
Cross Country Franchise Consultation

A new contract for the operation of Cross Country services is scheduled to start in December 2019 and the Department for Transport has initiated consultation with stakeholders about the future pattern of services.

There has been passenger growth of 28% since 2010 to reach 40 million annual users and this had led to overcrowding at peak holiday periods and for some local journeys.

Leisure use is the largest market accounting for 64% of passengers, with commuters making up 24% and business travel 13%. A third of journeys originate or finish at Birmingham New Street (32%) with the next 10 busiest stations accounting for 59% of all trips headed by Reading, Manchester and Sheffield.

If overcrowding is to be avoided without any fleet expansion two options have been put forward.

Stakeholders have been asked whether commuter trips should be restricted by either removing calling points or imposing 'pick up' or 'set down' conditions for designated services. And to provide more rolling stock resources on densely used route sections whether there should be a cut back in geographic reach by terminating trains short of their current destinations bringing a requirement to change trains for journeys to stations currently served in Scotland, the West Country and South Coast.

A factor that raw statistics do not illuminate is that while annual journeys, particularly to West Country destinations, are smaller than core network flows they are concentrated in the tourist season so that demand during that period represents a much larger, indeed excessive demand on capacity.



Not a Cross Country route but the quiet country station at Castle Cary is overwhelmed by Glastonbury festival goers showing the challenge of providing enhanced capacity at times of peak seasonal demand

The DfT acknowledges that route curtailment is unlikely to be preferred particularly as a number of transport authorities are seeking service extensions to serve locations such as Bradford, Liverpool, and Swansea. In any case changing trains is not an attractive proposition for leisure market passengers travelling with luggage and the reliability of connections has always been an issue that reduces the attractiveness of using rail for the journey concerned.

It is acknowledged that the franchise has been well run by Arriva since 2007 when the successful bid was managed and written by FCP. Performance and customer satisfaction has been good although fleet issues are identified and in particular the use of Class 220 Voyager trains where electrical control equipment is mounted on the roof and cannot be reliably operated on the Cornwall route when high waves impact on the sea wall.

In recent times distributed power with traction equipment mounted underneath coaches has been judged more economical than locomotive hauled formations but the provision of new locomotive hauled coaches on Trans Pennine routes indicates such equipment does not import a cost penalty if greater capacity is needed. This is a pointer to the provision of more suitable resources for West Country services where the availability of bi-mode locomotives would allow a reduction in the use of diesel traction over long sections of electrified route over which Cross

Country services operate.



Class 220 Voyager trains have roof mounted electrical equipment which is prone to failure when encountering the type of operating conditions illustrated on the West Country route

The solution in the past was to operate dated services with a winter and summer timetable that reflected demand. Operating practice has since developed based on the provision of the same service throughout the year accepting that high demand will not be comfortably handled and unused capacity at quieter times represents an opportunity to sell cheap advanced purchase tickets.

There is an alternative strategy to maintain connectivity at off peak times by running a train with portions for different destinations and upgrading the portions to independent trains during times of high demand which the flexibility that exists in the available rolling stock fleet makes possible once more. In addition, the management of the maintenance spare element of the fleet can be programmed to make rolling stock available for demand peaks.

The luxury of simply providing the services that are convenient is not enough for the railway and the current slow-down in demand sends the message that the industry must work harder to improve its product response to the market.

©First Class Partnerships Ltd