Response to the Williams Review

Campaign for Rail is an organisation based in the West Midlands that advocates railway interests and the best interests of all rail passengers and groups, including support for Rail User Groups, the development of rail freight, the opening of new stations and the re-opening of closed lines. We also lobby for and promote rail interests with the relevant statutory bodies.

1. Investment

One of the worst aspects of the current franchising system has been the inability of TOCs to address overcrowding in the later years of their franchise by expanding their fleet of rolling stock. The problem is not just the reluctance of Government to approve orders for new fleets of trains that were not anticipated when the franchise was awarded but also the absence of a rolling stock pool from which TOCs could expand their fleet. Such a pool would ideally include additional centre coaches as well as complete trains.

TOCs are also generally unable to undertake significant investment in the facilities provided for passengers at the stations they manage in the later years of their franchise. The problem here is that the time remaining is too short to recover the investment, the written down cost of which cannot usually be transferred to the following franchise.

With the continued growth in passenger numbers in most regions this limitation often prevents the timely expansion of Car Parks - even when additional land is available - and delays the timely upgrading of station facilities.

It is often said that one of the mistakes of the 1955 Modernisation Plan was the proliferation of diesel locomotive types. However, in the later years of British Rail we benefited from large fleets of generally interchangeable Mk II and Mk III coaches that could simply be transferred wherever capacity was needed. These products of long running production lines would also have benefited from incremental improvements and the economies of scale.

In the early years of privatisation, the purchase of the popular Adtranz, later Bombardier, Class 170s continued the trend, being built in large numbers of compatible units. Sadly, in the 21st century, we have again seen a proliferation of small fleets - Classes 175, 185, 180, 220 - 222 etc. - which cannot economically either be lengthened or expanded. In a rational world a TOC that was short of capacity would simply expand its existing fleet by the insertion of additional trailer or powered units; making 3-car units from 2-car and 4-car from 3-car. Instead of which we have the wasteful practice of making a 4-car unit from 2 x 2-car units, creating a pair of redundant driving cabs and duplicating the provision of disabled facilities - both a clear waste of space that would otherwise be used for seating or luggage.

Incidentally, it is astonishing that the 4-car Siemens Class 350 EMUs used mainly on West Coast services, cannot physically be expanded to 5-car units - despite being a relatively new fleet.

The often quoted mantra that TOCs "invest" in rolling stock needs to be challenged. The TOCs have virtually no capital on their balance sheet - they are trading companies that will disappear when their franchise ends. It is the ROSCOs and their bankers who purchase new rolling stock in the expectation that it will be leased to one or more TOCs for 25 years or more. The TOCs only contract is to pay annual leasing charges, a cost which can sometimes be partly offset by the reduced cost of maintaining new trains.

Porterbrook's early initiative in placing a speculative order for additional trains in 2001 clearly worked to the benefit of passengers on Central Trains and later Cross Country but was sadly not repeated by the other ROSCOs. How much easier it would be to match demand to capacity if there was a single organisation responsible for ordering and supplying the national rolling stock fleet!

More recently Northern Irish Railways (Translink) have been able to place an order for additional centre carriages to lengthen their fleet of 3-car Class 400 DMUs under a contract with CAF that dates from 2009. [Ref. Modern Railways, January 2019 p 102]

We note that much of the current overcrowding on the Trans-Pennine routes would have been reduced if the previous franchise had been allowed to order the additional trailer cars for their fleet of 3-car Class 185 DMUs that were available as a follow-on order from Siemens.

Station enhancements suffer from the same investment 'stand still' in the later years of a franchise, a situation which is made worse when the franchise is extended. Even overdue refurbishment that was not expected to be needed in the original franchise contract is "put on hold" - apart from the often wasteful "reparations" that usually involve re-painting everything regardless of condition. We need to get back to steady state management of assets without the wasteful re-branding that currently occurs every seven years.

2. Franchising Limitations

In the first round of passenger franchising it was expected that the new TOCs would introduce innovative new services and thus provide significant benefits for passengers. Chiltern Railways has indeed introduced several enhanced services which have been successful and have now been incorporated into the established network. Other introductions, such as First North Western's express service from Rochdale to Euston and Anglia's cross London service were stopped by the SRA on grounds of limited track capacity.

Here in the West Midlands we already have frequent services to Birmingham International for Birmingham Airport and an hourly service to Stansted Airport, but currently no through service to Manchester Airport; which is only 24 miles from the City of Stoke-on-Trent. We understand that both bidders for the new West Midlands franchise offered to extend one of their two local services that will terminate at Crewe from May 2019 to Manchester Airport; thereby plugging the major connectivity gap in access to this Airport from the west and south of the region. Sadly, it appears that this service extension was rejected by DfT, despite the existence of adequate track capacity to run these trains. The opportunity to increase the proportion of airport passengers using rail and the significant benefit this would have brought to residents in the Potteries has been lost for another five years.

Further west it was disappointing to find that no additional services were specified for the twelve stations in England, including two county towns, on the "Marches Line" from Newport to Crewe. Apart from Hereford and Shrewsbury, the local stations on this line only have a basic, and irregular, hourly service provided by the Wales & Borders franchise, now Transport for Wales, who also manage the stations. The Rail Passenger Committee for Wales made some practical suggestions, showing how an additional service could be provided, ten years ago in their response to Network Rail's "Route Utilisation Strategy". But nothing more was specified for these stations in either the new Wales & Borders franchise or the new West Midlands franchise.

Even more surprising was the news that DfT has refused to permit TfW to run an additional service on the busy Cardiff - Bristol corridor, despite the additional track capacity that is now available following the re-quadrupling of Filton Bank last year. Surely such decisions should be left to Network Rail and the Rail Regulator?

3. Passenger Representation

Before they were abolished in the 2004 Transport Act the eight regional Rail Passenger Committees (RPCs) had statutory powers to hold four public meetings each year at which the Train Operators in their region could be asked to explain what action they were taking to address any problems with the services they were providing. The Midlands RPC was particularly effective in compiling a series of reports on the condition of station facilities, the provision of car parking and, with other regions, passengers' impressions of new rolling stock - such as the Cross Country Voyagers.

We have no doubt that, were they still in existence, the Midlands RPC would be making a fuss about the continued shortage of capacity on certain trains running into Birmingham from Worcester and Cannock, a problem that is caused by the previous operator's inability to lease additional rolling stock. Similarly, the farcical situation that has arisen at Kenilworth - where Cross Country trains continue to pass the station without stopping even when the unit that West Midlands Trains are supposed to run is cancelled - would have been the subject of strong unfavourable comment.

With the planned devolution of more functions to Network Rail's Routes it is more important than ever that some form of Regional Passenger Representation should be restored.

4. Statistics

In addition to the quarterly statistics on many aspects of the UK railway the ORR also publish an annual table of Station Usage for each station on the mainland. These were first commissioned by the Department of Transport in 1997 and, with the exception of 2002/03 have been published every year since, forming an invaluable 'time series'.

However, in order to provide an absolute figure for the number of passengers using each station an estimate for the number of journeys that have been made on each type of Season Ticket is needed. The ratios that are currently in use are:

Weekly season = 10.3 journeys; Monthly season = 45 journeys; Annual = 480 journeys etc. [Source: ORR/SDG Report, 2018]

We understand that these ratios were initially based on work done by British Rail in the 1980s and have remained unchanged since. It appears that no attempt was made when the data were first collected to identify any differences in travel patterns between the BR regions and numerically the results are likely to have been biased towards commuting into London.

There has recently been a sharp drop in the published number of passengers who travel from the South Coast into London terminals, whilst growth has continued in most of the English regions. We therefore suggest that a new survey of the travel patterns of commuters using a season ticket is long overdue; and that this should be structured to identify any variations between commuting into London and into the principal regional cities.

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