



Information for Enterprise, Innovation and Networks Committee meeting

17 January 2007

Introduction

Passenger Focus attended the Enterprise, Innovation and Networks Committee meeting in 22 November 2006, when I outlined our activities over 2006, highlighting passenger issues at the time.

Representatives from First Great Western (FGW) and Virgin Trains will attend the EIN Committee meeting on 17 January 2007 and, therefore, this paper gives Passenger Focus' perspective of some of the main issues relating to the performance of these train operators. Many of my comments are based on the latest National Passenger Survey (NPS) published in June 2006. It should be noted that the next wave of the NPS will be available shortly, on 29 January 2007.

National Passenger Survey results

The NPS is the largest piece of published passenger research in Great Britain – more than 50,000 passengers take part in it each year (2000 in Wales), giving Passenger Focus an invaluable bedrock of passenger opinion. It also gives Passenger Focus a solid platform for a mature debate with train companies and Network Rail about improving rail services. The information forms part of the franchise compliance management of several operators, including Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) undertaken by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), as well as being used to highlight areas for service improvement and to develop action plans. Passenger Focus is, therefore, in regular dialogue with WAG about the performance of ATW and other operators providing services for Welsh passengers.

In the last NPS, First Great Western (FGW), Virgin West Coast (VWC) and Virgin CrossCountry (VXC) were all classified as long distance operators - as opposed to Arriva Trains Wales, which is classified as a regional operator.

Since the last NPS, the Great Western franchise has been restructured and re-awarded to FGW. It now incorporates regional services previously provided by Wessex Trains, from South Wales to the South West of England.

The attached table presents passenger ratings for overall satisfaction, as well as a range of on-train and at-station measures, for the operators, as well as the overall average for long distance train operators. In addition, it provides the overall average for all train companies for journeys taken to, from and within Wales.

The individual figures for FGW, VWC and VXC are for all their services, not just those that run in Wales. As such, consideration should be given to the differences in route and rolling stock specified in their respective franchises.

First Great Western

Overall satisfaction with FGW's long distance services fell to 77%, a 6% decline on the previous survey. Value-for-money was a chief concern, with only 42% of passengers believing this was satisfactory.

Compared with the overall ratings for all journeys taken to, from and within Wales, FGW scored below average in six categories:

- overall satisfaction
- punctuality/reliability
- length of time the journey was scheduled to take
- helpfulness and attitude of staff on train;
- ease of being able to get on and off the train; and,
- availability of staff (on train).

Virgin West Coast

VWC saw a considerable improvement in its ratings and achieved one of the highest ratings for overall satisfaction across Britain's rail network at 90%. Particularly strong improvements were seen in satisfaction with the way the company dealt with delays (up 12%) and punctuality/reliability (up 9%).

Compared with the overall ratings for all journeys taken to, from and within Wales, VWC scored below the average in two categories:

- facilities for car parking
- space for luggage

VXC had an overall satisfaction rating of 84%.

Compared with the overall ratings for all journeys taken to, from and within Wales, VXC scored below the average in one category:

- space for luggage

Complaints

Passenger Focus becomes involved in complaints after the service provider and passenger have attempted to resolve the issue. Passenger Focus offers advice on how best to pursue the complaint and offers guidance on passenger rights. The majority of our contacts are initial enquiries where the passenger hasn't yet had a response from the train operator.

During 2006, Passenger Focus received 782 contacts relating to FGW. The three most common contact categories were fares/refunds, train service performance and timetable and connection issues.

In relation to VWC, Passenger Focus was contacted 175 times, with the most common areas of enquiry being fares/refunds, complaints handling and train service performance.

Regards VXC, we dealt with 552 contacts, most commonly fares/refunds, complaints handling and quality of services and facilities on the train.

Other issues and comments

First Great Western

- The new seven-year FGW franchise runs to March 2013 plus a possible three-year extension. It includes a commitment to pay a premium of £1.13 billion during its lifetime. Passenger Focus is concerned that the high premium payment may limit the company's willingness to invest in passenger benefits beyond the minimum franchise requirements.
- The New Year has seen higher than inflation increases being imposed by most train operators for unregulated fares. FGW's unregulated fares increase averaged 4.8%. The Standard Open Return from Cardiff to London Paddington has, in fact, increased 12.5% since last January and is now £144.
- As part of a £200 million franchise commitment, FGW is re-designing and refurbishing the current High Speed Train (HST) fleet, and refreshing the former Wessex fleet. Passenger Focus welcomes the improved passenger comfort this will bring.
- Passenger Focus welcomed FGW's response to strong passenger demand to reinstate the stops at Severn Tunnel Junction for commuter services to and from Bristol. However, Passenger Focus is very concerned about the overcrowding on peak hour services between Cardiff and Bristol – these services are often two car trains, when three or four car trains are required.
- Passenger Focus is disappointed that, despite representation at the highest level, the 15.15 ex-Paddington service now terminates at Cardiff, not Swansea. However, this service was not a requirement of the original Department for Transport specification and FGW is reluctant to fund additional services not forming part of the specification unless there is a clear business case to support it. Passenger Focus, in partnership with South East Wales Transport Alliance (SEWTA), is actively monitoring the impact of this service change on passengers including the extra pressure on Arriva's services but Passenger Focus's initial observations are that the impact is not as serious as initially feared.
- Passenger Focus welcomes the introduction of discounted fares between Newport and Swansea which should encourage more people to use the train, and make better use of spare capacity in off-peak periods.
- The FGW franchise is being run on infrastructure which is the oldest in Britain and the last to benefit from upgrading. This resulted in regular breakdowns and poor punctuality performance in the first six months of the franchise. Network Rail is investing in a major upgrade of infrastructure and as a consequence, there were some signs of improved FGW performance but this has taken a severe knock since the introduction of the new timetable in December 2006.
- FGW transferred their maintenance work from Canton to a new depot in St Phillips Marsh, Bristol on the 10 December 2006. The transition has not gone as smoothly as hoped and, as a result, FGW has failed to provide sufficient rolling stock to run the new timetable since that date. The result has been a high number of short-formed trains being provided and cancellation of services at an

unacceptable level. Passengers have been seriously inconvenienced and Passenger Focus is looking to FGW to rectify this situation as soon as possible.

Virgin West Coast

- VWC franchise runs until 31 March 2012
- Passenger Focus welcomes the expansion of services between Chester and London Euston from December 2008 that will greatly benefit North Wales' rail users. Passenger Focus, in conjunction with VWC, is planning a meeting with politicians and other key stakeholders in North Wales to outline the benefits of the new timetable
- Passenger Focus would like to see VWC more involved in the development of improved facilities at North Wales' stations
- Passenger Focus welcomes the innovative approaches to ticketing that Virgin has recently introduced elsewhere, such as the heavily discounted [Print@Home](#) tickets. We would like to see these extended to Wales
- There has also been a much higher than inflation increase on VWC's unregulated fares (average VWC increase 6.6%). The Standard Open Return from Bangor to London Euston rose 8.3% to £209, although there is no restrictions on the Saver ticket for this trip (now £66.90) so passengers are very unlikely to use it while Saver regulation remains.

Virgin CrossCountry

- Virgin is one of the four bidders short-listed by the Department for Transport for the new Cross Country franchise, which will come into operation from 11 November 2007. The other short listed bidders for the new Cross Country franchise are: Arriva plc (owners of ATW); First Group plc (owners of FGW) and National Express Group plc.
- The new franchise, which will run until April 2016, offers the opportunity for the selected operator to enhance services for South Wales' passengers. Passenger Focus has made representations for the new franchise to provide improved services for commuters from Cheptow and Caldicot to Newport and Cardiff, and, Gloucester, and extend services further west to Swansea and West Wales. This is in line with WAG's aspirations for the new franchise.

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Passenger Focus Board Member for Wales

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Data from National Passenger Survey

	FGW* % satisfied or good	VWC % satisfied or good	VXC % satisfied or good	Peers % satisfied or good	Wales - All- TOCs % satisfied or good
Overall satisfaction	77	90	84	85	79
At-station measures					
Ticket buying facilities	77	75	77	77	67
Provision of information about train times/ platforms	82	87	82	85	64
Upkeep/ repair of the station buildings/ platforms	66	72	68	68	47
Cleanliness	70	75	74	73	57
Facilities and services	66	65	68	66	36
Attitudes and helpfulness of the staff	73	76	82	77	69
Connections with other forms of public transport	78	83	74	76	55
Facilities for car parking	57	49	58	54	52
Overall environment	68	70	71	69	49
Your personal security whilst using	65	67	70	68	54
Availability of staff	64	67	73	68	54
How request to station staff was handled	87	83	90	87	81
On-train measures					
Frequency of the trains on that route	81	85	83	84	69
Punctuality/ reliability (i.e. the train arriving/ departing on time)	72	89	82	82	73
Length of time the journey was scheduled to take (speed)	82	88	86	86	86
Connections with other train services	71	75	73	73	60
Value for money of the ticket	42	58	58	53	53
Cleanliness of the train	79	93	91	87	62
Up keep and repair of the train	75	94	92	86	57
Provision of information during journey	70	84	85	80	51
Helpfulness and attitude of staff on train	74	83	84	81	75
Space for luggage	61	55	55	58	59
Toilet facilities	47	60	69	59	41
Sufficient room for all to sit/stand	71	76	69	72	68
Comfort of the seating area	78	79	81	80	67
Ease of being able to get on and off	74	87	81	81	76
Your personal security whilst on board	80	88	84	84	73
Cleanliness of the inside	80	93	90	86	63
Cleanliness of the outside	63	88	80	75	46
Availability of staff	52	70	71	66	57
How well company dealt with delays	45	61	47	51	38

- FGW = First Great Western; VWC = Virgin West Coast; VXC = Virgin Cross Country
- Peers = Average of all long distance train operating companies
- Figures taken from Spring 2006 wave



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