

What passengers want from the new
Cross Country franchise – an executive summary

September 2006

Introduction

In June 2006, the Department for Transport consulted on its proposals for the new Cross Country franchise, due to start in November 2007. This executive summary of Passenger Focus' detailed response sets out the key improvements that passengers want the new franchise to deliver.

Our recommendations for the new franchise are based on comprehensive research with over 32,000 passengers, looking at the passenger viewpoint on fares, satisfaction and wider rail issues, using large-scale route-specific research conducted in spring 2006, as well as data from the National Passenger Survey (NPS). In addition, Passenger Focus gathered a wealth of information from passengers, stakeholders and passenger groups. We also considered previous research and publications produced by the former Rail Passengers Council (RPC) and supplemented this with new desktop research from a wide variety of sources.

Background

The numbers of people travelling by train are increasing. Performance on the railways is steadily improving, and passenger satisfaction is rising. We expect changes to franchises to further improve performance, improve passenger satisfaction, and allow for continued growth; so do passengers. In general, passengers want a safe, reliable, affordable railway that meets their expectations of service quality for the price paid. Drivers of passenger satisfaction change over time but punctuality and reliability have been the main drivers of passenger satisfaction since the National Passenger Survey began in 1999. Passenger Focus expects franchises to address the link between passenger satisfaction and actionable improvement.

Over the last few years, the Cross Country franchise has been a real success story for passengers in terms of performance, passenger numbers and satisfaction. Passenger Focus is therefore concerned at any proposals to significantly alter or diminish a network which is showing such signs of success. This franchise should be consolidated and developed, not cut back. While there may be winners in the battle for faster journeys and improved capacity in the core of the network, these would be counteracted by significant losses—a reduction in direct journeys between Scotland or the north west and the south of England, and the loss of services east of Reading. We are wary of setting out a 'wish-list' of items that has little prospect of being provided—we understand there are practicalities around funding. However, we make no apologies for having an aspirational vision of the future. We see rail as essential to the delivery of Government objectives such as reducing congestion, improving economic regeneration and pushing towards a more socially inclusive society.



Passengers' priorities on Cross Country routes

1. Getting a seat

The new Passenger Focus research on Cross Country routes showed that passengers rated 'getting a seat' as the second most important aspect of their journey, beaten only by 'arriving on time at your destination'. For leisure passengers, getting a seat was their highest priority. Overcrowding was also a key issue for stakeholders with most suggesting that longer trains were the answer. It is clear that the network is popular but the train units have not met demand, with crowding reported in both standard and first class¹. There is supporting evidence for this view from the National Passenger Survey where Cross Country falls below the average level of satisfaction for long-distance train operators on this issue; business passengers and commuters are considerably less satisfied than leisure passengers.

According to the current operator, 20% of Virgin CrossCountry trains are overcrowded at some point in their journey and particularly on Fridays and Sundays. However, the Department for Transport (DfT) has not stated how many additional seats it needs to procure to alleviate the acknowledged crowding problems. There is also no evidence provided to show how the proposed changes to the Cross Country network will provide the necessary number of extra seats.

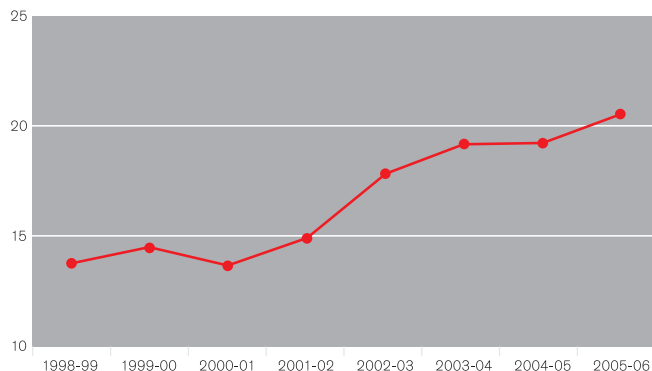
The proposals mean the loss of many direct journeys for passengers, yet the DfT has also failed to demonstrate that the trade-off between this and adding seats at the core of the network is worthwhile in terms of overall passenger benefit. Stakeholders have expressed concern that changes to the pattern of services could shift large numbers of passengers onto trains run by other train operating companies who cover parts of the route, resulting in crowding issues which reduce journey quality for all passengers using these services. Furthermore, there is no demonstration of how the DfT has predicted and accounted for future growth. Growth in passenger numbers on Cross Country services is higher than the national average. Cross Country carried 20 million passengers in 2005 compared to 10.4 million in 1994. The graph below shows Cross Country growth in passenger journeys from 1998 onwards²:

The DfT has stated that it sees growth occurring for intermediate travel but appears less convinced of growth in longer distance journeys. No evidence has been provided by the DfT to support this view and underpin the rationale behind the franchise proposals.

¹ As stated in page 15 of the DfT Cross Country consultation document

² Source: SRA Annual reports 1998/99 to 2002/03 and ORR 2003/04 to 2005/06

Cross Country – passenger journeys (millions)



Regional bodies stress that transport policy must be seen as part of regional regeneration delivery and any strategy must work with the regional strategic economic framework which is supported by EU and UK public funding streams. There is therefore a recognised need to ensure there is provision in the new franchise for future growth:

“Our Local Transport Strategy 2000 and draft Local Transport Strategy 2007 recognise the need for high-quality, rapid train services linking Aberdeen with the major cities and hubs around Britain. The cross country franchise operated by Virgin Trains works substantially towards delivering this.” [Aberdeen City Council]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our top priority is that passengers can get a seat. The DfT needs to define how many seats it needs to procure to tackle the current crowding problems and to allow for the continued high growth which is predicted across the lifetime of the franchise. The franchise should also include a commitment to introduce a robust monitoring regime.

2. Loss of through services and impact of interchanges

The DfT suggests that crowding across the core of the network could be reduced by transferring some services to Virgin West Coast and TransPennine Express, and cutting services east of Reading, including those to Gatwick, Britain’s second busiest airport. This would result in the loss of various through journeys. Passenger Focus has analysed the current and proposed Cross Country franchise map for comparison and a selection of the possible losses are highlighted in the table below³:

As the table shows, Glasgow and Preston could lose all through services to destinations south of Birmingham. Bournemouth and Coventry could lose all through services to the north east. The effects of the proposed changes would be felt across the Cross Country network. For example,

From:	Derby		Sheffield		Leeds		York		Newcastle		Edinburgh		Manchester		Preston		Glasgow	
Plymouth	+4	+44%	+4	+44%	+6	+86%	+4	+50%	+4	+57%	+5	+100%	-	-	-6	-100%	-5	-100%
Exeter	+2	+18%		+18%	+7	+117%	+3	+33%	+3	+38%	+6	+150%	-1	-100%	-8	-100%	-6	-100%
Bristol	-4	-21%	-4	-21%	+7	+88%	-4	-22%	-4	-24%	+7	+140%	+11	+550%	-8	-100%	-6	-100%
Bournemouth	-7	-100%	-7	-100%	-7	-100%	-6	-100%	-6	-100%	-8	-100%	+8	+133%	-3	-100%	-1	-100%
Reading	+5	+71%	+5	+71%	-7	-100%	+6	+100%	+6	+100%	-8	-100%	-4	-21%	-3	-100%	-1	-100%
Coventry	-7	-100%	-7	-100%	-7	-100%	-6	-100%	-6	-100%	-5	-100%	-5	-25%	-3	-100%	-3	-100%

future Cross Country journeys via the East Coast Main Line (ECML) from Edinburgh to destinations south of Birmingham would be significantly slower than the journey currently available via the West Coast⁴. The DfT proposals would also sever the link between Glasgow and Edinburgh with ECML services starting from Edinburgh. In the south west, an area reliant on tourism, direct through services are seen as essential. The region also currently benefits from additional direct services during the summer, which bring visitors to and from popular holiday destinations where the road infrastructure is inadequate. These additional services should be included in the new franchise as a costed option.

The franchise specification mentions that 40% of passengers already change at least once before they join a Cross Country train and passengers tell us that a further change would affect their decision to use rail. Our new passenger research found that 14% of all passengers surveyed would be fairly or very unlikely to complete the same stretch of journey again by train if they were required to make a change. Scaling up this 14% based on 20 million passenger journeys, the Cross Country network could suffer a loss of 2.8 million passengers per year. Changing trains is a particular problem for disabled passengers and those travelling with luggage, and as South West Wales Integrated Transport Consortium (SWITCH) comments:

“For visitors and tourists travelling by rail for overnight stays, direct rail links are important. These travellers are encumbered by luggage and often travel with small children and a change of trains presents a formidable obstacle to them.”

In our new research, passengers were asked what their biggest concerns would be if they did need to change trains in future. The top three priorities given were:

1. Being able to make a connection on time
2. Journey information at the station
3. Having to wait and adding extra time to the journey

Birmingham New Street station

The DfT proposals mean that many passengers will face additional interchanges to complete their journeys. Most of the additional interchange would be at Birmingham New Street station. Passenger Focus is aware that Birmingham New Street station is already operating at well over capacity and is often closed to passengers at peak times for crowd control. There are issues with a lack of platform space, inadequate circulation and waiting areas for passengers. ‘Supporting the case for cross-country inter-city services’⁵ supports this view, commenting:

“A major benefit of the present cross-country network is that a high percentage of passengers are able to make through journeys to their destinations. If passengers had to change trains at Birmingham, it would place an impossible burden on New Street.”

³ The first column under each place name shows the estimated net gain or loss in the number of services, as a result of the proposed changes:
 • Current number of services - northbound trains per day, Monday to Friday as at 12/06/06
 • Estimated future number of services - estimated northbound trains per day, Monday to Friday, SLC2
 The second column under each place name gives the % gain or loss in the number of services, as above

⁴ Example: via ECML - dep EDB 1305 arr BHM 1758 (journey time 4h 53m). Via WCML - dep EDB 0852 arr BHM 1259 (journey time 4h 07m) (Source: National Rail Timetable 11 June-9 Dec 06, table 51)

⁵ Published by the former Rail Passengers Committee for the North West in March 2005

A major overhaul is planned for Birmingham New Street station, although this is not referred to in the franchise consultation document. Network Rail's Gateway Project will create severe disruption for passengers during the entire lifetime of the new franchise. Therefore Passenger Focus is concerned that the impact on passengers has not been taken into account by the DfT when proposing changes which will require large numbers of additional passengers to change trains at this already overcrowded station. Network Rail was scheduled to produce a capacity review of Birmingham New Street which would address some of the issues of concern from Passenger Focus. However, to date, the DfT has not released this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our second priority is to retain as much of the existing direct network as possible. Passengers prefer direct services, and terminating so many trains at Birmingham New Street would be a retrograde step. There should be no significant increase in journey times for passengers. Our research demonstrates the need to offer minimal increases in end-to-end journey times for currently available through-journeys, which the DfT are proposing will have more connections than before.

3. Value for money

In our new passenger research, passengers were given an option to comment unprompted on important aspects of their rail journey. The issue most frequently raised across the whole Cross Country route was value for money. In the Spring 2006 National Passenger Survey, national passenger satisfaction with 'value for money for the price of your ticket' hit a low of 41%. Whilst the equivalent for Virgin Cross Country was higher at 58%, this is still an unsatisfactory level. Stakeholders also raised the issue of fares on Cross Country routes, in particular the availability of discounted tickets and the need to protect affordable 'walk-on' fares.⁶

Clearly there is more work to be done on improving value for money. The current debate surrounding fares regulation has led to speculation about what will happen to walk-on fares in the future. There needs to be recognition of this in the consultation, with a strong emphasis on what the future will hold for fares valid on new

Cross Country routes and those no longer part of Cross Country. Advance-purchase discount tickets must remain valid across a complete passenger journey regardless of the number of changes of train or train company. The consultation document does not explicitly mention ticket restrictions, but some recently awarded franchises have come under criticism for imposing additional restrictions on ticket availability very soon after the start of the franchise. The DfT policy on new restrictions on ticket availability should be transparent and clearly stated. Overcrowding and increased demand should not be solved by increasing the ticket restrictions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passengers deserve better value for money. A simple, easy to understand fares structure should be put in place, and there should be no reduction in the current availability of cost-effective through-ticketing. The franchise should include a commitment to improve passenger satisfaction with value for money.

4. Service patterns

The DfT proposes improving the frequency of some services in order to improve capacity across currently crowded areas of the network. However, the proposals provide insufficient detail of the intended timetables so it is difficult to determine benefits and/or disbenefits for passengers. This lack of information means Passenger Focus cannot therefore make any detailed comments on service provision and its potential impact on passengers. Many stakeholder groups have commented that the new Cross Country franchise should offer no less than the current service levels, and in many cases, an improved service is seen as a key issue for the new franchise:

"My colleagues and I re-affirm the importance of there being no retrenchment whatsoever upon the Cross Country franchise's tremendous progress over recent years. The present status should duly form the minimum baseline for taking the franchise forward—rather than backward." [Plymouth Chamber of Commerce and Industry]

Our new passenger research shows that arriving on time at their destination was the top priority for passengers. Reliability has improved since the introduction of the December 2005 timetable and this should form the base timetable for the new franchise. In proposing any revision to the timetable it is vital that effective technical consultation takes place to fully understand the complexity of markets and to ensure the specification reflects all needs. Passenger Focus would also like to seek assurance from the DfT that any changes to service levels will be justified and that performance will not suffer as a result.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passenger Focus would like further clarification on the level of service to be provided and seeks assurances that robust consultation processes will be in place for discussing proposed changes to service levels.



⁶ Summary of some of the stakeholder views collated by TravelWatch North West.

5. Stations

According to our new research, provision of information about train times and platforms at stations features in the top three priorities for improvement for passengers across all Cross Country routes. Taking into account the proposals in the franchise specification to cut direct services and subsequently increase the amount of changes necessary to complete a journey, information provision is likely to become an issue of even greater significance in the future. Our research also found that when required to change trains, the second highest concern for passengers was journey information at stations.

There is a responsibility for the new franchise to manage connections with other services across the network. Our new passenger research tells us that 92% of passengers are concerned about making connections on time; this figure was even higher for business travellers, where time delays are of increased importance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The DfT needs to ensure there is commitment on the part of the franchisee to contribute to the development of stations and integration with other modes of transport, including connections with other train operators' services.

6. Trains

The Voyager trains are popular with passengers. Whichever trains are used for the new franchise, they must meet the specification of the existing Voyager fleet in terms of comfort and performance as a minimum. The new franchise proposes the transfer of a number of services to alternative train companies. We recommend that passengers making these journeys should be offered no less a standard of comfort, ambience and facilities to those which are currently in service on Cross Country routes.

The new Cross Country franchise specification makes no mention of solving the lack of sufficient luggage space on trains, or the problems travelling with luggage can cause. The NPS (Spring 2006) found that only 55% of Cross Country passengers were satisfied with the luggage space available.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Passenger Focus seeks assurances that the DfT will ensure trains which are fit for purpose for long-distance travel are provided for Cross Country journeys, with satisfactory on-board facilities for passengers. Cleanliness and upkeep/repair should be monitored. Passenger Focus should also be consulted on the design of any new or refurbished stock.

Conclusions

Based on extensive evidence, Passenger Focus has made the following recommendations to the DfT concerning the new Cross Country franchise.

- The franchise must consolidate and build on the success of the existing network, ensuring passengers in the regions of England, Scotland and Wales can make journey connections easily, with enough seats to meet passenger demand. Passengers' actual experiences should match their expectations, with the franchise delivering a reliable service where passengers feel valued.
- Passenger Focus is concerned that the franchise objectives are based on operational issues for the railway, at the expense of passenger needs. We agree with the House of Commons Transport Committee report that a system for managing capacity which puts financial outcomes for train companies or Government before the needs of the passengers is a retrograde step. Measures to reverse Cross Country's increased need for subsidy are necessary, but it is essential that costs are contained and reduced without impacting upon services for passengers. It must also be recognised that the franchise objectives need to be consistent with the delivery of economic development, spatial planning, and the tourism and transport strategies of the regions.
- Passenger Focus is disappointed at the lack of evidence provided by the DfT to justify the franchise proposals relating to the management of connecting services to reduce the need to change at Birmingham and to improve journey times. We remain unconvinced that crowding will be satisfactorily addressed or that this will make up for the loss of some services. Indeed, the loss of existing Cross Country links may force the number of passengers up on alternative services, creating new capacity issues elsewhere. The DfT proposals, which place additional pressure on Birmingham New Street station with further interchanges, do not appear to have been satisfactorily considered in terms of passenger impact, especially as the station may be undergoing major redevelopment during the whole lifetime of the new franchise.
- The franchise specification suggests that current levels of service will be maintained but the proposal to withdraw direct rail services between many major cities, plus removing Gatwick, Britain's second busiest airport, from the Cross Country network is alarming. The current Cross Country franchise has regular clockface train timings, associated with hourly and half-hourly services, and this has been a major contributor to improving Cross Country passenger satisfaction and regional connectivity. The present timetable should therefore form the baseline for the timetable specification of the new Cross Country franchise.
- The DfT also plans to add new routes to the Cross Country franchise. Passengers need to be assured that they will experience a high level of service and facilities, whichever franchise the routes belong to, and whichever bidder secures the franchise.



Contact us

For a copy of our full consultation response to the DfT's proposals for the new Cross Country franchise, go to:

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