

Thank you for sending Passenger Focus details of First/Keolis Transpennine Limited's draft application for a new Track Access Contract to cover the period December 2013 to December 2016.

Industry Background and Processes

1. We note that it is driven by the extension to TPE's Franchise Agreement, which has three DfT priorities:

to provide an enhanced level of services between Manchester and Scotland, utilising the route via Golborne Junction and Wigan scheduled to be electrified by autumn 2013;

to support the delivery of additional capacity for some of the key Northern cities: Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle;

to reduce the subsidy paid to Franchise Operators.

2. The application proposes that the Track Access Contract will be in place for a further three years - until the Passenger Change Date 2016, which will allow TPE, on the priority date in March 2015, if necessary, to exercise rights for the 2016 timetable (beginning in December 2015), which will provide certainty to a new franchisee.

3. The ORR wrote to the industry on 23 September 2011 setting out restrictions on its consideration of applications for Track Access Contracts beyond December 2013. Network Rail indicated to TPE that it would not be prepared to accept a submission under Section 22 of the Railways Act; consequently TPE has had recourse to the provisions of Section 17.

4. In drafting the contract TPE has sought to adhere to ORR's policy as set down in the letter of 23 September 2011; the application is restricted to rights for a quantum of train services supported by calling patterns. TPE's "approach will be reviewed in light of the conclusion of ORR's policy review and the developing conclusions of the West Coast Events Steering Group". It is important that future changes to the Railway's franchise structure are considered as an integral part of this application.

5. Passenger Focus notes the discussions between TPE and Network Rail, and the DfT, in developing the timetable and development work which form part of this application, and is pleased to learn that TPE has found Network Rail to be supportive of the approach taken to formalise TPE's proposals.

6. We note that TPE considers that its application should be considered as a matter of priority; they believe that delay in reaching a decision would put at risk their plans, and the aims of the Secretary of State. Passengers will agree; too often promised improvements are delayed by industry processes.

The application itself

The application provides for the continuation of TPE services beyond the expiry of its current Track Access Contract in December 2013, together with additional rights for the use of Class 350 EMUs as specified equipment, access over the route between Manchester and Wigan via Golborne, and additional Anglo-Scottish and North Trans-Pennine Route services.

To provide the required benefits to passengers there will be two timetable changes, the first at the Passenger Change Date in December 2013, and the second from the Subsidiary Change Date in May 2014, linked to the introduction of new Class 350/4 trains and the cascade of other trains.

TPE is only applying for rights to a quantum of services described in the tables (2.1, 4.1 and 5.1) that list Passenger Train Slots, Regular Calling Pattern and Standard Specified Equipment; this will give the industry the flexibility required to develop the best possible timetable, which will have to reflect the opportunities created by the first stage of the Northern Hub project. Passengers will expect a smooth evolution of their timetable.

Passenger Benefits

Passengers will welcome the additional trains and capacity on the route between Manchester Airport/Manchester and Edinburgh/Glasgow Central, which is often subject to serious overcrowding. Since taking over the route, TPE has made considerable efforts to provide more resources for it. The new trains will help improve the travelling experience for passengers.

Consequent upon the introduction of the new Class 350/4 trains, the cascade of DMU vehicles will add much needed increased capacity between key Northern cities and provide some journey time improvements on the north trans-Pennine route. The additional capacity between Manchester and Sheffield will be a great benefit for passengers.

Passenger Focus notes that TPE plans to introduce, on Mondays to Fridays only, an hourly Liverpool to Newcastle service via Manchester Victoria utilising the enhanced infrastructure capability and investments made in the Chat Moss route. This will be a precursor to further enhancements through the “Northern Hub” project.

Passengers will be pleased to learn that TPE's proposals would provide an increase of one third in the peak capacity provided by TPE for the key Northern cities of Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Sheffield and Liverpool. Passengers also benefit from some faster journey times, mainly driven by the reduction between Liverpool Lime Street and Manchester Victoria.

Passenger Disbenefits

The application will permit TPE to develop better timetables and add capacity between most of the conurbations of the North. However, it is not possible for timetables to be all things to all passengers, and there are aspects of the proposed timetables that do not meet passengers' needs. Not all parts of the North will receive similar benefits, and in fact will actually suffer some disbenefits, such as fewer through services and longer journey times.

Newcastle, Durham and Darlington will lose their through services to Manchester Airport on Mondays to Fridays. At weekends, the current service pattern linking to Manchester Airport will continue. Passengers might find the weekday/weekend dichotomy unhelpful.

At present, through trains at convenient times allow passengers to make day return trips between Manchester and Windermere; the return train at 17.06 from Windermere will be withdrawn. Connectivity generally from the Windermere branch will be worse.

But that is detail beyond the immediate concerns of the TAC, which does not itself create those disbenefits.

Performance

Passengers will be pleased to learn that the proposals will help to improve performance by providing additional train capacity, reducing the length of station stops, and because of the improved operating characteristics of EMUs. We note that the introduction of electric services will require the delivery of the infrastructure works on the Chat Moss route as well as the new EMU fleet.

As ever, the increase in services will add to the potential for additional delays, particularly on the WCML north of Preston, and between Manchester and York, which will require careful management to ensure performance outcomes are not affected. We note that TPE envisages completing further operational and performance simulation, using tools such as Railsys/TRAIL to inform the final timetable, and operational decision making. Passenger Focus has some concerns here, prompted by the worsening of Chiltern Railways' performance after the introduction of their September 2011, which appears not to have been identified by the modelling of their proposed timetable's impact. It might be useful to provide information showing how the level of performance on the WCML north of Preston over recent years has changed as TPE has introduced more services.

We are encouraged to learn that the close working between TPE and Network Rail has been helpful in developing the proposals, and that Network Rail has not raised any concerns that the proposal will materially affect performance.

Modelling

We understand that modelling has been done by ARUP to assess the transport and wider economic benefits of the proposed Track Access Contract. Although much of the information generated is confidential, stakeholders and passengers should be given as much background as possible to help them consider TPE's proposals when they are made public. Properly informed feedback will help make the public consultation much more useful for the rail industry.

Consultation

Passenger Focus has been consulted by TPE about these proposals, as they have for all the previous timetable proposals. We commend TPE's conscientious approach to consulting widely with stakeholders on its timetable development. The inclusion of detailed timetables has been particularly useful in considering TPE's proposals. We have already had an exchange of ideas and comments with TPE regarding the timetables, and will be communicating with them again.

Passenger Focus understands that TPE is shortly to meet with stakeholders and user groups in areas such as Furness and Kendal – Windermere, who have particular concerns regarding the future development of their services. Given the potential impact on connectivity between Cumbria and Manchester, it is vital that regional needs and aspirations are fully explored.

We are pleased to see that TPE's open approach - as it should - extends to the passenger and freight operators affected by these proposals, and that TPE is working with them to design the best possible timetable, and is available to meet relevant operators who wish to discuss and comment on the proposed timetable.

Conclusion

Passenger Focus believes that extending TPE's Track Access Contract until December 2016, and the additional rights it seeks would, in general, benefit passengers. We do suggest that some aspects of the proposals, particularly in the North West, will give rise to a certain amount of unease amongst passengers and stakeholders. More details of possible service patterns once all the NW electrification is complete should be made available as soon as possible. We also note that some stakeholders believe Hull should be served more frequently, an aspiration that does appear to have merit.