues was the phasing in of the Thameslink timetable. Even if all the trains had been running properly on 21 May, there were fewer between May and December than there would be eventually. Some of the passenger angst related to short-term reductions in the service which had probably not been explained well.

AL was interested if there was a commercial driver behind the confusion over the timetable. LM suggested the problem was that they did not have sufficient trained drivers. GD stated that he was looking at detailed performance information from the previous day. He would see a train that was cancelled one day, which the following day ran 'right time', which suggested that the timetable itself was robust. LM added that Network Rail has said that the timetable itself was actually working. AS clarified that it could work. GD cautioned that it was not clear whether it was working only because so many Thameslink trains were not actually running.

JH added that there was a Transport Select Committee (TSC) inquiry taking place the following Monday. There was also an Inquiry chaired by Professor Stephen Glaister, which Transport Focus had been asked to input to. GD had agreed to lead Transport Focus's input.

JH asked if Transport Focus planned to make any submission to the TSC. JH thought there were a number of points from this discussion that Transport Focus could, and probably should, feed in. Making provisions for the undoubted surge in complaints would be one of them.

JH questioned what the risk register associated with this change had been. He wondered if there had been a risk-based approach, what high-level risks had been identified and what contingencies had been put in place. ML added that this was a risk not just for the train operating companies, but for the Department. ML would expect to see this on risk registers across the piece and mitigating actions taken accordingly.

JH added that, while it was a verbal hearing, there was nothing to stop Transport Focus providing information to TSC which could then be published. JH stated that Transport Focus could write to the chair.

On risk, AS acknowledged MHo's points about Plan Bs. There could not be a Plan B on a timetable because it meant that everyone else had to move around. It either had to work or did not.

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PM referred to the readiness board, where there were senior industry people signing off on this project. PM suggested this was where the risk register should sit. The risk register should have been looked at. JH stated that TSC should ask to see which risk registers had been presented to the readiness board and understand if a risk-based approach had been adopted.

AL expressed uncertainty as to the scope of the Glaister Inquiry. AS did not believe anyone was sure. It was to be discussed and Transport Focus would make the point that it should be as forward-looking as it was backward-looking.

PM stated that, particularly in the case of Northern, the infrastructure meant that they could not go for the timetable they had originally wanted. Fortunately, it had been self-contained within Scotland and they had managed to keep going with the timetable unchanged without problems. There was another large set of issues that were likely to get pushed into the December 2018 timetable change. A decision had to be made earlier as to whether to take advantage of that or delay it to make sure it could be delivered robustly.

GD stated that if changes scheduled for December 2018 were deferred, it could be simply storing up a problem for May 2019, when there would be a set of further timetable change to implement. JH stated that PM would have the opportunity to ask some of those questions the following Tuesday when Transport Focus met in public with Northern.

ML wondered what performance indicators the readiness board had been given and what had been missing.

5.0 Any Other Business

JH thanked attendees. It would be helpful to send a letter to the TSC chair. This would have to be done quickly to be useful.

AS stated that the discussion about the Northern issues would take place following week.

There being no other business, the meeting ended at 13.11.

Signed as a true and accurate record of the meeting:

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Jeff Halliwell
Chair, Transport Focus

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Date

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