

West Coast Main Line: consultation on new franchise

Draft Response from Railfuture

Introduction

Railfuture is pleased to respond to the draft West Coast Main Line revised franchise arrangements. Railfuture is the campaigning name of the Railway Development Society Limited, a (not for profit) Limited Company organised in England as twelve regional branches plus two national branches in Scotland and Wales. This coordinated response has been compiled by Railfuture North West with input from the following Railfuture branches, North East, West Midlands, Thames Valley, London & South East, East Midlands, Lincolnshire, Scotland and (North) Wales. Where appropriate we have quoted the relevant paragraph from the consultation document and our comments are in italics straight after. The paragraph numbering we have put in for our purposes; it does not relate to anything in the original.

General

Railfuture welcomes the proposed 14 year term of the next franchise; we think that on balance, the 15 year term of the existing franchise has worked to the benefit of passengers. However we have concerns about the fares structure control mechanisms and would point to an increase in the (illustrative example) peak walk-on fare of Manchester to London of 193% since the franchise was let in 1997 (£95 to £279), whilst compound retail price inflation across that period was $\approx$ 40%. Whilst the operator would no doubt point to competition on routes served by the franchise, in practice we think in effect, more of the services on the West Coast franchise have no on-rail competition than not. The introduction of a 20 minute frequency service on two key cities on the franchise route map ought to have been an opportunity to introduce a "walk up and go" mentality that would help in achieving targets to get more people taking journeys by train to reduce carbon emissions, but we think that this fare structure works against that. The franchise operator may point to good levels of growth achieved on those routes, but in practice these have been measured from a low point whilst work was going on to renew the route.

Specific points referred to in the consultation document

The franchise specification proposes that the basic service pattern will be similar to that operated by Virgin Trains on the West Coast today; and it is expected that a Track Access Agreement will be available to support this level of service for the first ten years of the franchise. [p 52]

Enhancements in terms of capacity and frequency of service will be required during the 17 day period of the Olympic Games and the 12 day period of the Paralympic Games in 2012. [p 52]

Consultation Questions:

Chapter 6 - Schemes, Stakeholders and other Initiatives.

1. (Ch 6, p36) "Respondents are encouraged to consider any specific local factors that they believe might influence the future level of passenger demand."

There has been substantial growth on the West Coast route, including on services running between Birmingham and Scotland which are now frequently overcrowded. We note that with

the publication of the Station Usage tables for 2009/10 last month it is now possible to track the changes at individual stations over five or seven years. We feel that this should make it easier to respond to traffic changes for the new franchise holder.

We note however that there is still a poor uptake on Scotland-London WCML services, with London trains relatively empty in Scotland. We think Scottish passengers have voted with their feet to the competition (car, long distance bus, airlines, East Coast, Caledonian Sleeper) and we believe this to be because of competition, the generally expensive fares and the very limited pattern of stops/connections.

2. (Ch 6, p40) "Respondents are encouraged to consider issues arising from the planned development of HS2 - particularly in that the bidding community may find it difficult to price within their proposals the effects of either the introduction of a new service pattern or its abstractive effect at this stage."

The franchisee should be encouraged not to see future abstraction as a threat but more of an opportunity to grow traffic on the southern end of the WCML. However we do note that in the first phase of HS2 where services north of Birmingham will run on the existing route, we think great care should be taken that these services are not at the expense of other services on the route, e.g. Birmingham – Scotland, though given timings, this may be beyond the end of the franchise.

3. (Ch 6, p46) "We would welcome comments on what the most important investment priorities should be for the franchise and respondents are asked to highlight any other schemes that are likely to be delivered during the life of the next franchise."

High priorities for Railfuture are;

a. *To provide additional capacity on the Birmingham - Scotland service where the existing 5-car Voyagers are frequently overcrowded. There is also still a problem with the quality of stock, particularly Pendolinos, users tell us that they are not happy with the low number of seats with windows and that there are already problems with "rattling panels" when trains are at linespeed, something that we think should not be the case at this stage in their life. The seating issue could be addressed at the next midlife refurbishment whilst the rattling panels could be addressed by better maintenance now.*

b. *Whilst getting HS2 to connect to Scotland from all points on the West Coast network in much improved journey times might seem a distant ambition, we think that the present network could still be better used to provide more frequent and faster services on this part of the route and this need not be at the expense of stopping patterns.*

Franchise Remapping.

4. (Ch 6, p47) "Stakeholders are asked to highlight any amendments to service providers that they would like to propose as part of a remapping exercise."

a. *The cancellation of the service provided by the Open Access operator WSMR has removed all through services to London from the county of Shropshire, including the growing new town of Telford, and the hinterland which extends over the border into Wales. Whilst we welcome the retention of the limited direct service from Wrexham to London we suggest that the franchise should also provide a through service to Telford and Shrewsbury as soon as suitable rolling stock becomes available.*

b. *The Town of Walsall has a similar population to Wolverhampton but no direct services to either London or the North West [since the WSMR service to Tame Bridge parkway was withdrawn]. We urge bidders for the new West Coast franchise to consider how they could provide an Inter City service to Walsall after the planned changes to the layout at that station are completed.*

c. We suggest that the new franchise should include direct services from either London and/or Birmingham to Blackpool North as soon as suitable rolling stock becomes available.

d. The extension of electrification which is already planned in the North-West will increase the synergies between the Manchester - Scotland service group, currently operated by Trans Pennine, and the services operated by the West Coast franchise. We suggest that, as there appear to be considerable synergies, consideration should be given to transferring the Manchester Airport - Scotland service group to the West Coast franchise following the end of the Trans Pennine franchise.

e. We further suggest that the new West Coast franchise should include some direct services from Liverpool to Scotland as suggested by Network Rail's draft Route Utilisation Strategy.

f. Since the curtailment of Cross Country services north of Manchester in 2005 there has been no direct service from Stoke-on-Trent to the North West or Scotland. The new franchise should consider whether there might be an opportunity to fill this gap when the planned North West electrification is completed.

Chapter 7 - The proposed DfT Specification.

Bidders are invited to suggest changes to the inherited train service, taking into account the additional capacity which will be available when the full fleet of 35 x 11-car Pendolinos are available.

Changes to Train Service Requirements.

(Ch 7, p55) "Stakeholders are asked to suggest alternative suggestions that they believe will be affordable, value for money, and provide a strong commercial or economic case."

- Should the Euston - Glasgow service be enhanced to hourly?
- What is the appropriate balance for London-Glasgow services between fast journey times with few intermediate stops and slower times with more stops? Which intermediate stations should be served by Glasgow trains, and how frequently?

Recent surveys by Passenger Focus show that passengers rate 'connectivity' as the highest priority. We think services patterns should reflect that, stopping the majority of long distance services at major nodes such as Crewe.

- Which intermediate stations should be served by Glasgow trains and how frequently?

For Scottish passengers, there has often been a difficulty in getting to the more southern stations on the WCML, so to make that easier, we think that as a minimum, Crewe should be served, whilst Carlisle should enable connections at the northern end. A more frequent service should enable Motherwell, Carstairs and Lockerbie stations to have a "skip stop" service.

- Should the spare off-peak path be used to provide an hourly service between Euston and Preston (or Lancaster or Blackpool) to serve intermediate stations, such as Warrington and Wigan, thus enabling these calls to be removed from the Glasgow trains, with consequent journey time reductions between London and Glasgow?

In principle yes; providing this new service calls at Milton Keynes, Nuneaton and Crewe to provide good connections to the north-west from intermediate stations.

- Is three trains per hour the appropriate level of service between London and each of Birmingham and Manchester, and for how many hours of the day should such a service level operate?

The current service frequency is generally appropriate for Euston – Birmingham and Manchester; any more trains would disrupt the overall pattern. However the franchisee should be encouraged to pursue quicker timings between Coventry and Wolverhampton to help in reducing the level of regional rail-heading at Birmingham International, Rugby et al.

Whilst we think it right to have a 20 minute service on the Manchester- Euston services, to improve the efficiency of the fleet and improve journey opportunities, after the North West Electrification schemes have been completed, we feel some thought might be given to extending some services through Manchester Piccadilly to/from Liverpool to add to the service level there and whilst we think there would be significant traffic from Bolton if it was added to the network, we understand there may be problems in providing catering servicing for such trains there, so we feel that an option to consider would be running the proposed service to Blackpool via Manchester possibly replacing the path of commuter services.

- What is the appropriate frequency of service between Milton Keynes and north-west England?

The growth in traffic between Milton Keynes and the West Midlands should also be considered by the new franchisee. In particular the peak hour stops at Milton Keynes in the service from Birmingham, which are omitted in the current timetables, should be reinstated.

- Does the West Coast Intercity operator have a role to play in the provision of commuter services between Milton Keynes and London, or would commuters overcrowd the Intercity services?

We do not believe that the West Coast Intercity operator should try to provide commuter services per se between Milton Keynes and London; doing so would lead to poor loading on long-distance services as although we are calling for better connections to Milton Keynes from points north (which would mean some seats would become available, once connecting passengers had left), we think overall this would mean carrying empty seats for long distances

- Should off-peak services be provided between London and each of Nuneaton, Tamworth and Lichfield, or does the existing hourly service provided by London Midland cater adequately for these flows?

Although all of the Trent Valley towns provide some connectional opportunities, Nuneaton is the key junction for passengers from Leicester and East Anglia. The hourly London Midland service is loading well and could soon justify lengthening to 6-car trains. However it may be too soon to consider whether additional capacity should be provided on this part of the West Coast route by more expensive Pendolinos.

- Is there a case for allocating Pendolinos to some of the Birmingham to Scotland services (to provide greater capacity) whilst allocating diesel-powered Voyagers to some Euston services so that direct trains can be operated to destinations, such as Blackpool North, that lie on non-electrified routes?

Many trains between the west Midlands and Scotland are overcrowded, so extra capacity should be provided, possibly by running London - Birmingham Pendolinos on from the west Midlands. Trains from the north, currently terminating at New Street, should be continued to International to:

- (i) Provide connectional opportunities to the NEC and Airport;
- (ii) Remove congestion from New Street.

- What level of service should be provided at smaller stations on the network such as Motherwell, Lockerbie and Penrith?

We would like to add Carstairs to that list and whilst we understand what would be looked at here would be "skip stop" services, this would obviously result in some stations not being connected to each other. We understand that these decisions are a balance between attracting long distance passengers and sustaining economic inclusion by train services at smaller communities, we think that either a second tier service needs to be looked at or failing that an hourly or two-hourly service, including early and late trains.

- What level of service should be provided between stations such as Oxenholme and Penrith?
- Is there a case for more Intercity services to call at Watford Junction and/or Rugby?

Watford Junction and Milton Keynes provide useful connections into the Southern service to South Croydon. When this service is extended to Gatwick, this will offer much easier travel from both Britain's second city and other key stations to Britain's second airport.

Services during the Off-peak, Evenings, Weekends and Public Holidays.

(Ch 7, p55) "Respondents are encouraged to consider appropriate train times and service frequencies for the franchise. Respondents are also encouraged to consider alternative service propositions."

The franchise should provide late evening services from London to all major stations on the route and between major stations. We note that the current evening service to Stoke-on-Trent is particularly poor and a later train should be provided. We also think that co-ordination with other train operating companies and Network Rail during disruption on weekends still needs to be addressed, there are still too many occasions in which several parallel routes are closed for engineering works at the same time. Whilst it is more of an issue with Network Rail, we think more progress should be made towards the 24/7 railway so that things like out and back trips on Saturdays and Sundays are possible from Scotland.

Managing Capacity / Reliability and Performance.

(Ch 7, p58) "Respondents are encouraged to highlight any performance areas of particular concern."

Recent franchises (e.g. Cross Country) have been permitted to publish a single PPM averaged over all the routes which they run. This has blurred the poor performance of individual service groups. The new West Coast franchise should be required to disaggregate performance statistics by service group.

Delivering Improvements for Passengers.

8. (Ch 7, p60) "Respondents are encouraged to consider the best method for funding major station enhancements and are encouraged to consider any local accessibility issues that they believe need addressing."

The franchise should respect the recommendations in the "Better Rail Stations" report and not proliferate bespoke signage at the stations which they manage. We trust that Schedule 4 - Station Information - of the earlier franchises will be retained with the information preferably displayed in a more standardised format. In particular we think that attention should be paid to colours and size of lettering used to take into account station users with poor sight.

Access for All and National Stations Improvement Program.

9. (Ch 7, p60) "Respondents are encouraged to consider which locations may be desirable for future consideration for improvement under these schemes and how such schemes may be funded."

We believe that Carstairs and Lichfield Trent Valley may now be the only stations served by the West Coast Train franchise which do not have level access to all main line platforms. The franchise should be required to contribute to access improvements and upgraded passenger facilities at all stations which they serve not just those where it is the Station Facility Owner.

Combined management and maintenance.

10. (Ch 7, p62) "Respondents are encouraged to consider how best to improve the management and maintenance of tracks and stations. We also welcome proposals that will enable reductions in cost to be achieved."

The franchise should consider transferring the management of major hub stations (e.g. Carlisle, Crewe and Preston) to Network Rail and offer facilities at all other stations to other TOCs on an even handed basis. [i.e. No more 1st Class waiting rooms reserved for Virgin passengers only]. All station development should prioritise train service development rather than retail development.

Fares, Ticketing and Revenue Protection.

11. (Ch 7, p65) "Respondents are encouraged to consider how best to minimise revenue loss across the franchise and how fares on this franchise could be made easier to understand."

We believe that on-train ticket inspection should be retained on all long distance services as this ensures that staff remain visible and able to advise passengers on forward connections and return travel.

Passenger Information.

12. (Ch 7, p65) "Respondents are encouraged to consider how best to communicate with passengers across the franchise."

Communication with Rail User Groups has declined significantly since the former regional Rail Passenger Committees were disbanded. The new franchise should include a requirement to set up, staff and fund a representative passenger panel and hold regular meetings with Rail User Groups. We understand that suggestions made by the Chiltern Passenger board have often been beneficial to the operator and urge the new West Coast franchise to consider this model. Also we feel that "the general passenger" should be encouraged to contact the Franchisee about its performance with contact posters on stations and the internet with maybe a "permanent" advert on the National Rail Website. On passenger information screens, we think that they should always be providing train information and not alternating with general security information. If this is needed it should be on separate screens.

Improving Service Quality.

13. (Ch 7, p66) "The Department is considering the appropriate approach for the new franchise and respondents are encouraged to consider the proposals suggested, to highlight any alternative proposals and to make recommendations on any issues that may be identified."

A check on whether the air conditioning and all toilets are functioning should be required when the train leaves the depot and ideally at the start of each journey in the daily diagrams.

Managing Disruption.

14. (Ch 7, p67) "Respondents are encouraged to consider how best to keep passengers informed during times of disruption."

When a train is cancelled the following service should normally make additional stops to cover those stations where a train would not otherwise call within an hour. Note: This applies particularly to Rugby and Milton Keynes which only have an hourly service from Manchester and Birmingham. The TOC should not however be further penalised for delaying this second train and passengers on the following service should be clearly informed as to what's happening.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and Minor Works Fund.

15. (Ch 7, p68) "Respondents are encouraged to consider local accessibility and mobility issues and suggest how improvements could be made."

As previously mentioned, we believe that Carstairs and Lichfield Trent Valley may now be the only stations served by the West Coast Trains franchise which do not have level access to all main line platforms.

Catering.

16. (Ch 7, p68) "Respondents are encouraged to consider what level of catering provision should be provided."

The current provision is generally acceptable but a creative franchise should always consider improving this facility which is an essential for long distance passengers. The Wrexham and Shropshire Railway experience suggests that there is an untapped market for quality catering on long distance services.

Improving the Environmental Performance of the Railway.

17. (Ch 7, p69) "Respondents are encouraged to consider what environmental key performance indicators (KPIs) should be set within the franchise specification."

The new franchise should include a commitment to recycling all waste material, including that generated on trains, wherever feasible.

DfT should publish the franchise commitments and encourage Passenger Focus to monitor progress in achieving these. These are likely to include provision of additional car parking spaces, provision of Level Access and CIS at stations, refurbishing rolling stock and the introduction of new routes and services.

Other comments on topics not raised in the consultation.

a. The new franchise should consider if there is any way in which they could release platform capacity of Wolverhampton rather than occupying platform 2 for 34 minutes in every hour.

b. We note also that the longer 11-car Pendolinos will require extended timings over the busy station throats at New Street and Wolverhampton where there are very restrictive speed limits. Is there perhaps a case for investment in upgraded infrastructure here?

c. Running times from Coventry to Birmingham and Wolverhampton are constrained by the mix of traffic on this busy twin track route. The new franchise may wish to consider whether there is a case for partial four-tracking of the line between Coventry and Birmingham.

d. At the moment railcard holders can use a discounted Off-Peak Return (formerly known as Saver) ticket on any Virgin West Coast service. This is a much valued (if not well publicised) facility which helps to fill seats on peak trains which otherwise would be empty. We would like this facility to continue with the new franchise (it could be incorporated in the Franchise Agreement).

e. Potential ticket gates at Manchester Piccadilly station. We understand that the current franchise holder Virgin vetoed the installation of ticket gates there against the wishes of other TOCs. Railfuture believes installation of ticket gates would be a significant improvement to revenue protection. The present haphazard system of some platforms/services having staff at the end of the platform is not consistent and having gates would mean fewer staff overall as there would also not need to be staff on the overbridge to Platforms 13/14 as there currently is for a large portion of the day, though we think this should not be seen as a cost saving exercise. We think this requirement could be written into the new Franchise Agreement, though we strongly feel that this should not be without the clear management objectives of:

i) Adequate numbers of gates provided to ensure there's no over-crowding;

ii) For interchange passengers, if the gates can't be programmed to provide for "breaks in journey" access, good "airside" facilities for interchange passengers will need to be provided;

iii) That at all times when in use, the gates will be staffed to provide help with anyone that needs it.

iv) Whilst we understand it is a DfT requirement, ITSO card reader compliance should be built in to any such barriers.

v) To ensure that the facilities are adequate and to give an incentive for the operator and Station Facility Owner to make good provision, the arrival time of the train in the PPM statistics should be the time the last passenger has left the platform, not the time the train stops, should these barriers be brought into operation.

f. The first few lines of the draft specification mentions the completion of works to enable the introduction of 11 car Pendolinos by December 2012, but elsewhere it mentions that capacity will need to be enhanced by the start of the Olympics in July 2012; we think it should be much clearer what capacity would be needed by when.

g. We think the franchise should allow for the introduction of through services between the North of England and the Continent via the Channel Tunnel. To be viable these trains need to be open to domestic passengers between Manchester and London. They need to be an integral part of the InterCity West Coast franchise but also be through trains to and from the Continent.

h. Seat Reservations:

There seem to be frequent mess-ups with seat reservations. If seat reservations do not work properly they are worse than useless.

A particular point is that on line reservations preferentially allocate the seats with a blank wall/ no window. This happens even if a request for a window seat is made and even if the rest of the coach is unreserved. This is not co-incidence. The system knows where these window-less seats are. These seats should be taken out of the reservation system altogether and kept for emergency only use.