

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

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ICWC Consultation
 Department for Transport
 4/18 Great Minster House
 33 Horseferry Road
 London SW1P 4DR

2nd August 2016

Dear Sir/Madam

Consultation on InterCity West Coast Rail Franchise

TravelWatch NorthWest is an independent Community Interest Company representing public transport users in NW England. We welcome the opportunity to comment on this consultation.

Our comments (with particular acknowledgement to our Chairman, Chris Dale and other Directors) are given below -

Q1: We have listed below examples of areas identified that customers would most like improved on their ICWC journey and would ask you to rank your top five. It would help us analyse this information if you could explain why you think this area warrants/needs improvement, if it relates to a particular station or train service, and what you think the new train operator could do to help.

Availability of seating at stations

Seating is in short supply at many stations and needs increasing urgently. This is especially true at the major stations, such as Euston and Manchester Piccadilly where the majority of seating is found in commercial outlets and is reserved for the sole use of their customers. This seating is needed by many passengers who are unable to stand for long periods in particular the disabled and the elderly.

Getting a seat on trains

This is essential for all journeys longer than 20 minutes. All Pendolinos should be extended to at least 11 cars.

With regard to comfort seat pitch/ leg room is an important consideration. This seems to have progressively worsened over the years in many cases – a philosophy of cramming more seats in to save on the number of carriages

needed, often with detrimental effects on luggage space (see below), with attendant cost savings.

On the subject of seat reservations, whilst some passengers may appreciate internet access, etc., there are significant numbers of people who want to look out of the window and enjoy the scenery and journey. These passengers must be catered for with seats aligned with windows that people can actually see out of and the ability to specifically reserve these seats. Passengers should be able to reserve specific seats e.g. forward facing by a window, with charging point for mobile, choice of coach so they can have a seat which will be close to the station entrance. Reserved seating notices should be removed if the reservation has not been utilised. Passengers on cheap advanced tickets should not have priority over full fare paying passengers for a seat, possibly by only specifying the train to be used and not the seat.

Car parking facilities at train stations

The most recent (Spring 2016) Transport Focus National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) shows a low satisfaction figure for car parking at stations served by West Coast (61%). Driving to a station to park is a continually growing preference and substantially more provision will be needed, probably by multi storey solutions. Parking charges should be at more reasonable rates than at present due to many ICWC stations being major commuting hubs as well as long distance departure points. The current high fees make it impossible for commuters to use on a regular basis. This causes problems to the local communities with large amounts of on-street parking near stations. Adequate provision for pick-up/set-down is vital.

Increased staff visibility (at train stations or on trains)

There should be a constant visible presence of staff at all stations. This is especially important when booking offices close early and also during times of disruption. Train conductors also need to be more visible. In this context, the level of ticket inspection on trains varies greatly and can be absent between several stations. Thus revenue can be lost due to poor practice.

A more proactive approach to customer service at train stations

There will always be many passengers who are unfamiliar with rail travel. Station staff must be visible and willing to help those passengers who need it. Direction to the correct section of the train for boarding is crucial.

Luggage space on trains

Luggage is becoming larger and bulkier and, with more seats crammed into coaches, space is at a premium. Passengers are encouraged to keep their luggage in view at all times, which is impossible with the current layout. A complete review of the internal design is needed

Overall satisfaction with stations and their cleanliness

Station cleanliness has improved recently and the improvement needs to continue. The supply of rubbish bags has helped and there should be a continued encouragement of recycling facilities at all stations. Much can be

done to improve toilet facilities and keeping them presentable. We have reservations about charging for toilets.

Getting between the train and station concourse

Adequate signage is imperative with physical help available if required by some passengers. All stations served by West Coast must be fully accessible. Euston – there is an urgent requirement to end the “Euston dash” when a train begins to board. Passengers should be directed to areas close to the platform as used to be the usual procedure. The current arrangements are hazardous and should end as soon as possible

Toilet facilities on train

Another area of low passenger satisfaction in NRPS (62%). Two aspects of poor quality are hand dryers that either do not work or are intermittent and difficulty of extracting toilet paper from the dispenser. Also of fundamental importance is the ratio of toilets to seats. There is a need for a standard to apply on long distance services to minimise queuing which is common on busy trains. The current practice of on-board cleaners on trains must continue, but there is still work to do making toilets more pleasant.

Being kept informed about delays

It is vital that passengers are informed of problems as soon as possible. They also need to be treated as adults with real reasons given for the delay, rather than vague phrases such as “operational difficulties” If the reason for the delay is not immediately known, passengers should be told and assured that they will be informed as soon as possible.

Access to catering and refreshments on board

The provision of a central shop facility is needed for the supply of hot food and other refreshments on long distance trains, but there should also be a trolley service to supply snacks and drinks to passengers who do not wish to visit the shop (either through disability or reluctance to leave their luggage). The First Class offer should also apply at weekends at the same level as weekdays

If there are other areas for improvement not included in the above table, please explain what these areas are and why you think this area could be improved.

Car parking is mentioned above but the whole issue of getting to and from stations and the whole door to door journey experience has to be considered. Access to stations by all modes including practicable, well publicised, integration with bus services should be given wider attention.

There are always going to be occasions where rail replacement coaches are needed. These can be difficult to operate and be problematical for passengers e.g. no pavement/kerb resulting in a high step onto road coaches. Therefore, when improving stations, provision for rail replacement coaches should be built in.

The carriage of cycles on trains is not mentioned. The availability of space is a vexed issue but it is likely that demand for this facility will go on increasing.

Q2: What type/method of communication do you find most effective to:

a) Enable you to plan your end to end train journey?

This varies considerably but use of the internet grows apace. Accuracy of route and fare information is a key consideration with ideally a single point of information for journey planning. This should be available via telephone, internet or personal visit to stations. There should be clear links to options for integrated transport links and availability of car parking space.

b) Be informed in advance about known disruptions such as planned engineering works

Adequate clear information should be available as far in advance as possible. The T-12 maxim should be adhered to. The arrangements for travel and replacement services should be easy to understand.

c) Be informed during unplanned disruptions both before you travel and during the journey?

In this scenario 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. Information should be made readily available by staff from all TOCs when a problem occurs involving trains/stations/staff of different TOCs

Q3: Are there any direct journeys currently provided by ICWC that you would want to see protected at a minimum level (e.g. 1 train every 2 hours)? Please say where would this be and your reasons why where possible.

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. Crewe is a major hub for the East Midlands, North West and Wales and calling the Carlisle/ Scottish trains there will also improve the local service between Crewe and Preston which is only served by ICWC.

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.

A better co-ordinated service is required in Cumbria in conjunction with TransPennineExpress (TPE) e.g. reduction of the current skip/stop service (shared with TPE) at Penrith and Oxenholme and plugging some of the big station calling gaps at Penrith and Oxenholme for example 3 hour gaps in direct trains from Euston to Oxenholme throughout the morning.

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.

Q4: Please rank the options below to indicate your priority for potential changes you would like to see to ICWC train services. Please say where would this be and your reasons why where possible

Speed up service for long-distance passengers for example by changing stops at low-use stations.

Depending on how low use is defined, if stations such as Oxenholme and Penrith come into this category they are important hubs for their local area with West Coast being the only provider of intermediate journeys. They should not suffer service reductions due to any misperceived low importance.

Introduce new stops to provide services to destinations not currently directly served by the ICWC franchise.

With the forthcoming electrification projects in the North West, two destinations should be considered. Blackpool, which only has a minimal service at present, should have a regular London service. The line to Windermere should also receive a through service from London. This is one of the most important and well visited tourist areas in the country and is poorly served with a lesser service recently introduced with the new franchise. Though this is not within the current West Coast franchise we aspire to the re-introduction of through services from Cumbria/Lancs beyond Birmingham to Poole, Plymouth, Penzance etc. These were taken out of the CrossCountry franchise in 2008 and the through links are very much missed.

Swap an existing stop for another to increase destinations not currently directly served by the ICWC franchise.

We have no specific examples of this. Taking out stops can be a controversial exercise and any such proposals would have to be given careful consideration.

Adjust the level of service (e.g. evening, weekend) to better match demand.

The West Coast line has a much earlier finish than other main lines and this needs to change. Major night time economies such as Manchester are let down by the lack of an adequate late evening service. Later trains for Cumbria (especially from Euston) are also desirable.

We now live in a world where activities occur on all seven days. Therefore we need a timetable which provides a good service all seven days. Specifically,

services on Saturday afternoons and Sundays need to be improved. Sunday has become a major shopping day and also sporting events are now much more popular on that day. North of Preston the WCML doesn't open much before noon on Sundays which is useless for what is now a busy leisure day, and given that the WCML north of Lancaster is basically a leisure market, this issue must be addressed. Also the requirement to operate services on Boxing Day should be a franchise commitment as this day is a key outdoor leisure day after Christmas for shopping theatre, etc. visits, events and sporting fixtures.

Better support the economic development of the towns and cities served by the franchise for example by increasing/reducing services for seasonal travel (e.g. tourism, holidays) or for a major event (e.g. concert or sporting event).

Tourist areas such as Blackpool and the Lake District need increased services during their busy seasons. It is regrettable that Network Rail chooses to carry out engineering work necessitating line closures during weekend and bank holidays when demand for leisure/ tourist travel to the Lake District is at its highest. The West Coast also seems singularly inept at providing additional services for major events, especially in the evening and this needs urgent attention.

Improve/connections with other trains services as part of longer-distance journeys.

There is a need to look at connections at hubs such as Crewe, Preston and Carlisle and also at key interchanges like Lancaster and Oxenholme. Due to the continuing reduction in through services between Windermere and Manchester, Oxenholme is becoming increasingly an interchange station and connections are therefore very important.

Holding trains at stations for connecting trains

Timetables should be designed with connections that actually work. There is a general need for a sensible approach to holding connecting trains which we believe is currently frowned on due to the regulatory regime. For example there should not be a situation where a WCML service arrives at Lancaster a few minutes late and people on the train watch their connection to Barrow depart as the WCML service arrives.

Q5: Based on your journey, please could you state whether you consider any priority should be placed on either:

Protecting long distance capacity on trains or

This is vital and there are instances at peak times where limited stops are justified to provide that capacity. At those times other services need to be increased to provide the missing links.

Providing maximum choice of operator over short distance journeys.

Many passengers will not yearn for a choice of operator over short distances provided the incumbent offers a frequent choice of quality, value for money services.

Q6: What methods do you think could enable more people to travel and improve the railway's ability to cater for passenger growth?

Looking at fares, standard fares on this route are high 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 (only attaining 62% satisfied in the recent NRPS survey). 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 has now happened with the current Virgin West Coast franchise.*** Ideally we would like to see this benefit returned in the new 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.

The fares structure should be fair and easy to understand. The high peak fares charged on this route are hard to justify and the sharp changes between the peak and off peak fares are too high.

There is a need for a complete overhaul of the fares structure with more understanding of the passenger's needs required, rather than the operational convenience of the TOC.

Q7: Based on your knowledge of your local area/station, how could the new ICWC train operator:

Improve rail services (including all the support functions it needs) in a way that respects and helps to maintain the environment?

Further electrification e.g. to Chester/North Wales.

Play a greater role in supporting and improving the community it serves, the heritage of the railway and help develop their stations into hubs for the community?

There should be closer involvement with Community Rail Partnerships which connect with West Coast services e.g. in Cumbria. Several stations have a strong heritage and this must be considered when any improvement work is to be carried out

Q8: Please list, in priority order, the top five facilities you would like to see either improved or introduced at stations served by the ICWC Franchise.

- 1) Modernisation of passenger facilities including toilets at all stations

- 2) Improved access to all platforms with escalators and easily accessible lifts.
- 3) Safe routes to and from the station by all means of transport.
- 4) Consistent standards across the network at all stations.
- 5) Modern facilities such as free wi-fi and ATMs at all stations.

Q9: Thinking of the journeys you make or have made on the ICWC, or a journey you could make by the ICWC but where you decide to use an alternative transport mode instead.

What specific changes could be made to make the railway easier to access and therefore more attractive to use and why do you think these changes would help?

- A means of determining car park capacity in advance would encourage use of the train rather than driving the whole journey.
- Overhaul of NRES journey planner including integration with other modes

Q10 – What do you think the future ICWC train operator could do to modernise and improve the ticketing experience for customers? Please include your views on the elements or parts of service the train operator should consider when developing their ticketing and ticket retailing plans.

Relevant new technology is to be welcomed. The needs of those who do not have access to the internet have to be recognised and station ticket offices properly staffed and informative Ticket machines should provide as wide a range of tickets as possible. Improve integrated ticketing with bus and light rail e.g. Manchester Metrolink.

Q11: If there are any additional areas that you think it is important for us to consider that have not already been addressed in this consultation please explain them here

There are two areas we would like to bring attention to –

1. Engineering work disruption

The West Coast Main Line sees numerous closures for engineering work usually necessitating the use of rail replacement road services often over long distances. TOWNW has always urged that alternative rail services should always be a first choice over road. In particular when the WCML is closed between Preston & Carlisle for planned or emergency engineering work as many trains as possible should be diverted via the Settle & Carlisle (S/C) line. Other trains should run through to the intermediate stations at Lancaster, Oxenholme or Penrith (where possible), from both ends, so that road services are only required for the shortest distance and NOT the 90 miles from Preston to Carlisle.

Use of the S/C in these circumstances eradicates the gross inconvenience for passengers, including those with heavy luggage and the many mobility impaired, of changing from train to coach and coach back to train. The journey time compares favourably with the road option and research by Transport Focus has consistently shown that passengers prefer through rail services even with time penalties (which there are none in this case taking into account the time taken to change modes).

Unfortunately there is a perverse incentive for operators to take the easy option of road services as these are financially covered by Network Rail (i.e. the taxpayer). This is not always in the best interests of passengers. (See also our recent report attached - ***West Coast Main Line Improvement works between Warrington, Carlisle and Scotland April and May 2016 July 2016***)

2. Relationships with passenger stakeholders.

We can find nowhere in the consultation any reference to ongoing relationships between the new franchisee and passenger stakeholder groups.

We understand that there is a commitment in the new TPE franchise for TOWNW to be involved in the proactive development of long term timetables and amended service patterns for engineering work and special events. We have an expectation for First TPE to engage with TOWNW alongside Transport Focus in relation to long term timetable changes at a suitable early stage and to co-create plans for amended timetables, rail replacement services, station interchange and passenger information in advance and during planned disruption.

We would look for a similar commitment in the new West Coast franchise and also to consult 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***, at appropriate, timely points in the timetable planning process to enable, local and regional views to be incorporated in any changes proposed.

We would add that we would expect to see proper stakeholder consultation on changes during the franchises on other matters in addition to timetabling, such as fares alterations, rolling stock developments including the design of new trains and other passenger interest issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

Yours faithfully

John A Moorhouse

John Moorhouse
Company Secretary