

INTERCITY WEST COAST FRANCHISE CONSULTATION COMMENTS OF CAMPAIGN FOR RAIL

Campaign for Rail is an organisation that advocates railway interests and the best interests of all rail passengers and groups, including (but not limited to) Rail User Groups, Freight Development, and re-opening of lines and services. We also lobby for and promote rail interests with the relevant statutory bodies.

We welcome the public consultation regarding the new InterCity West Coast franchise. Our comments are listed based on the questionnaire on pages 43-47 of the consultation document.

In preparing our comments we are working on the assumption that HS2 will happen and will open on schedule in 2026. We believe there is a need to provide additional capacity as the West Coast Main Line is now nearly full, meaning there is little capacity available to allow additional ICWC services, or services provided by other operators.

Q1. Examples of areas that customers would like improved on their ICWC journey.

Getting a seat on trains

The vast majority of passengers on ICWC are making long-distance journeys, e.g. Wolverhampton – London Euston, Stafford – London Euston. Being able to have a seat for a long-distance journey should be a basic requirement. It is unacceptable for passengers to have to stand for more than 15 minutes on long journeys, particularly those who are infirm, or elderly, or who are pregnant.

The decision to lengthen the “Pendolino” trains and reconfigure them to provide more standard class seating was welcome. However, the booking system operated under the current franchise does not help matters. Regularly seats on ICWC services are showing as reserved, even though there is no-one sitting there, noticeably on peak services and ones frequented by leisure passengers (such as those leaving Euston on a Friday evening, or going towards London on a Saturday morning). The new franchise should look at the booking system to address this. One suggestion would be to introduce advance day return tickets with the outward portion fixed on a particular train, but with the return being valid on any train. This would help address the issue and would be of benefit to business and leisure travellers who may be attending a particular event and who find that it over-runs. At present they are placed in a position of leaving early to get their booked train back, or chancing getting onto a later service with their advance ticket, which may well be invalid. Alternatively, simply imposing a charge for reservations may result in better seat utilisation.

Car Parking at Stations

As more and more passengers are using West Coast services the car parks at many stations are often full. There is a need to look at options to increase parking availability. It may not be practicable or desirable to extend car parking in busy town or city centres, owing to traffic congestion and the lack of available land at stations. However, there may be a case for looking at more Parkway stations and sites at Cosford on the Shrewsbury line and at the proposed station east of Coventry, between Coventry and Rugby may provide options. The new franchise should also encourage the use of modes other than the car to access stations, for example by promoting the PLUSBUS ticket and by working with local authorities and bus operators, or

by providing more capacity for cycle parking at stations (while the new cycle racks at Birmingham New Street provided during the rebuild were welcome, in practice they are regularly full.)

In this context, we welcome the suggestion that the new franchise should be able to contribute to station enhancement at all stations where their trains call.

Increased staff visibility at stations and on trains

One regular criticism we have made to the current operator is the lack of visibility of the conductor between Wolverhampton and Coventry on ICWC services; the conductor only being seen either after Coventry or northwards from Wolverhampton. Likewise Birmingham New Street is supposed to have an automated ticket barrier staffed by the current operator, but this is known to be open during the evening and on Sundays, and has even been known not to be manned in the rush hour! Because of this and the lack of checking tickets on local services there is an impression that the railway is free and several million pounds of revenue must be being lost every year.

Passengers value a visible staff presence, both to provide advice and assistance, to be a form of security and assist in dealing with unruly passengers. The incoming franchise should continue to ensure staff are visible, and work to address the gaps we have identified.

Cleanliness

Since the decision to run Wolverhampton – London Euston services as part of longer Glasgow – London diagrams on-train cleanliness has declined. There is not the ability to do a through sweep of the train at Wolverhampton any more. It would be desirable for the new franchise to look at increasing the number of travelling cleaners so a more thorough sweep out of the train can be undertaken while the train is in transit.

Toilet Facilities on Trains

The “Pendolino Pong” is a noticeable feature of ICWC services. It is time this design fault was eliminated.

Being kept informed about delays

When things do go wrong, passengers often find the information they are being given is incorrect or misleading. For example, when there are problems on the Birmingham New Street – London Euston line ticket acceptance is often put in place on the Chiltern line between Birmingham Moor Street and London Marylebone. However, there have been occasions where this has not been mentioned to ICWC passengers, with the result that those not “in the know” end up enduring a cramped service to Euston where they could have travelled via the Chiltern Route instead. Similarly, passengers from Manchester and Stoke-on-Trent could be directed to travel via Derby to St. Pancras.

Q2. Communication methods

ICWC passengers use a number of different methods to plan their journeys. There is an assumption that a majority of passengers go on-line to plan their journeys or find out about delays and disruption, using smart-phones, computers and tablets. Indeed the number of adults using the Internet and electronic devices to do business has grown.

However, there is a large and significant group of passengers who use other more traditional methods to plan their journeys and obtain information, such as timetable leaflets and booklets, booking offices and travel centres at stations, and using the telephone. As well as those who are not IT literate there are passengers who are living in areas with limited or poor broadband speeds where it is probably quicker to peruse a timetable leaflet or ring National Rail Enquiries than go on-line. Even users who are “tech-savvy” may prefer to use a timetable booklet or a poster at a station.

The ICWC franchise should continue to use both printed and electronic materials to communicate with passengers. The current DL pocket timetable booklets although bulky are user friendly and we would prefer this style to continue, rather than the tiny leaflets with tiny print that have been introduced by London Midland during their stewardship of the West Midlands franchise.

We must mention the leaflets produced by the current franchisee to advise customers of major engineering works. They are poor – on the displays at stations it does not appear obvious what their purpose is and the information contained in them is often wrong; for example inferring to customers that they will need to use a rail replacement bus to complete a journey when there is another rail option available. If the TOC's cannot produce these materials properly it may be time for this function to be transferred away from the operators to either Network Rail or the Department for Transport, with a charge being made to the TOC.

Q3. Current journeys operated by ICWC

In our view the Public Service Requirement for the ICWC franchise before HS2 comes into operation should continue. Even when HS2 commences operation there will still be a need to ensure that Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley, and Coventry continue to have direct services to London. Not all passengers will wish to travel either to Birmingham Curzon or Birmingham Interchange to connect with HS2 services, so there should continue to be a minimum hourly ICWC train from Wolverhampton and 2 ICWC trains from Coventry once HS2 is up and running, thereby retaining access to Milton Keynes and Watford Junction.

Q4. Suggested changes

Based on the table on p45, we would consider the following to be priorities:

Improved connections with other trains/services as part of long distance journeys.

This is of particular importance to those using Rugby, Nuneaton, and stations on the Trent Valley route. In order to make journeys north it is often necessary to use London Midland services and change at Crewe. Connections at Crewe from the London Midland Trent Valley services are currently very poor, resulting in delays of up to an hour on journeys to/from the North West and Scotland.

If the West Midlands franchise does indeed introduce a Birmingham – Stoke – Crewe service and Trent Valley trains then run direct from Stafford to Crewe, this will effectively solve the problem and would save 20 minutes.

Now that the wires are in place north of Manchester consideration should be given to restoring through services from Stoke-on-Trent to the North West and Scotland.

Introduce new stops

For users in Rugby, Nuneaton and of Trent Valley stations it would be desirable for there to be additional direct ICWC services to Liverpool and/or Manchester and Preston for business travellers.

Better support economic development

The incoming franchisee should work with local stakeholders such as local authorities, LEP's, Chambers of Commerce and civic societies. This could be in the form of sponsoring local events (which would allow some cross promotion to encourage train travel) and for major events operating joint-ticketing. For example the NEC has a number of major exhibitions each year such as Crufts, Gardeners World Live and Clothes Show Live and it has superb rail access from Birmingham International Station. Joint rail and admission tickets would be attractive for visitors.

Adjust the levels of service to better match demand

One regular frustration for ICWC users is that engineering works on the West Coast Main Line often coincide with major events such as the FA Cup Semi-Finals at Wembley. When teams from the North West are involved, rail can be unfeasible when engineering works take place on the WCML unless fans are willing to endure lengthy substitutions or diversions. It would be desirable for there to be much better co-ordination and planning of engineering works so that weekends where major events are taking place on the WCML are avoided where practicable.

Holding trains at stations for connecting journeys

This is a desirable proposition and should be the standard procedure for “last train of the day” journeys. However, who will make the decisions and could this end up only benefiting a small number of passengers whilst inconveniencing thousands more and ratcheting up more delays and cancellations elsewhere on the rail network?

In reality, the railway (not just ICWC) need to be much better at working together in the interests of the passenger, particularly when there are delays and disruption, rather than as is often seen passing the buck between each other and Network Rail. It may not be possible to hold a train, but the ICWC TOC should not be in a position of abandoning passengers and letting them have to make their own arrangements when things go wrong. Other options (such as taxi hire) should be considered.

Q5. Capacity

This seems to infer that holders of local tickets or multi-modal tickets such as the “Daytripper” or “nNetwork” passes in the West Midlands should be barred from using ICWC services. We would not support this. There are often empty seats between Wolverhampton and Coventry and the current operator has offered its own off-peak fares for passengers making local trips between Wolverhampton and Birmingham and Coventry and Birmingham.

Q6. Enabling Growth

Campaign for Rail has a campaign to improve night services to Birmingham International. Birmingham Airport is seeing growth with an increase in the number of routes, flights and fliers. At present it is not possible to use rail to make the first flights of the morning leaving Birmingham Airport at 06:00 – for example the first train from Wolverhampton does not arrive until 05:40 and there is insufficient time to transfer from Birmingham International to Birmingham Airport and “check-in”. Owing to current increased security requirements it is necessary to arrive two hours before a flight is due to depart to “check-in”. The airports busiest time of day is around 07:15 meaning that passengers departing on flights at that time would need to arrive around 05:15.

We have suggested that a Birmingham New Street – Birmingham International – Coventry local service should be introduced as part of the new West Midlands franchises. There is also a case for looking at two early morning services from London Euston to Birmingham New Street at 02:30 and 03:30, calling at Watford Junction, Milton Keynes, Rugby, Coventry and Birmingham International with an arrival at International at around 05:00 – which would allow a passenger to arrive in good time for “check-in” for those first flights.

We would also suggest that bi-modal trains are provided to ICWC to replace the diesel Voyagers which could be redeployed to Cross Country; ideally a larger number of units than the current fleet in order to accommodate growth. This would allow the Shrewsbury – Telford – London service to be increased to accommodate more passengers, which coupled with the development of Cosford as a Parkway station may help in managing demand for parking at Wolverhampton.

Q7. Communities, heritage and a sustainable railway

As stated earlier, it would be desirable for the ICWC franchise to develop partnerships with local stakeholders such as civic societies, local authorities and Chambers of Commerce, with the franchise sponsoring local events (e.g. a sports event such as a marathon or a music or summer festival). This would help stimulate local economies as well as providing potentially more passengers for ICWC.

The incoming franchisee should look at becoming greener, reducing the amount of materials that are sent to landfill, and encourage the recycling of waste. Reporting the proportion of waste that has been recycled would be a good start.

We agree that stations should be seen as community hubs. "Community adoption" should be encouraged, though it will need to be developed much differently to the "station adoption" schemes that have developed over the years on commuter, regional and rural services. "Community adoption" could be in the form of art displays at stations developed by local schools, by offering the use meeting rooms in stations by community groups outside of peak times, or by working with local charities.

Q8. Stations

Many of the stations used by ICWC were built alongside the 1960's modernisation of the West Coast Main Line and now look tired. In this context, we welcome the suggestion that the new franchise should be able to contribute to station enhancement at all stations where their trains call.

There is a scheme to rebuild Wolverhampton Station – which is easily one of the poorest on the National Rail network and presents a poor first impression of the city. We support the proposals and we hope that Wolverhampton will have a 21st century station delivered during the early part of the franchise.

Coventry's station was built during the early 1960's and future projections suggest capacity constraints. The scheme to refurbish the station is badly needed to provide room for additional passengers. The completion of this should be an early priority in the new franchise, but it is vital that easy interchange between bus and rail services are maintained.

In terms of signage at stations, there has been too much of an attempt to paint and sign stations in their own corporate branding, which inevitably gets changed each time the franchise is changed and adds no value whatsoever to the passenger. There is much to be gained and saved in signing stations in the old BR corporate image.

Some ICWC stations have a "First Class Lounge" which has been provided by the current franchise operator. In several cases the use of these lounges is restricted to passengers holding tickets for ICWC trains, rather than all holders of first class tickets. Other train operators allow all First Class passengers to use the lounge regardless of whose service they will be travelling on, so the incoming franchisee should do remove this restriction, which represents appalling treatment for passengers paying substantial sums of money for first class tickets.

Q9. Accessibility

For passengers with disabilities, ensuring that stations are accessible is needed to make the railway more attractive to use.

One area of disappointment we have is the slow process to make stations and rail services truly "accessible for all". There seems to have been a reliance on DfT providing funding from the "Access for All" budget and given that the number of citizens with a registered disability is rising it is deplorable that this pot of funding has been reduced.

The new franchisee should ensure that accessibility issues at all stations it manages are dealt with during its lifetime and we would expect the work needed at Lichfield Trent Valley and Penrith which was promised as part of "Access for All" be completed rapidly. DfT honouring the commitments it has made and looking elsewhere in the budget for savings would also be welcomed.

Q10. Fares and ticketing

A number of ICWC stations have had their travel centres (which were introduced in BR days to provide facilities to make advance bookings) and booking offices merged together. The result of this arrangement at Birmingham New Street is that one has to take a ticket to buy a ticket. There are not sufficient windows available for passengers travelling on the day as a result. While the number of passengers booking tickets on-line has reduced the demand for passengers booking advance tickets at stations, we would suggest the process of merging travel centres and ticket offices is stopped and a system of ticket windows for passengers travelling on the day (where passengers would queue) and windows for passengers booking advance tickets and reservations (where passengers would obtain a ticket and wait for a number to be called) is put in place. Some passengers may need to pay in cash and it should be noted that not all passengers feel comfortable buying tickets from machines or may not be able to so there will be a continued need for staffed booking offices at ICWC stations.

Smartcards are perceived to be the way forward but at present there is a plethora of cards depending on which part of the country you live in. London has the Oyster card, the West Midlands has a SWIFT card, Merseyside has the Walrus card. Some areas have not managed to put their smart card into place – Greater Manchester's will not be launched until next year. Some of the smartcards can only be used on a limited number of local rail services. For smartcards to be serious there needs to be a "*National Rail Card*" administered by the industry (maybe via ATOC) rather than each operator launching its own. It is not smart to have a wallet full of 20 cards and having to use a different one depending on which part of the country you are in and whose train service you are using.

Based on the current approach we do not consider it feasible or ideal to withdraw the traditional orange magnetic stripe card tickets, which continue to be valid at all stations on the national rail network. Airline style and print at home tickets are unlikely ever to be accepted by ticket gates and their use will only result in queues to enter or exit a station. The Department for Transport should also note that all not passengers possess, or wish, to have a smartphone.

Q11. Other issues

The current franchisee has often decided during periods of engineering works to replace rail services with buses, when it would have been perfectly possible to have operated a rail service using single line working or operating a diversion - for example, the Wolverhampton Easter blockade of 2013, or a recent planned blockade of the northern WCML which resulted in coaches replacing trains between Crewe and Glasgow. One reason for this may be to save money by not maintaining staff route knowledge. The Birmingham – Rugeley Trent Valley route will be electrified by the start of the new franchise and it should be "signed" by ICWC train-crew, as should the Birmingham – Nuneaton line.

Whilst it is inevitable that emergency works may result in bustitution it is totally unacceptable that **planned** engineering works should always mean passengers having to change between trains and buses (which often do not have sufficient room for heavy luggage and presents difficulties for the disabled, the elderly, the infirm and those travelling with young children). The incoming operator must be much better at ensuring that a rail service continues to operate during planned engineering work with the rail replacement bus being the last option, rather than the first port of call.

During periods of perturbation alternative route options should be planned as part of the "contingency" and promoted. For example, when there is a blockage of the route between Birmingham and Stafford

passengers for the North West and Scotland might be directed to take a train to Lichfield Trent Valley, where an appropriate ICWC train would make a special stop.

Kevin Chapman
Campaign for Rail
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