

COMMENT

The West Midlands is at the heart of the Cross Country [XC] network. There's just no other way to get to Bristol or Derby for example. Yet I hear more complaints about XC than any other TOC. The franchise is coming up for renewal and we are working hard to ensure we get something better.

Top of the list is more carriages - and not just more seats squeezed into what we have now. We are not asking for greater frequencies during the day (although we want to plug the evening gaps to Leicester and from Bristol, plus some earlier arrivals on Sundays into Birmingham). On some lines, it is not physically possible to fit in more trains. We want longer trains. We know there is severe overcrowding across the core of the XC network, and not just at commuting times. Try the 11.17 from New Street as far as Bristol! But beyond the core, demand is lower and long trains would be far from full. So we envisage two units coupled across the core, splitting beyond there to serve two destinations. For example, trains to Plymouth should divide at Exeter with the rear set continuing to Paignton. Far from the wishes of Arriva, the current franchisee, to run no services at all to Paignton so that it can use its stock across the core because it thinks there is more profit to be made there, we want through trains to as many large towns and cities as possible.

XC's biggest market is leisure travel and through trains are make or break for many potential passengers. Going north east from the West Midlands, each hour sees a train for Scotland via Leeds and one for Newcastle via Doncaster. Network Rail is committed to so many services along the East Coast Main Line north of Northallerton that it really needs to lose XC's Newcastle train. Our vision is for this service to split at Sheffield, with one unit going forward to Hull and the other to Bradford, two major cities that at present have no through trains in our direction. If that is only deemed viable every two hours, we think in the alternate hour the split should be at York, with half of the train for Scarborough and the other half for Middlesbrough or Sunderland.

Improving connectivity is an excellent way of giving an area an economic boost. We hope the DfT does not see innovations like these narrowly as only relevant to the TOC's balance sheet, or operationally a potential problem. If the Invitation to Tender specifies some new destinations, it must not allow a 'Parliamentary Train' solution, where a token single train is tacked on to the start or finish of the day to suit the operator. Under Arriva's Torbay proposals, there would be no XC trains to Torbay but just one departure from Paignton early in the morning, before hotels have even started serving breakfast! That is not putting passengers at the heart of the service.

Cover photo: Birmingham Moor Street, like New Street, will not get its extra WM services promised for December, as all the timetable changes across the West Midlands have been deferred until next May. The possibility that Chase Line electrification and platform lengthening may not be ready has been blamed.

Photo: Keith Flinders



A token service to the extremities of the Cross Country network at times to suit the operator does not serve passengers well. Guildford's only departure leaves at 06.01. This is the return train from Newcastle, rushing through Warwick Parkway.

We know there are some places that will not have XC through trains, where it will be necessary to change. That puts off many, especially leisure travellers. The perception is that XC does not have connections, only timetable coincidences. What ought to be a smooth connection, made with confidence is always onto a train run by another TOC at a station not run by XC. XC in fact runs no stations even though it provides the only trains at some, like Water Orton, Coleshill Parkway and Wilnecote! A fine example is the last train of the day from Par to Newquay. It leaves just six minutes before the iconic 08.20 Aberdeen to Penzance gets to Par! The Newquay train is of course GWR and it connects out of the 16.03 from Paddington, also GWR - but no connection for XC.

Where changing between XC and other operators is challenging, we want XC Train Managers routinely to advise platform and departure times as their train approaches the interchange station. This should have real time validity, so if there is late running and a 'connection' is not being held, information about the next train should be given. On the platform XC should have clearly recognisable staff to help position passengers to be by the correct door for their seat reservations. That is a challenge too far for the current franchisee, as our experience is that the information on the platform screens about which

way round the set is running is too often wrong. Even when it is not, it's too difficult to see the display on the side of the Voyager and passengers for the low numbered seats in a coach get in at the high number end - and vice versa. As they try to pass each other in the middle of the coach, often with luggage, the train's departure can be delayed. The DfT has a good word for this: churn. Hopefully bimodes will take over from Voyagers and these problems will be addressed. Having through trains to more places should also reduce the churn. We accept that XC will not be able to reach Gatwick Airport for example, so Reading is a prime example of where XC platform staff would be a worthwhile investment.

The reletting of the franchise is the right time to rethink ticket pricing and availability. Arriva has brought in APOD, Advance Purchase On the Day, selling Advance tickets even after the train has started its journey. As Advance tickets always come with a reserved seat, this means passengers can be turfed out of the unreserved seats chosen when they joined the train. Why does Arriva like this public relations disaster? Because with an Advance ticket only valid on its train, it gets all the income. Any open ticket to the south west, for example, has some of the fare given to Great Western as the passenger may use one of its trains for part of the way. We have suggested APOD tickets are sold without seat reservations by the new franchisee.

One of the consequences of not having enough coaches has been very few spare seats to sell off more cheaply, so Arriva's Advance tickets are few and at very little discount over tickets without such restrictions. For example, Advance tickets from Birmingham to Penzance and back are £153.40 next week but an Off Peak Return is only £5.20 more. XC tickets are also more expensive per mile than other operators, so split ticketing saves money, sometimes a lot of money. This should not be. We want XC fares to be no more than the sum of the split ticketing parts.

When built, the Voyagers had a shop. Arriva removed this to increase seating slightly, promising a trolley service through the train. Now, the busier the service, the less likely passengers will ever see the trolley. People standing (for hours) and luggage blocking the aisles mean the trolley can't get through. Add to this, Arriva's policy of no catering after 20.00 and no catering at any time west of Plymouth nor beyond Edinburgh needs a fundamental rethink for the next franchise. In first class, tickets are priced to include complementary refreshments, but their provision is unpredictable. The First Class Host has been withdrawn from 'quieter services' and the standard class trolley may have to suffice, but only after selling to those who have to pay for their refreshments. Staff have told us this is a management instruction. We suggest catering should be a concession, to increase incentives.

It sums up a franchise run to maximise profit [more than £50 million last year] rather than putting passengers first. Read CfR's consultation response on our website and a major article we wrote for August's 'Railway Magazine'.