

New Cross Country Franchise Procurement Consultation Manager
DfT Rail Group
Great Minster House
76 Marsham St
London SW1P 4DR

24 August 2006

Dear Sir/Madam

NEW CROSS COUNTRY FRANCHISE

The South East England Regional Transport Board is a partnership board chaired by the South East England Regional Assembly. Its membership comprises six Regional Assembly members, a Board member from the SEEDA (the Regional Development Agency), together with representatives from the Government Office, the Highways Agency, Network Rail, Confederation of Passenger Transport and the environmental sector.

The Board met on the 21 July to discuss the Cross Country Franchise Consultation Document, please find below the response to the consultation.

Retaining Capacity

The Board is very concerned about the intended transfer of rolling stock away from Cross Country services within the South East. For example the proposed reduction from five to four car units serving Southampton amounts to a reduction of 20% in capacity on a route, that continues to see significant growth in market share, especially in the off peak leisure market. The Board strongly urges that the franchise specification to be amended to require the franchise to retain, if not improve, the capacity of services.

Network Choice

The proposed re-structuring of the Cross Country network with the creation of six service groups causes the Board concern, as it fundamentally reduces destination choice from the region. The proposed structure will require more passengers to interchange

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to complete journeys to their final destinations further north, with only direct services being retained to Manchester.

These concerns are compounded by the already difficult interchange at Birmingham New Street. Whilst it is acknowledged that there are proposals to improve the situation at Birmingham New Street in the future, the Board consider it inappropriate to increase the need for passengers to interchange at a known pressure point on the network. The Board therefore urges that the existing range of destinations served by direct services.

Reading Station

The removal of the capacity bottleneck at Reading Station is mentioned within the consultation as a third party scheme, and is highlighted as a key regional priority for investment. The reference to Reading Station is welcomed, however the Board considers that the implications of the restrictions at Reading Station for the Cross Country network are underplayed. Due to platforming restrictions at Reading, some of the Cross Country services serving Reading are restricted to a maximum five car operation. Operational experience shows that inter regional services operated by Cross Country have experienced considerable growth. The new franchise should be able to respond to this growth in a positive way. The importance of removing existing capacity constraints at Reading Station should therefore be identified in the franchise specification as a key objective for the Government.

Reading – Brighton Services

The Board is disappointed at the suggestion that services between Reading and Brighton, via Guildford or via Kensington Olympia, are to be removed. At present three trains per day perform this journey which provides a practical alternative to the need to travel via a central London terminus. The provision of direct services that enhance orbital rail movements is a priority for the Regional Transport Strategy, part of the statutory planning framework.

The current level of three through services per day on this corridor fails to provide a realistic alternative that would enable the potential to achieve a modal shift to be realised. Further consideration should be given as part of this franchise to the opportunity to increase service levels, possibly in association with capacity enhancements along the North Downs Line. The latter would be consistent with the requirements of the Regional Transport Strategy.

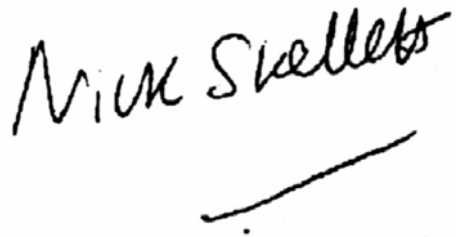
It appears that the proposal to remove Cross Country Services south of Reading is justified on the basis of the increased services contained in the recently awarded Great Western Franchise. However, publication of the timetables for December 2006 clearly show that without the delivery of the Brighton Main Line RUS, those additional services

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south of Redhill are not possible. The franchise therefore proposes a reduction in services associated with cross country franchise without some of the supposed benefits being delivered. This is despite the benefits supposedly being scored through a recently let franchise.

If the proposal to remove the three through services is confirmed, it is essential that the Department delivers, as a priority, the benefits of the Brighton Main Line RUS. The issue also serves to emphasise the importance of improving interchange facilities at key stations, in particular Reading, Redhill and Gatwick which should be made a requirement of the base case in the franchise specification.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nick Skellett". Below the signature is a single horizontal line.

Nick Skellett
Chairman Regional Transport Board

CC David Cooper, GOSE
Stephen Clarke, Dft Rail