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NEWS RELEASE - IMMEDIATE

New CrossCountry franchise gets a cautious welcome from TravelWatch North West

TravelWatch North West has reacted cautiously to the announcement by the Department for Transport that the franchise for the New Cross Country franchise is to be awarded to Arriva Trains.

So far as the North West is concerned bidders for the new franchise were only asked to operate services from Manchester to Birmingham and Bristol. These will be provided by Arriva with the addition of one train a day to the far South West, a move in response to criticism that long distance services between the North West and the South West were not included in the franchise specification. TWNW much welcomes this move, but hopes that train times at Manchester will allow comfortable and convenient connections to and from other parts of the region.

Additional capacity is to be provided on New Cross Country services by the re-introduction of the popular, but 30-years old, High Speed Trains, withdrawn from the current CrossCountry franchise four years ago. It is unlikely that these will operate on Manchester services.

TWNW would welcome the proposal to reconfigure existing Voyager trains to provide additional seating and luggage space, but questions the wisdom of this when it will be at the expense of toilet provision on the trains. It must be remembered that these are long distance services and history has shown that toilets on Voyager trains have proved not only unreliable, but also inadequate for the needs of passengers on long journeys, and therefore the proposal to reduce them from three per train to two on all four and five coach train is seriously flawed.

TWNW earlier expressed serious concerns about the increased number of passengers who may have to change trains at Birmingham New Street station under the new franchise arrangements. Studies were undertaken with Passenger Focus into the potential for interchange arrangements at other stations, but no mention is made of these in the franchise announcement. Arriva does, however, commit itself to providing additional staff to assist passengers at Birmingham.

Of serious concern to all users of CrossCountry trains is the announcement that unregulated fares will be increased by an average of 3.4% per annum above inflation over the life of the franchise. This will allow a real rise of fare prices of over 30% over the eight-year life of the franchise. This is a risky move as the reaction of the market in an ageing but more value-demanding society may run against the current growth trend and put more traffic back on the roads.

The restructured services and reconfigured trains are intended to provide a 35% increase in seating capacity on CrossCountry trains although an increase of only 30% was specified. TWNW must ask if this will accommodate continuing increases in passenger carryings when numbers have been increasing across the rail network by around 5% a year.

TWNW welcomes clarification of the terms of compensation to passengers for disrupted rail journeys - a move which needs to be extended across all passenger franchises.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

CrossCountry services in the North West presently include trains between Manchester and Glasgow/Edinburgh, and from Glasgow/Edinburgh to the South and South West coasts of England, all operated by Virgin Trains. The first of these services will be transferred to the TransPennine Express franchise and the latter will be replaced by trains between Glasgow/Edinburgh and Birmingham New Street to be operated by Virgin West Coast, currently operator of all London-based services on the West Coast Main Line through Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria.

These changes will come into effect from December 2007 and passengers using services to travel south of Birmingham will find it necessary to change trains at Birmingham New Street.

Since its introduction, long before rail privatisation, the Cross Country network has proved increasingly popular, particularly with leisure travellers looking to avoid the growing congestion experienced in undertaking long distance road journeys, and has undoubtedly contributed to the effort to relieve congestion on the roads. Profiles of passengers using Cross Country exhibit the fact that many are elderly and their requirements are different to those of commuter routes and business trains.

TravelWatch North West represents all public transport users in the NW.

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