

promoting quality public transport.....

InterCity West Coast Franchise Consultation Manager
Department for Transport
Zone 5/26
Great Minster House
76 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DR

20th April 2011

Dear Sir/Madam,

Inter City West Coast Consultation Document

Introduction

TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) is an independent Community Interest Company representing users of all forms of public transport in North West England. We welcome the opportunity to comment on this document

This franchise will operate during a period when it is widely agreed that the demand for rail travel will increase, but there are large discrepancies in the forecasts currently being used. What is certain is that extra capacity, both in pathing and train accommodation, is urgently required.

The North West appears to have maintained some growth despite the recent financial upheaval and major developments are planned throughout the region. In view of this, it is imperative that the new Pendolino vehicles should be introduced as soon as possible. The current delivery timetable seems very slow compared with the introduction of other rolling stock on the network and this needs to be addressed.

Although the main purpose of this franchise is to provide services to London from the North West and beyond, there are many opportunities to provide fast frequent services to intermediate points along the route without any major impact on the core service. This applies especially to stations in the Trent Valley, Milton Keynes and Watford Junction which are major generators of travel from this region.

2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Whilst it is acknowledged that the Games will need major public transport efforts to handle the expected visitors, it must not be used as an excuse to channel permanent resources into the Capital to the detriment of the rest of the network. Throughout the duration of the Games, normal business life will continue and must take precedence over the short term needs of these events.

High Speed 2

If, following consultation, the London terminal of HS2 is located at Euston then appropriate measures must be in place to allow as near a normal service as possible to be maintained during the redevelopment of the Euston site.

If another terminal becomes the preferred option, what will be the impact on the West Coast Main Line and will the line open on time in 2026? This question must be addressed with due consideration to the needs of the passengers using the traditional main lines.

Although this franchise will finish in 2026 the document refers to the question regarding fare abstraction from current WCML operators with the introduction of services on HS2. It is highly likely that this will be offset by the increased revenue earned from the introduction of new services on the traditional lines using the released capacity produced by HS2.

The post 2026 franchising map will have to be redrawn to take account of HS2.

Electrification

The electrification schemes now confirmed in the North West are vital for improvements across the network, not just in the local areas. The introduction of electric units with better acceleration and higher speeds will free up valuable space on the network, especially when replacing some of the current diesel stock which has maximum speeds of only 75mph. Consideration should also be given to the long term goal of electrifying the final part of the WCML from Crewe to Holyhead/Llandudno

Northern Hub

The announcement regarding the building of the Ordsall Curve is welcomed, but this must be accompanied by the other parts of the Northern Hub scheme to provide the full benefits

Other schemes

The upgrade of the electricity supply has to be a priority to cope with the increased length of the Pendolinos and the extra electric trains to be

introduced following the schemes mentioned above. There are several signalling schemes which are long overdue and some are mentioned in the consultation. One area missing is the Stockport area which is still using systems dating back over one hundred years to operate a 21st century railway.

We agree with the proposal that there should be a mechanism that enables investment improvements to be carried out mid term or approaching the end of the franchise that could be passed to the next operator. This is obviously in the interests of passengers who are not so concerned about who is operating their service so long as they can see seamless improvements.

Train Service Requirements

Any additional services should not be to the detriment of local services in the North West (either financially or operationally) as was the case in the Manchester area when the Euston - Manchester service increased to 3 trains per hour.

There should be at least an hourly service from Euston to Carlisle providing regular services at Penrith, Oxenholme, Lancaster, Preston, Wigan North Western, Warrington Bank Quay and Crewe. Links between many of these stations in the North West are poor and should be improved. Oxenholme and Penrith in particular, should not suffer from slower and/or less frequent services. The current omission of Crewe from these services causes problems for passengers from the North who need to change on to other services at Crewe.

Milton Keynes and Watford Junction both have a poor level of service from many parts of the North West, and usually require a change of train to complete the journey. Liverpool is similarly poorly served by WCML services with only one train per hour compared to the three to Manchester and Birmingham. We feel that Liverpool justifies a more frequent service, perhaps with regular calls at Crewe and Liverpool South Parkway to provide increased demand.

The use of Pendolinos on the services from Birmingham to Scotland would provide much needed extra capacity on the route and remove the use of diesel trains on services that run on electrified lines throughout. The document refers to the possibility of operating diesel-powered Voyagers to some destinations, such as Blackpool North, that lie on non-electrified routes. This line is due to be electrified from early in the franchise so we would hope for through electric trains between Blackpool and Euston (perhaps in part an extension of an hourly off peak Euston – Preston service).

There should be consultation whenever timetable changes and changes to train service requirement are contemplated. At the very minimum this should be with stakeholders, ***in particular regional and local passenger organisations***, before any timetable reductions are implemented or

incorporated into franchise terms. Such consultation should also be mandatory within all franchise agreements at appropriate, timely points in the timetable planning process to enable, local and regional views to be incorporated in any changes proposed

Engineering

The need for track access is acknowledged as a requirement for the operation of a safe railway, but these must be properly administered. Sunday is a busy day for passengers and we would not wish to see any deterioration in service levels arising from the plan to increase the blocking of two tracks (for maintenance purposes) on the four track sections from 16 hours to 18 hours between 2000 Saturday and 1200 Sunday. Given this proviso we trust an advantage would be the withdrawal of the regular late evening closures during the week which cause major problems for travellers returning from London on late trains.

Train Capacity and Performance

Passengers regard being able to get a seat as a high priority on long distance journeys. We welcome the requirement to provide passenger count information. In order to increase the availability of seats and look to future growth **all** Pendolinos should be strengthened to 11 vehicles.

The Public Performance Measure (PPM) which is basically an average figure conceals wide ranging variations in performance and does not apply to intermediate stations. We welcome the commitment to aspire to raise the benchmark. There should also be measures for punctuality at intermediate stations and not just those stations where there are connections.

Delivering Improvements for Passengers

This is a key issue for the franchise contract and we welcome the close co-operation that has been developed with Passenger Focus.

Stations

The document refers to the review of station standards conducted by Chris Green and Sir Peter Hall in November 2009. This highlighted Crewe, Stockport, Warrington Bank Quay, Preston and Wigan North Western stations - 5 West Coast stations out of the poorest scoring 10 key interchange stations in the country that would benefit from investment in improved facilities.

Following this report TWNW produced a report (The North West's Weakest Link Rail Stations) on the facilities at provided by 12 of the North West's major stations including these 5 stations. TWNW concluded that the condition of the vast majority of these stations is significantly below what passengers should expect in the 21st century. *(The report is attached).*

We expect this new franchise to make considerable progress in making these and other stations more attractive for passengers, including the implementation of Station Travel Plans to improve access. Some recent efforts, such as those at Macclesfield, were only a form of sticking plaster, where major surgery was required to provide the correct level of modern facilities. Several other stations are in a similar position and a thorough audit of all stations should be urgently undertaken.

Bus/rail interchange should be encouraged and cycle storage/car parking improved.

The current method of shared responsibility for stations between the TOC and Network Rail causes problems when repairs and upgrades are required. Indeed Network Rail often appears to be a real barrier to carrying out station improvements. We feel that the Department should commit to extending responsibilities to franchisees for station management and improvement.

Security and passenger safety should be part of any plans undertaken anywhere on the railway, and not as an afterthought

Tickets and Revenue

The current fares regime is still far too complicated with too many petty rules and regulations, often accompanied by heavy handed implementation of these rules. This does not mean that there should be no revenue protection, but many innocent travellers have very poor experiences when they have made a genuine mistake. In these circumstances (for example where passengers have missed their booked train because of a late running bus or other road traffic hold up) excess fares should be charged on the basis of the difference between the fare already paid and what should apply on that particular service. As things stand at the moment passengers can be asked to pay the entire fare as if no ticket were held.

Also, the level of ticket inspection on trains varies greatly and there are many occasions where revenue is lost due to poor practice by some staff.

The fares on this route are the highest in the country and compare poorly with similar services across Europe. There is also a substantial amount of spare capacity in First Class for much of the day. Value for money is a key factor for passengers and many of them are not satisfied with this at the moment. Regulation is an important means of protecting fares levels particularly those which are outwith the cheaper advance ticketing portfolio.

One measure taken to alleviate high walk on fares was the facility for Railcard holders to use off-peak tickets on any train. When Virgin lost the Cross Country franchise, this facility was immediately withdrawn by the new franchisee. ***This must not be allowed to happen with the new West Coast franchise.*** An affordable walk-on fare is vital; for many passengers who do not have the flexibility to book weeks ahead of the date of travel.

Reference is made in this section to the requirement for the franchisee to produce a Passengers Charter featuring a Delay Repay compensation scheme. The standards and triggers for compensation and its scope should be at least as beneficial to the passenger as in the current Virgin Rail Passengers Charter.

Passenger Information

The level of information available varies greatly across the franchise, although all the stations now have real time information screens operating. Other methods of obtaining information are often complicated and inaccurate. This is especially true in the case of service disruption, where up to date accurate information can often be a rare commodity. This problem arises from several sources including lines of communication within the rail industry and difficulty in predicting the extent of a disruption. Contingency plans should be in place to minimise inconvenience and information deficiency.

There is a trend for unnecessary PA announcements for “Health and Safety” reasons, which actually serve no real purpose and are certainly not required by H & S regulations. Also, over-long announcements about the penalties incurred for not understanding the complicated ticketing system are a regular feature of journeys, and would not be required if the ticketing system was simplified, as noted above.

Improving Service Quality

The document states that “the operator may also be required to propose how they will improve aspects of the rail journey not covered elsewhere, such as the quality and cleanliness of stations and trains.” Also “Service quality provision has historically been left to the operator on InterCity services as competitive pressure and the incentive to increase customer patronage has been assumed to be sufficient and this may continue to be our proposed approach.”

There is one area of concern highlighted by the results of the National Passenger Survey. The satisfaction scores for on train toilets has been within the 50 – 58% range since 2006. This is an important area where incentives should be provided to encourage improvement e.g. minimum percentage of fully working toilets, including water, drying equipment, etc.) This is particularly significant as the total number of toilets provided on trains is limited.

Another area that causes problems is luggage storage. Voyagers and Pendolinos have limited storage space and the size of cases, etc appears to get larger. There is inevitably a trade off with seating but the franchisee should contemplate better facilities.

Catering

A good level of catering is essential on long distance journeys and this cannot be provided by a trolley service passing through the train. Experience of these on other franchises show great variations in the level of service provided and the choice of food and drinks available. We advocate the retention of the shop, hot food and also meals services for First Class passengers.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Yours faithfully,

JOHN MOORHOUSE
COMPANY SECRETARY