

# Passengers Before Profits:

Monitoring report of fast peak-time services from Oxford to London Paddington (January 22 - February 2 2007)



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# 1 Executive Summary:

First Great Western's (FGW) vision is "to be the leading train company and our customers' preferred choice of travel. Our people, through their passion, energy and commitment, will provide customers and communities with travel that is safe, reliable and enjoyable. Our objective is to be a profitable train operating company and an employer of choice, offering consistent punctuality, reliability and excellent customer service."<sup>1</sup>

Many regular FGW passengers would prefer to travel with someone else, but they have no choice. Far from providing "safe, reliable and enjoyable" travel, FGW's appalling management of its new timetable has raised the issue of poor rail services to the top of the national news agenda. Overcrowding, delays and cancellations have stoked travellers' anger to unprecedented levels. Passenger groups have resorted to fare strikes to protest at being herded like cattle into inadequate carriages, fobbed off with thin excuses and charged significant fare increases.

At a time when people are being encouraged to switch to public transport, it is the ultimate irony that FGW is showing that taking the train is expensive, slow and unpleasant. Concern is mounting at the company's ability to deliver a satisfactory service in line with specifications laid down by the Department of Transport in the new FGW franchise awarded in December 2005. Peter Luff MP told Parliament in January 2007: "I have severe reservations about the management ability of First Great Western and, in particular, about its management of the franchise."<sup>2</sup>

The lives of thousands of Oxford residents are affected each day by FGW's performance – whether they are regular travellers, their partners or their families. It is not just individuals who suffer. Oxford City Council, local business groups and Members of Parliament have acknowledged the critical role a fast and reliable service to London plays in sustaining Oxford's economic health.

When FGW introduced the new timetable on December 10 2006, it slashed morning fast peak-time (6am-8am) trains from Oxford to London. As a result, Ox Rail Action was set up to represent passengers who had been ignored by FGW. A month later, FGW bowed to public pressure by announcing a revised timetable.

Ox Rail Action welcomed some of the changes introduced on January 15 2007. However, the new timetable does not restore previous levels of service. We allowed a week settling in period giving passengers a chance to get used to the new timetable and for teething problems to be ironed out. Ox Rail Action members then monitored fast trains between 6am and 8am on weekdays between January 22 and February 2.<sup>3</sup> In addition to seat availability and punctuality, Ox Rail Action also monitored other customer service issues. This report outlines key findings and recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> First Great Western's website

<sup>2</sup> See Hansard, Wednesday January 27 2007

<sup>3</sup> Poor performance of the 6.45am train during week one meant that the researcher was arriving too late for work and so the monitoring of this train for week two was abandoned

#### Summary of Recommendations:

1. Improve punctuality and reliability overall,
2. Reduce journey time for the 6:45am departure from Oxford for London Paddington,
3. Use of Turbo train on the 7:05am departure should be scrapped and an Adelante or High Speed Train used instead,
4. The punctuality of the 7:33am departure needs to be addressed. In particular, the 10-minute delay at Didcot needs to be investigated and removed,
5. Tackle the consistent lateness of the 7:44am train departure,
6. Repair or replace information boards and platform screens at Oxford station. In the meantime, when the boards fail, an immediate notice should be put up by the barriers to tell people that the information being shown is wrong and advising passengers of the right information,
7. FGW needs to invest immediately in supporting its staff by investing in training in customer service. The frequency and reliability of announcements needs to be improved, with minimum standards of information set,
8. The Turbo trains need substantial investment – not just a make-over. An overhaul of the interior design, seating and heating systems is desperately needed to make journeys more bearable,
9. The system for contacting FGW's customer panel needs to be made clearer and easier for passengers, and the e-mail contact system should be reviewed, and
10. Standard replies to customer complaints should be scrapped.

## 2 Individual Trains

### 2.1 6.38am train

This train has a strong following and would be a popular train but passengers report problems with time-keeping and unreliability, making it a poor option for those who need to be at their desks in London by 8am.

The train starts in Moreton-in-Marsh and so overcrowding can be an issue on this train, though our monitoring showed that on most days there were generally just enough seats from Oxford.

#### Key findings:

1. During the monitoring period, this train was repeatedly late on arrival in Oxford and consequently London Paddington .
2. The train starts further up the line and was often more than half-full by the time it drew into Oxford. During the monitoring period, the train generally had just enough seats for passengers from Oxford, with perhaps one or two spare seats per carriage, including in First Class.

However, on some mornings, the overcrowding is worse. On Wednesday January 23, nine passengers were forced to stand from Oxford and two passengers chose not to board because there was no room for their luggage in the luggage racks.

### 2.2 6.45am train

This train was brought in as an alternative option for passengers travelling on the over-crowded 7.05am train service or early 6.38am service. It was billed as a 'fast service' by FGW when first announced on January 9 2007. Our research, however, shows this is a misnomer – in fact, the service is very slow indeed.

The 6.45am starts in Oxford and is scheduled to arrive at London Paddington at 7.59am, giving a journey time of 1hr 14mins. Passengers leaving Oxford on the 7.05am train arrive at London Paddington at 8.05am, just six minutes after those catching the 6.45am.

This is clearly not a fast service. Passengers do not see it as a viable alternative to the 6.38am or the 7.05am and so it is under-used.

#### Key findings:

1. This train is like a ghost-train leaving Oxford, with some carriages completely empty, including First Class. During the monitoring period the train carried a maximum of 36 passengers from Oxford (January 25) and a minimum of 15 (January 23).

Passengers who travelled on the 6.45am from Oxford said they were frustrated with the journey time but chose to get this train purely because they could not face the fight to get a seat on the 7.05am.



Picture 1: The 6.45 train is of little use to passengers travelling from Oxford to London

2. The journey time on this train is 74 minutes when it runs to time and so is not a 'fast' service. During the monitoring period, due to poor performance, overall door-to-door journey time for some passengers was up to 2hrs 30 minutes. During the week starting January 22, the train arrived at London Paddington on time no more than once.
3. The train was clearly of far more use to passengers from Twyford and Maidenhead than those from Oxford.
4. Throughout the monitoring period, passengers said the train was extremely cold. Passengers said they took extra scarves and sweaters to make the journey bearable.

### 2.3 7.05am train

The 7:05am departure time is welcomed by passengers wishing to arrive in London at around 8am, who feel this had the potential to be a good train. However, the 7.05am train starts in Great Malvern and so by the time it reaches Oxford it is often more than two-thirds full.

Between December 10 2006 and January 14 2007, an Adelante ran on this service, however, on January 15, a Turbo train was introduced. We understand that this was done to provide an Adelante service for the newly introduced 7.33am train, but passengers were at a loss to understand why this train had been selected, as it was clear that a Turbo was completely inappropriate for such a highly-used service.

Key findings:

1. On both Mondays during the monitoring period, few Oxford passengers got a seat and dozens of passengers were forced to cram together and stand in all carriages or sit in the luggage area. One passenger reported a woman almost fainting because of the crush (January 29).

The shortage of seats had encouraged others to display aggressive behaviour when boarding and she admitted to pushing a fellow passenger out of the way in order to secure a seat on Monday January 29.



Picture 2: Seats are at a premium on the 7.05 train

2. On Tuesdays to Fridays during the monitoring period, there were around 30 to 40 spare seats (not including First Class) on each train; however, these were almost all middle knee-to-knee seats; passengers still opted to stand from Oxford saying they would rather stand or sit on the floor than sit on the cramped 'knee-to-knee' seats for an hour-long journey.

3. Business people who rely on the time they spend on the train to catch up on vital work said they found it difficult to work on the 7.05am. Passengers said it was almost impossible to juggle a laptop on this train, especially given that getting a seat cannot always be guaranteed. Some even said they had stopped buying a newspaper because they could not turn the page. We have been informed by a least one passenger who may have to give up out-of-hours work altogether.



Picture 3: Working on a lap-top on the 7.05am is a challenge

4. Temperatures on the 7:05am are erratic and passengers reported the train was either extremely hot or cold
5. While there is plenty of luggage space on the Turbo, passengers with folding bikes reported that it was not always easy to find a space for them because on crowded mornings passengers sit in the luggage areas.
6. Timing on this train appears to be an issue with long delays on Tuesday January 23 (arrived at Paddington 40 minutes late) and Wednesday January 24 (30 minutes late – probably due to snow). On other days, the train regularly arrived at Paddington five or so minutes late.

#### 2.4 7.33 train

This train was one that FGW re-instated into the timetable on the 15<sup>th</sup> January. In effect, it is a replacement for the pre-10<sup>th</sup> December timetable 7.25 service, a very

popular commuter service. The new 7.33am runs to a similar timetable, except that it no longer stops at Radley.

Time-keeping is a real issue for this train. If it arrives on time, then passengers can get to their desks by 9am; if it is late – even by just a few minutes – then they are likely to be late for work.

Key findings:

1. This train repeatedly arrived late during our monitoring period with average delays of between 10 and 15 minutes. On January 23, this train arrived at London Paddington at 10am.

This train does not seem to sit well within the existing timetable. The slow train that leaves Oxford at 7.23 appears to hold up the 7.33 until Didcot. By then, the train is already a few minutes late, and so several other trains are allowed to leave before the original 7.33am.

The delay at Didcot could be as long as 10 minutes and passengers were not kept informed as to the reason for the delay. Passengers speculated that it could be due to the fact that FGW is fined for every train that arrives more than 10 minutes late and so when one train is already slightly delayed, it is better to make that one more delayed, allowing other trains to run on-time and not be fined. It is better that one train is 20 minutes late, than two or three trains being 11 minutes late.

2. Over-crowding did not seem to be an issue on this train during the monitoring period. Generally, there were one or two seats free in each carriage, though on one day (February 1) people were forced to stand from Oxford.

## 2.5 7.44am train

The 7.44am train from Oxford has not changed since December 10 2006. This train comes from Hereford, and is therefore mostly full by the time it arrives at Oxford. Few commuters use this train as it is not a viable train to get into work in central London by 9am, even if it runs to time, so we have limited data on levels of overcrowding or delays experienced during our monitoring period.

Key finding:

1. Time-keeping appears to be an issue on this train and it seems this train is regularly delayed. According to reports from passengers, this train cannot be relied upon for regular commuting as it rarely arrives on time. This is borne out by the evidence we do have for two days during the monitoring period.

The train arrived at Oxford 10 minutes late on January 29 and 15 minutes late on February 1. Arrival at London Paddington was affected with the train arriving 27 minutes late on February 1.

### 3 General communication problems

As well as the problems outlined above that are specific to trains and the new timetable, we received many complaints over the two weeks about more general concerns. The following are issues mentioned to us by many passengers.

#### 3.1 *Screen/ information board failures*

It seems that the timetable boards and platform screens are becoming increasingly unreliable. We have had reports almost everyday that they are not working properly. This is not a huge problem for regular commuters, as we have learnt to ignore them entirely, but it is often obvious that there are many confused and worried non-frequent passengers who are entirely baffled by screens that are wrong or out of order.

If the screens are not working, then a message that reads 'out of order' or 'closed' suffices to let passengers know that the information is not available. The problem occurs when the screens are out of order but passengers are not informed of this. Displaying slightly wrong information or wrongly timed information can be more confusing than no information at all. When the information desk is unmanned, this just makes the problems worse.

Previously, when the screens went out of order, announcements were regularly made to inform passengers of this fact, and tell them about trains. Now, it seems that the screens are so often broken that announcements are not made and passengers are left to fend for themselves.

It seems absurd that money for a new flash computer screen on Platform 2 has been found, when the ordinary train timetable boards, which are far more important, are left broken.

#### 3.2 *Announcements*

Announcements about train delays and train information are also of a poor standard. This is a problem that passengers have reported both on the trains, and at Oxford and Reading stations. When trains are delayed or cancelled, the information given to passengers about the best way to proceed is often wrong, and there were several unexplained delays reported.

Some examples from our monitoring log include:

##### *24<sup>th</sup> January – 6.45am*

"Train announced as 6.45am, departed at 6.52am; 16 on board; this was not the 6.45am, instead it was a slow train which stopped at all stations to London – late for work".

##### *24<sup>th</sup> January – 7.05am*

"Train arrives over 30 minutes late into Paddington at 8.37. We're told the relief line around the Heathrow junction is closed, but not told why."

##### *25<sup>th</sup> January – 7.33am*

"No problems in getting to Reading, however after leaving we crawled along. We had no announcements to advise us of the problems and guessed it was something to do with the previous day's derailment. It could not have been the snow as there was not enough to worry about.

“Whilst we were on the fast up line at 08:45 a HST passed us on the up relief line between Langley & Iver. We eventually arrived into Paddington at 09:20 some 50 minutes late! At no time were we advised of what the issue was or an apology.”

*Unspecified date – 7.05am*

“There was no indication of problems except the late departure but as the train approached Didcot the driver informed us that there was a fault with the train and that it would terminate at Reading. He went on to say that this fault had been known about when the train left Great Malvern and that we should have been informed before getting on the train.

“When we got to Reading we all duly got off as requested but passengers at Reading got on as they had not been told of the cancellation. The information boards indicated that the train was about to depart for London and there was a platform announcement to that effect. All those who got off at Reading had therefore lost their seats and had to join the scrum trying to get on. Needless to say there was insufficient room so those at the back of the queue were left stranded at Reading”.

*Unspecified date – 6.38am*

“We had a lovely situation just before I went on vacation when the 6.38 was very late and we were told the station staff had no idea where it was!”

Needless to say, this sort of mis-information and mis-direction can make very stressful journeys for Oxford passengers.

### *3.3 Turbo train problems – heating, seats and space*

Many have complained to us about the conditions of travel on the older stock Turbo trains. When travelling for an hour, or more usually more, uncomfortable trains can make a commute very unpleasant.

Firstly, the temperature never seems to be correct – we have heard complaints from four very cold passengers and one very hot passenger, and several complaints of windows that keep falling open letting freezing air into the carriages. It seems ludicrous that FGW have spent so much money refurbishing the outside of the Turbo carriages, for no particular reason, but not spent any money on the interiors, window catches or heating systems.

The second problem with Turbo trains is the type of seating. People have described the journeys to us as ‘very cramped’ and ‘packed’. Many choose to stand rather than be crammed in to the tiny seats where you have to touch knees and become very friendly with fellow passengers! Some have reported having to give up working on the train, as it impossible to use laptops or even write on these trains.

Lastly, there is not enough space on these trains, particularly when passengers are standing, to bring luggage or folding bicycles onto the train. It is simply not feasible to run Turbo trains on fast services.

### *3.4 Passenger representation and communication*

As a campaign group, we have been disappointed by the lack of customer representation within FGW. Although we have now met with and communicated with our Customer Panel representative, it took several months of campaigning and several e-mails before we managed to make contact with him. It seems that the general e-mail contact for the Customer Panel did not work as it should have done at a crucial time.

Many Oxford passengers have been complaining frequently and bitterly to FGW, both through Customer Services and to various members of staff. Overall, there are a large number of comments that have gone unanswered since 11<sup>th</sup> December. On the few occasions when comments are answered, the response often bears little relation to the comment raised.

## 4 Recommendations

Passengers clearly would like to see a return to the pre-December 10 2006 service, if they were given the choice. We accept that this is unlikely but from the evidence laid out in this report, it is clear that there is still a need for radical improvements to the services from Oxford.

We have a number of recommendations we would like to see considered by First Great Western:

### 4.1 *Time-keeping*

That increased efforts be made to ensure that all trains arrive in Oxford, and therefore London Paddington, on time. Passengers travelling on all services clearly identified time-keeping problems with all services. Daily reports of signal failures, slow trains in front and inclement weather do little to reassure passengers that First Great Western is up to the job of running a train service to a satisfactory standard.

### 4.2 *6.45am train*

Journey time on this train needs to be cut to around an hour to make this a viable alternative to the 6.38am or the 7.05am for passengers travelling to London.

As it is at the moment, the train is of little use to Oxford passengers travelling to London Paddington

### 4.3 *7.05am train*

The use of a Turbo train for this service should be scrapped and an Adelante or High Speed Train should be introduced

Turbo trains are completely inadequate for use on this service. We propose that the Adelante used for 6.51am train (a slow service) should be used instead. While the 6.51am was not formally monitored by Ox Rail Action, regular observation shows that very few passengers (ie less than 20) regularly board the train at Oxford. As far as we know, there is no need for this train to be an Adelante service.

### 4.4 *7.33am train*

The time-keeping of this train needs to be addressed. The 10-minute delay at Didcot, in particular, needs to be investigated and removed.

We realise that there are problems of congestion in the Reading area meaning that most trains are slightly delayed in the morning peak, but it is frustrating when we are held at Didcot for long periods of time.

### 4.5 *7.44am train*

We recommend that FGW assesses why the 7.44 train appears to be consistently late, and makes changes to resolve this problem.

### 4.6 *Screen/ information board failures*

FGW urgently needs to repair or replace the information boards and platform screens, so that they provide reliable information. Investment in this area would ease pressure on the over-worked station staff who end up dealing with multiple enquiries.

In the meantime, when the boards do fail, an immediate notice should be put up by the barriers to tell people that the information being shown is wrong and advising

passengers of the right information – perhaps an updatable whiteboard could be installed near the ticket barriers, as is used on the London Underground.

#### *4.7 Announcements*

FGW needs to support its staff by investing in staff training in customer service and increase the frequency and reliability of announcements. Minimum level standards of information should be set. For example, no more than 10 minutes should pass between announcements about trains if the information boards are not working. The staff should know exactly how the timetable works so that they can advise passengers of the best routes to take when problems occur. If regular passengers know the best way to get in, then staff certainly should.

When trains are delayed or disrupted, passengers should not have to wait for any more than 10 minutes before an announcement apologising for the delay and explaining the problem. Pre-recorded announcements should not be used in these circumstances. They appear insincere and often give the wrong information – fuelling passenger frustration.

#### *4.8 Turbo train problems – heating, seats and space*

It is good news that First Great Western is currently refurbishing the HST trains, and Ox Rail Action welcomes this. However, it seems illogical that the comfortable, modern Adelantes are to be replaced with the new HSTs when we look at the state of the Turbo trains.

We urge First Great Western to invest in the older Turbo trains. The entire fleet needs substantial investment – not just a make-over. An overhaul of the interior design, seating and heating systems desperately needs to occur to make our journeys more bearable.

#### *4.9 Passenger representation and communication*

The system for contacting FGW's customer panel needs to be made clearer and easier for passengers, and the e-mail contact system should be reviewed.

In addition, standard replies to complaints should be scrapped altogether. When passengers have taken the trouble to complain or make comments to FGW, this should at least be acknowledged.

## **5 Conclusion**

This report provides a snapshot into what life is like on a day-to-day basis for regular passengers travelling on fast morning peak-time trains.

When the revised timetable was introduced on January 15 2007 we wanted to give the new changes a chance. We had hoped we might be pleasantly surprised and that further campaigning would be unnecessary and that Ox Rail Action would be no longer needed.

That has not proved to be the case and so our campaign continues. With support from Oxford City Council and from our local Members of Parliament, we want to reassure First Great Western that this is not an issue that will go away. Oxford passengers will continue to fight for better services and improved passenger consultation.