

NEWS

Monday 27 November 2006

GOVERNMENT IGNORES RAIL PASSENGERS

The Department for Transport is pushing ahead with its proposals to axe direct Cross Country Trains from Scotland via the West Coast Main Line via Carlisle, Lancaster, Preston, Wigan, Warrington and Crewe to the South West and South Coast despite the results of a consultation carried out amongst passengers by its own Watchdog Agency that condemned the proposals. From December 2007 all passengers will have to change trains at Birmingham New Street.

The proposal is part of an initiative to renew the franchise that may see a new train operator on the route until 2016. During most of this period Birmingham New Street will be undergoing a major reconstruction.

The existing Cross Country network is well used. It provides regular trains from Glasgow and Edinburgh, operating via Carlisle Preston and, Crewe to Plymouth and Bournemouth and return. Patronage has more than doubled in the last 10 years since the demise of British Rail; Cross Country now carries 22 million passengers each year. 20% of services suffer over-crowding at some point. New trains operate all services.

Under the Department for Transport's plans:

1. Through services will be axed between Scotland and Reading, Southampton and Bournemouth, and Bristol, Exeter, Plymouth and other South West destinations via Carlisle, Preston and Crewe.
2. Services from Manchester to the South West will terminate at Bristol necessitating change of train for journeys onwards to Exeter, Plymouth and other South West destinations.
3. Through services will be axed from Bristol and Gloucestershire to all points along the West Coast route to the North West, north of Manchester, and the west of Scotland.
4. Many through journeys that are possible today will require at least one change of trains. The authoritative industry journal, *Modern Railways*, reports that the number of possible through journeys will be halved from over 1000 possible combinations of origin and destination points. North West travellers will be major losers.
5. Passenger Focus, the Department for Transport's own consumer body, surveyed more than 3000 passengers using Cross Country services in June 2006. 14% said that they would be fairly or very unlikely to make the same journey if they were required to make a change of train.
6. Many existing journeys will require a change at Birmingham New Street in future. This station is already notorious for over-crowding – it frequently has to be closed for safety reasons – and it is difficult to navigate. The station is due to be rebuilt – a project that will take most of the life of the franchise and which will add further congestion while demolition and reconstruction takes place.

7. Passengers from the North West stations on the West Coast route will have to wait for more than an hour when making onward connections at Birmingham.
8. Rail is set to lose up to 4 million passenger journeys as a result of the Department for Transport's plans if the Passenger Focus research on passengers' reluctance to change trains is correct. Many of these are likely to transfer to the already congested strategic road network.
9. The Cross Country network is particularly important for leisure travellers – 38% of passengers are visiting friends and relatives; many have reduced mobility due to old age, heavy luggage or small children.
10. The Department for Transport has invited baseline bids that deliver a minimum equivalent to current capacity, with an enhanced variant to deliver a 30% increase in capacity on the central section of the Cross Country network. Annual growth currently runs in double digits.
11. The Government has announced that part of the new Cross Country fleet is to be transferred to other routes – partly to provide diesel traction when Anglo-Scottish electric routes are closed for maintenance at weekends, partly to enable improved services from London to Chester and North Wales.
12. The proposals transfer the Manchester to Scotland Services to Trans Pennine Express whose trains, despite being new, only have a 100 mph capability. These trains were originally ordered for a different rail network and their transfer carries implications for their current services to Barrow and Windermere which face a consequential reduction in trains.
13. Passengers may face higher fares as through journeys they currently enjoy will have to be taken on trains of different operators, potentially reducing the availability of advance value tickets.
14. The only surplus modern equipment that is capable of the high speeds at which Cross Country services currently operate are the diesel Adelante train sets that First Great Western will cease leasing in 2007. However, the trade press is reporting that these are likely to be transferred to the electrified commuter lines serving London Kings Cross.
15. Tom Harris, the Minister for Rail, has said that the Department for Transport's plans have not taken account of the Stern Report.

Ministers need to be persuaded to question the Department for Transport's plans. TravelWatch North West believes that the proposals will result in more passengers going back to their cars rather than endure the inconvenience of disrupted train journeys by the need to change trains at least once and fears that the trend of growth in passenger numbers will be reversed.

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Note: The full document on the new Cross Country franchise can be found at www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_railways/documents/page/dft_railways_613536.doc

TravelWatch NorthWest represents the interests of the users of all modes of public transport in the region. It gives users a forum to discuss and exchange views on developing quality services across the North West.

It is supported by:

NorthWest Regional Development Agency; North West Regional Assembly; Merseytravel; Manchester Airport plc; Greater Manchester PTE; Stagecoach North West; TransPennine Express; Virgin Trains; Passenger Focus

The DfT's New Cross Country Trains Franchise Specification

Statement from TravelWatch North West - Monday 27 November 2006

1.0 Introduction

The Department for Transport published a briefing document for Stakeholders on 31st October. This purports to inform Stakeholders on the franchise specification on which the four bidders selected by the DfT have been invited to bid. The Stakeholder Briefing Document outlines the results of the consultation process on the DfT's initial proposals that was initiated in June and describes certain variations to them. This note sets out the views of TravelWatch NorthWest on the DfT's response to the Stakeholder consultation.

2.0 Submissions from the North West region

2.1. Responses from almost 50 organisations in the North West were submitted in response to the consultation, together with an unspecified number of individuals. These included Metropolitan Councils, Passenger Transport Authorities, Unitary Councils, and District Councils, together with a number of Universities, Chambers of Commerce, Tourism Agencies, the North West Regional Development Agency and the North West Regional Assembly. In addition a volume of comments from individuals, rail user groups and business organisations were also submitted.

2.2 A number of consistent points were made in the submissions from the North West. There was widespread concern at the prospective damage to inter-regional connectivity with:

- Ø The loss of through services to and from Scotland, Cumbria and Lancashire to and from the South West.
- Ø The loss of through services to and from Scotland, Cumbria and Lancashire to and from the South Coast.
- Ø The prospect of all passengers from stations north of Crewe having to change trains at Birmingham New Street - a station that will be going through major reconstruction until 2014.
- Ø The need to redress the absence of through XC services from Liverpool and Blackpool.
- Ø The convenience to passengers to enjoy seamless through long distance journeys avoiding London and without a change of train.
- Ø The need for additional high-speed train capacity to address current levels of over-crowding and projected future growth.

3.0 Inter-regional connectivity

3.1 The Stakeholder Briefing Document offers no comfort to eradicate the prospective damage to inter-regional connectivity. The DfT declines to release detailed passenger flow data to substantiate its proposals, claiming that this would compromise the commercial position of train operators. It then cites figures that it claims indicate the quantum of daily passenger flows originating at some key operating points. The DfT's argument is vulnerable to challenge.

Ø The passenger flow data that the DfT declines to release is almost certainly available to all the bidders since it is likely to be based on standard rail industry information that is available to members of the Association of Train Operating Companies. This data is not made available to rival modes but it would not be difficult for a suitably resourced prospective competitor to gather point-to-point journey data.

Ø The illustrative figures that the DfT cites to justify its case are hard to recognise: it claims to describe 'Daily averages of Cross Country Weekday Return Journeys' originating at specific points. Rail industry specialists are reported to have some difficulty in understanding this definition and are therefore sceptical as to the robustness of the data. The exclusion of weekend travel is likely to result in an understatement of leisure travel (the sector believed to dominate XC business) and therefore distorts the pattern of journeys.

Ø The illustrative point-to-point journeys described (e.g. Oxenholme to Bristol Temple Meads) appear to record only those journeys that start and end at those specific stations; it makes no allowance for passengers whose journeys may have started or ended with a connecting service into either of those stations (e.g. Windermere to Bath Spa via Oxenholme and Bristol Temple Meads). The data therefore understates the number of travellers between the stations cited.

3.2 The Stakeholder Briefing Document claims only that "there are a small number of through journeys that are possible today which will require a change in future".

Ø The November edition of *Modern Railways* reports research by Stewart Stacey, the former Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council and Vice-Chair of the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority from 1996-2003. This shows that the number of journey opportunities between pairs of stations served by Cross Country will fall from 1047 currently to 520 under the franchise arrangements proposed by DfT.

3.3 The Stakeholder Briefing Document emphasises that the proposed arrangements whilst reducing through journey opportunities for some people, should improve performance for the majority of passengers.

Ø It is not clear that this takes proper account of passenger preferences in relation to the Cross Country Network. Passenger Focus, the organisation established by the DfT to represent passengers' interests, undertook a survey of 3333 passengers using Virgin Cross Country services in June 2006. Out of all the passengers surveyed, 14% said they would be fairly or very unlikely to complete the same journey by train if they were required to make a change. This would mean the loss to rail of more than 3 million passenger journeys a year.

- Ø The DfT's original consultation document mentions that 40% of passengers already change at least once before they join a Cross Country train. Currently passengers visiting friends or relatives account for 38% of Cross Country journeys. These passengers carry significant volumes of luggage, and many of them have mobility problems. Although the rail industry does not appear to hold market research with which to validate the argument, it is likely that this group is likely to be more resistant than most to journeys involving additional change of trains. Thus, especially for older members of this group, a reduction in through journey opportunities is likely to be regarded as making a journey with new Cross Country significantly less attractive.

4.0 Connections

4.1 The DfT says that "Bidders are required...to ensure that the need to change trains does not become an inconvenience".

- Ø Passengers from the North West can currently make through journeys to destinations in the South West and South Coast. In future they will have to change at Birmingham New Street.
- Ø Connection time at Birmingham New Street between the North West and Scotland and the South West and South Coast is likely to be in excess of an hour. Currently minimum interchange time at Birmingham New Street is 12 minutes. Passengers seeking to make a connection arriving on late running services may risk missing their departure even if they are willing to sprint to the departure platform. Given the fact that they are likely to have luggage and may be elderly or disabled it can be assumed that their connection window will need to be lengthy. Equally the risk to successful connections is likely to dis-benefit passengers from being able to take advantage of discounted advance ticket sales on such journeys, thereby facing the dilemma of a long wait on a station in the midst of rebuilding or a fare increase by stealth.

4.2 The original DfT New Cross Country consultation suggested that the half-hourly services through Birmingham to Manchester would alternate between serving Crewe and Stoke on Trent. The Stakeholder Briefing Document now says that both services will operate via Stoke and not alternately via Crewe (although elsewhere it also says that 'a small number of trains in this service group will serve Crewe and Wilmslow as an alternative to Stoke on Trent and Macclesfield.

- Ø Crewe is an important interchange point for services to North Wales and Mid-Wales. In the decade to 2004-2005 there was 50% growth in passenger journeys between the South West and Wales, which is second only to London and the South East as a destination for rail passengers from the South West.
- Ø This effectively cuts out the opportunity for passengers and service providers to have the option of an alternative change point and thereby concentrates all changes on Birmingham New Street.

5.0 Performance

The Stakeholder Briefing Document says that a significant objective in the development of the New Cross Country franchise has been the elimination of the conflicting train movements that occur at Birmingham New Street, removing the risk to operational reliability.

- Ø While the intention is to be applauded, the credibility of the detailed workings shown in the document gives rise to doubt. The diagram of the present operation at Birmingham New Street describes the route via Camp Hill solely as a diversionary route whereas it is used throughout the day for regular two-hourly Cross Country services between Scotland, the North West and the South West that therefore already benefit from the route segregation proposed. Timetabling specialists believe that the proposed New Cross Country arrangements are likely to achieve only a minimal reduction in conflicting movements before any allowance is made for the impact of the reconstruction works at Birmingham New Street.

6.0 Capacity

The DfT acknowledges the challenge of providing additional capacity where and when it is most needed. The Stakeholder Briefing Document appears wanting in the solutions that it offers. Bidders are being asked to submit two proposals, one based on delivering a minimum capacity that is broadly equivalent to today's levels, the other involving a minimum capacity increase of approximately 30% on the central section of the franchise.

- Ø The second proposal is unlikely to be sufficient for the lifetime of the new franchise. There has been growth of around 40% in Cross Country patronage over the last three years. There is no obvious reason as to why this growth should be curtailed.
- Ø By the DfT's own admission, the proposals for New Cross Country have not taken account of the implications of the Stern Report or of any curtailment in short-haul airline operations.
- Ø It is not sufficient to plan for accommodating growth solely on the central section of the franchise: there are times of the day and week when there is serious over-crowding on services to the north of Birmingham.

7.0 Fares

One of the attractions to passengers that has undoubtedly contributed to the growth of business on Cross Country trains has been the availability of a "value" fares range by early booking. Heavily discounted tickets have proved to be a popular success particularly in the leisure and student sectors, both of which dominate passenger profiles on Cross Country trains. These will now be under threat as passengers travelling between the North West and Southern destinations will be required to travel on the trains of different franchise operators. Reduction in the availability of value fares will result in a consequential loss of passenger numbers travelling by train on the routes.

Note: The full document on the new Cross Country franchise can be found at www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_railways/documents/page/dft_railways_613536.doc

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