

Ormskirk – Preston Survey 2014

Key Findings Report

Introduction

This survey was undertaken by the West of Lancashire Community Rail Partnership (WoLCRP) as part of its work with Northern Rail to improve services on the Ormskirk-Preston line. Its purpose is to produce a comprehensive and objective analysis of travel patterns, journey requirements and traveller perceptions of the current service.

The research involved completion of a 16 question survey form (Appendix A) that needed single word or tick box answers, by as many passengers as possible on a single day of midweek services.

It was conducted on all services on 22nd October 2014 and completed by more than 430 individuals, a response rate of greater than 75%.

Passenger journeys

A full passenger count was also conducted (see Appendix B).

914 were counted with most making a return trip that day and 40% of trips made on 5 peak time services. Recent counts indicate that the daily passenger numbers on weekdays is now breaking 900.

Average number of passengers per service is 35 with an average maximum loading of 32. The counts conducted before the May 2014 timetable change (when 2 additional services were introduced) averaged 32 and 30.5 respectively.

Autumn 2014 had seen passenger numbers into the 90s for the 7.33 service from Preston and 8.07 from Ormskirk, which means those boarding at the penultimate station will not get a seat and the train (a 75 seat Class 153) is at capacity. At points of heavy loading guards cannot get down the train to check tickets and collect fares.

Moreover, other services are getting close to seated capacity with the 16.35 and 17.45 from Preston and 17.09 from Ormskirk also reaching the high 60s to 70s.

Although 'work' was the most common reason for travel at 35%, trip purpose was fairly evenly distributed between this, 'education' and 'other' (both 25-30%), with specific business trips at just below 10%.

More than 40% of trips start or finish at Ormskirk; around 15% were going to/from Edge Hill University.

Up to 25% of passengers use the service as part of their ongoing journey and route between Preston and Merseyside stations, an increase on the 1 in 5 identified in the 2013 survey, and in greater absolute numbers.

More than 100 trips daily are taking place between Burscough Junction and Ormskirk with many journeys continuing on the Merseyrail service; over 40 on the very busy services meaning a ticket check /sale is unlikely. Comments suggest that many would not buy a ticket until they reached the ticket office at Ormskirk station, with some requesting a ticket vending machine at Burscough Junction.

Rating the Service

Passengers were asked to give their opinion on 11 different aspects of the rail service and state their top two priorities for improvement. Suggestions and explanations were not sought on specific questions or topics and many of those surveyed having very limited time to complete the questionnaire. Comments with an occurrence of 1-2% was considered notable and above 4% significant, and have been treated accordingly in the qualitative analysis.

The major issues identified were:

1. Service Frequency

Over 50% made this one of their top 2 priorities and more than 10% added comments that it needs to be 'more frequent', 'more frequent in peak times', 'regular/ every 30/45/60 minutes'.

Moreover, those flagging 'punctuality and reliability' as a priority concern (11%) appeared to view it as part of the timetable and frequency issue, many expressing insecurity/ lack of confidence in the service on the basis that should they miss the train they need or it doesn't come, an 80-90 minute wait leaves them stranded.

2. Value for Money

Poor value for money was a key issue with actual ticket cost and fare availability the concern for a significant number; requests were made for Cheap Day and Open Returns, and student tickets/ discounts.

Others felt that fares compared very unfavourably with Merseyrail and Virgin, or on a price per mile basis with other franchises, eg '£7.50 return Burscough Jct-Preston compares badly with £4.90 Ormskirk-Liverpool'.

However, the vast majority prioritised this with 'service frequency' or 'scheduled journey time' with a clear implication that if these were improved they would have less cause to complain about the fare.

3. Ability to get a seat

A priority issue for 15% which equates to all of those riding on the two overcrowded services, with 8% commenting on the lack of carriages, seat, space and general accessibility.

4. Internal Cleanliness of the Train

It was a priority issue for 13% but there was surprisingly little comment apart from 'the little tables are always dirty' and 'leaky windows'. However, it was associated with space, accessibility, comfort and condition of 'old and tired' rolling stock.

5. Comfort of the ride

One in five considered it to be poor with 5% making a variety of comments with heavy criticism of the Class 142. For comfort outside of the peak services the single car Class153 would be preferred generally to the 2 car 142 but it did not achieve overall satisfaction, criticisms being lack of leg room and poor accessibility / lack of space for cycles and prams (this was also an observation made by the researchers). Cyclists complained of service denial on occasions.

Timetable and Connections

Bad connections were a common complaint from those travelling to/ from either end of the line. Many commented on waiting more than an hour to connect at Preston including most of those using Lancaster services.

4% commented specifically improvement of service onto the Merseytravel network, eg 'direct service/ through route to Liverpool', 'look to relink the lines', 'better connections to Liverpool/ at Ormskirk', 'more than an hour is too long to wait' (at Ormskirk). Many expressed frustration at having watched their connection pull out as the one they are on arrives. With a frequent Merseyrail service this seemed to be more of a plea for some discretion to be exercised on the departure time should either service run slightly late.

3-4% requested Sunday services for travelling to work, college or football matches.

1-2% sought 'later services'

1-2% made specific reference to the previous timetable being better, 'revert to old timetable', 'new timetable means I no longer can make my connection to ...', 'majority of commuters (working in Preston) finish work at 17.00 and switching times to 16.35 and 17.45 is not practical'. Although some said they were going to abandon the service due to unacceptably poor connections at Preston, it is only the last comment that can be shown to be significant statistically. Moreover, it was not

expected that anyone would suggest the timetable change 'had been' an improvement.

Arrival/ departure times –

Questions in the survey were designed to establish optimal/ preferred travel schedules. Significant numbers, proportionate to the traffic for time of day, sought and commented on their unmet requirement for:

Preston arrival at/ between:

08.00 - 08.30, 09.30 - 10.00, 10.45 – 11.00, 16.45 - 17.30, 18.00, 22.00

Ormskirk arrival at/ between:

08.30 – 09.00, 09.30 – 10.00, 17.45 – 18.00 (Preston departure around 17.15, see comment above).

How did passengers know about the line?

Most said they 'just do' as long time users and/or they live in close proximity. Word of mouth and travelling with peers/ colleagues was also a common reason.

"Internet" was also cited, a positive sign given that previous surveys indicated this service was not offered as an option on timetable and route queries. A businessman travelling from Preston to the Wirral on business said he hadn't used the line before but it came up as the quickest route.

1% said they were prompted by a leaflet which looks small but in context suggests the Line Guide is having some impact for 'other' or leisure travel.

Alternative modes of transport considered

Significant numbers consider car share (notably students) and the bus, but most concluded or commented they had little real choice. Note there is anecdotal evidence from other research and feedback of significant rail heading at Preston, Ormskirk and Maghull in order to avoid using this service.

How/ where are rail tickets purchased

It appeared many starting from Ormskirk buy on the train and not at the ticket office.

There were numerous suggestions and requests for ticket vending machines at the intermediate stations.

Information at stations

There were many complaints and concerns expressed by travellers taking services from all of the intermediate services that they have no idea if a train is cancelled or late due to there being no announcements or information on how services are running.

Some practical suggestions were made:

- Provide info on Plusbus, eg combined ticketing for Skelmersdale
- Timetable leaflets and station posters showing connections to Liverpool
- Platform (3c) at Preston should display/ signpost where to make mainline connections

Other Station facilities

The survey did not seek opinions on this but in addition to above, there were complaints about poor lighting at Croston.

Staff (availability to assist)

Despite the many criticisms of service levels, there was only praise and compliments for Northern Rail and Ormskirk ticket office staff, the typical comments being; 'Conductors are very helpful / essential/ great', 'staff are exceptional and a credit to Northern Rail', 'always good'.

Alan Fantom 21/4/15