

Cross Country Direct Award Team
Department for Transport
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Dear Sirs,

Cross Country Direct Award Consultation

Thank you for your email of 6 October concerning the Department's intention to negotiate a new contract for at least 3 years for the Cross Country Franchise from October 2016.

The Peninsula Rail Task Force (PRTF) comprises Somerset County Council, Devon County Council, Torbay Council, Plymouth City Council, Cornwall Council, the Heart of the South West LEP and Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly LEP.

The key aims of the PRTF are:

- (i) Improved resilience, comparable to that enjoyed elsewhere on the national network.
- (ii) Improving strategic connectivity, with improved journey times and reliability to London and the South East as well as the Midlands and the North.
- (iii) Sufficient capacity and comfort to accommodate current and future passengers demands, given the high rate of patronage growth across the South West Peninsula.

In answer to your questions:

(a) what level of involvement do you have with the existing Cross Country franchise?

Officers have regular contact with the current train operator, Arriva Cross Country.

The current operator is a key stakeholder on the PRTF stakeholder Group, which meets regularly with a prime aim to ensure good two way dialogue between stakeholders and PRTF.

(b) what things would you like to see the current franchise continuing to do?

In terms of current service, we would wish to see no reduction in service, and see the train operator continuing to provide at least the current pattern of services.

PRTF recognises that many Cross Country (XC) services serve a range of different needs along the length of the route. In the SW Peninsula - in addition to inter-regional needs to Bristol, the Midlands/ the North/ Scotland - these services provide for significant needs within the SW Peninsula, meeting:

- (a) a wide range of local travel needs along the main lines, and
- (b) intra-regional travel needs along the spine of the Peninsula, given the long distances along the length of the peninsula.

(c) what would like to see change in the current franchise service provision?

1. Capacity and Trains

1.1. Given the growth in patronage experienced since the franchise was last let, and the level of regular overcrowding on current services now being experienced, there is a need for additional capacity to be an early requirement in any new franchise. There is significant over-crowding on some services, particularly between Bristol and Exeter, and during the franchise extension period additional long distance rolling stock will become available as IEP trains are introduced on other franchises.

1.2. In addition to seating constraints, current Voyager trains have insufficient capacity for luggage and cycles.

1.3. Above all there is no justification for the new franchise to provide a “stand still” rail service, compared to current service patterns and capacity, given the current problems and capacity constraints that exist within the current franchise.

1.4. There is a requirement for a location west of Bristol to be used as a centre to measure demand; in the Great Western Route/demand study Truro was used as a proxy for Cornwall. It would appear to be beneficial to adopt a similar approach for the Cross Country Franchise in planning for demand by e.g. adopting both Truro and Exeter as a proxy.

1.5. It is recognised that demand on Cross Country services in the South West Peninsula followed a different pattern to other franchises and this needs to be better reflected on Cross Country services.

1.6. In line with the key aims of the PRTF, resilience of services to the South West Peninsula is critical, therefore trains also need to be suitable for expected conditions along the line. The repeated failure of Voyager trains on the Dawlish/ Teignmouth

seawall section is unacceptable: to run trains that are known to break down under certain known (regular) conditions is inexcusable and should not be tolerated in the new franchise. The current arrangements of monitoring high tides and then not running voyager trains for an hour either side mean that in the worst case we could lose 8 services in a day to the South West Peninsula.

1.7 Given the current fleet changes being made across the country, and the continuing and apparently unresolved seawall problems with current rolling stock, we believe it is time to urgently consider different trains for XC services.

2. Timetables

2.1. There is a need for XC and GWR timetables to be co-ordinated where possible to provide the best frequencies, coverage and timetables for the resources being deployed.

2.2. A particular concern is evening services, which from Plymouth to Exeter, and Exeter to Bristol, in the evening are particularly poor on both FGW and Cross Country timetables in comparison with other similar city economies. E.g. it is not possible to travel by train from Plymouth to Bristol after 19:42 and this contrasts unfavourably with intra-regional rail connectivity elsewhere in the UK. The new Franchise provides an opportunity to address these connectivity deficits. The services to the South West Peninsula suffer from poor connectivity and frequency in the later evening. We would like to see the gap in services between Plymouth and Exeter, between 21:25 and 23:54, addressed to allow evenings out to be achievable, as well as e.g. a 2042 Plymouth to Bristol departure.

2.3. The Great Western Franchise Direct Award includes the Devon Metro service pattern of 2 trains per hour between Exmouth, Exeter St David's and Paignton from December 2018. We would seek a requirement in the franchise specification that the Cross Country franchise operator will co-operate with the introduction of these services.

2.4. The provision of an hourly stopping service on the main line between Bristol, Taunton and Exeter, in addition to the existing Cross Country services, has become an essential requirement. This might best be achieved by extending the current Cardiff to Taunton train to Exeter. We would seek a requirement in the franchise specification that the Cross Country franchise operator will co-operate with the introduction of these services.

3. Journey Times

3.1. To avoid undermining the economic competitiveness of the South West Peninsula, we would like to see improved journey times across Cross Country services to the SW Peninsula, in line with the PRTF 3 point plan.

4. Response to Network Disruption

4.1. During periods of disruption during bad weather or planned maintenance, Cross Country services have often been terminated at Bristol, leaving the South West peninsula without through services to Bristol, the North or Midlands. We would seek a commitment that the franchise operator will continue to operate an hourly service into the South West under such circumstances. How this will manifest itself may vary depending on the location of disruption, but the commitment to, in one way or another, maintain the advertised provision of the service through the South West Peninsula is important.

5. Smart Ticketing and Wi-fi

5.1. Further discussion on opportunities and benefits of smart ticketing within the new franchise are sought.

5.2 The growth of wi-fi enabled technology and access now means that the provision of reliable and sufficient wi-fi connectivity is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity for business and leisure travellers. The ability to use wi-fi in the South West Peninsula is at best patchy; we would like to see the operator lead a programme of improvements with third parties to provide a seamless and continuous wi-fi signal along the routes served in the South West Peninsula.

6. Fares

6.1. Inconsistencies in fares for long distance travel, and the large savings that can be achieved through “split ticketing”, provide a source of irritation for passengers and will undermine the credibility of any new franchise arrangement. There will be real benefits flowing from these inconsistencies being ironed out at the start of the new franchise.

7. Connectivity and Service Coverage

7.1. There is a concern about the potential “vulnerability” of existing XC service patterns in the peninsula if electrification between Birmingham and Bristol is completed. It would be totally unacceptable for existing services to terminate at Bristol and for passengers travelling across Bristol (on services that currently operate through) to change trains.

7.2. Cross Country services to and from Paignton are well used and must be retained, and where possible enhanced as part of any new franchise. Tourism from the Midlands is especially important to the area all year round, and current loadings on these services reflects this.

7.3. Connectivity to Birmingham, the Midlands, Manchester, Yorkshire, the North East and Scotland together form an essential element of the connectivity that the South West Peninsula needs for its economy to function effectively. These connections need to be enhanced early and late in the day to enable better opportunities for a day's business in both directions.

8. Performance

8.1. Given the low PPM performance of XC services, it would seem to be an essential requirement of the new franchise to have measures in place to rectify this.

8.2. We suggest there should be targeted better Right Time arrivals and performance targets.

9. Franchise Focus

9.1. It is hoped that the new franchise will focus effectively on the benefits that the railway can bring to an improved economy, visitor experience to the SW Peninsula, and GVA in the Peninsula.

9.2. A key focus needs to be on better business continuity and resilience, given how the South West Peninsula is vulnerable to loss of service through the wider network impact, with fewer alternative services available to fill the gaps of the CC services.

9.3. The plans should also be aligned with the key areas from the Passenger Focus passenger survey results of passenger priorities for improvement.

9.4. Franchise Boundaries: given government's intention to look at franchise boundaries in the SW Peninsula, we would seek clarity regarding how the XC franchise will relate to this process.

9.5. The South West Peninsula has a very high level of seasonal travel and we would like to see additional capacity available for the key travel periods during seasonal demand.

10. Competition

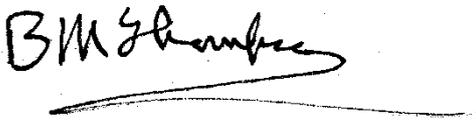
10.1. In negotiating a direct franchise there is a risk that the level of innovation and improvement is suppressed. This suppression reduces the opportunity to gain significant benefit for customers and stakeholders. We feel that there is a significant risk of this with the XC franchise as they do not operate stations or infrastructure. We would like to see the XC operator propose innovative and real solutions to the problems that affect the services in the South West Peninsula.

Summary

PRTF would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Direct Award project team to explore further how the franchise can ensure that it meets essential demands effectively and in a timely manner, both current demands that are far in excess of those that prevailed when the current franchise was let, and future demands given the consistent and high rate of patronage increase since 2001.

An ongoing, transparent and effective engagement process between PRTF officers (in the Peninsula Rail Officer Group – PROG) and DfT - on the franchise process, aspirations and identification of service enhancement requirements – will help ensure the best outcome for all concerned.

Yours sincerely,



Bruce Thompson
Chair, Peninsula Rail Officer Group,
On behalf of Peninsula Rail Task Force

20/10/15