

Direct Line: 0113 348 1731
Your Ref: VTEC Consultation (2016, 2019, 2020)
Our Ref: T4311

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and

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7 April 2015

Dear Phil and Mark,

**SECTION 17 PROPOSED TRACK ACCESS CONTRACT:
East Coast Main Line Company Limited t/a Virgin Trains East Coast (VTEC)**

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

In principle, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) is supportive of the application, on the basis that it seeks to put into practice a number of service enhancements that VTEC are committed to delivering under their franchise agreement, enhancements which WYCA considers to have real benefits for the economy and communities of the Leeds City Region.

There are some specific matters, however, that we would be keen to raise in the context of the application.

(i) Service enhancements at weekends

The proposed changes imply a significant and valuable expansion of the Intercity East Coast network on weekdays from May 2019, including seven daily trains

serving Bradford Forster Square and six for Harrogate, plus a service (one per day down, two up) for Huddersfield. WYCA warmly welcomes this.

However, with the exception of the Harrogate services, our understanding is that these enhancements do not appear to apply on either Saturdays or Sundays. If this is correct, then this is disappointing, particularly in the case of Bradford, which appears to have a single train-pair on Saturdays and none on Sundays. We would therefore like to take this opportunity to express our strong hope that VTEC will feel able to supplement the offer currently proposed by additional Saturday and Sunday trains to and from Bradford, to exploit what we believe to be a significant and growing leisure market in both directions between Britain's tenth largest city and London.

We are less clear as to the situation on the core Leeds – London service on Saturdays and Sundays. At present, the basic half-hourly frequency does not apply for much of Saturday and Sunday. WYCA's strong view is that it should. The draft track access contract appears to suggest a higher quantum of trains than at present on Saturdays and Sundays, but it is not clear precisely what is proposed. We would appreciate it if clarification could be offered on this important point. For the avoidance of doubt, WYCA would strongly support weekend frequencies being brought to the same level as the standard weekday service.

(ii) Network capacity and interaction with other services

As stated above, WYCA is supportive of the provision of additional services between Leeds and London King's Cross and the general expansion of services, to the extent that it brings benefits to the Leeds City Region.

There is, however, a potential issue in terms of how VTEC's services interact with other train services, which is not limited to those which are currently in operation. WYCA is committed to a range of service expansions encompassing interurban and regional passenger services, as set out in Rail Plan 7, and, with a view to the longer term, the Yorkshire Rail Network Study. This commitment has a strong evidence base. In some cases, additional services implied by Rail Plan 7 and/or the YRNS Conditional Outputs will interact with VTEC services, meaning that there is possible scope for conflicts which could impair the deliverability (and/or affordability) of these enhancements.

Similar considerations would apply to any impacts of the proposed new VTEC services on the ability to deliver the indicative train service specifications agreed as outputs for Network Rail's CP5 investment programmes (in particular Northern Hub and the trans-Pennine electrification/upgrade) by the North of England Programmes Board and the Industry Planning Group. We have particular regard in this connection to the ITSSs for Configuration States 5 and 7 – to the extent that VTEC's proposed services are not already accounted for in those ITSSs.

In the event of any such conflicts, a clear mechanism would be required to reach the best decision as to how finite capacity should be allocated between operators and service groups.

This question is particularly pertinent to the West Riding line, i.e. the Leeds – Wakefield – Doncaster section, and by extension the route to the east of Leeds towards York and Selby. WYCA is committed to seeking an improvement in the Leeds – Wakefield – Doncaster stopping service operated by Northern to a basic 2tph pattern. This has not been specified in the Northern Invitation To Tender, for reasons that we believe may be connected with uncertainty over future track capacity on the West Riding and East Leeds routes; nonetheless, we are making clear to bidders for the Northern franchises that we wish to see this happen.

VTEC's proposed standard-hour stopping pattern reinforces the case for this additional stopping service: in a post-2020 'base-case' scenario retaining only the current Northern service, connectivity between Leeds and Doncaster would drop from the current 3tph (2 fast plus 1 stopping) to only 2.5tph (1 fast plus 1 stopping hourly, plus 1 fast every other hour) – and that between Wakefield and Doncaster from the current 3tph (2 fast plus 1 stopping) to only 2tph (1 fast plus 1 stopping).

If the additional 2-hourly VTEC service between Harrogate and London operates via East Leeds as envisaged, we would expect that this would allow the Leeds – Wakefield – Doncaster stopping service to increase to hourly in line with our and SYPTC's policies. Under those circumstances, i.e. if the Northern service is increased to 2tph, we would be content for the quantum of VTEC services between Wakefield Westgate and Doncaster (stopping at both) to drop to 1tph as proposed in the schematics in Appendices 2B and Appendix 2C – in other words, for 1tph (shown as "Train G") from Leeds and Wakefield not to stop at Doncaster.

We understand, however, that it is not certain that the new Harrogate – London service will be able to operate via East Leeds. If this train is in fact required to operate via Wakefield, then it may be that this may render the additional hourly Leeds – Doncaster stopping service difficult or unfeasible to deliver. If this improvement in the stopping service cannot be delivered, then all other things being equal the loss of connectivity set out above will equally apply – a drop to 2.5tph between Leeds and Doncaster, and 2tph between Wakefield and Doncaster (or 2.5tph if the Harrogate train also stopped in Wakefield).

Under this scenario, i.e. with no additional local service between Leeds and Doncaster, we consider it important that stops at both Wakefield and Doncaster should be retained such that the total service offer between these points is overall no worse than now. This means that we would wish to see two VTEC trains per hour making stops at both stations (in addition, of course, to Leeds). This would imply an adjustment to the stopping patterns shown in the schematics in Appendices 2B and 2C to the application form – probably in the form of an additional Doncaster stop for

“train G”¹. It is appreciated that there would be a small journey-time penalty from the additional hourly stop, but the alternative is a significant decrement to the Leeds – Wakefield – Doncaster service.

In summary, therefore, in principle WYCA is strongly supportive of VTEC’s application, but we consider that the issue of the stopping patterns on the Leeds – Wakefield – Doncaster section needs further consideration, with this consideration to take into account what services the new Northern operator will provide on this route, and to ensure that there is no detriment to connectivity on a corridor which is important for the Leeds and Sheffield city regions. In addition, we would ask for clarification of the proposed level of services on Saturdays and Sundays on all relevant routes, and emphasise our hope that Bradford in particular will receive regular direct London services on a daily basis.

I would be more than happy to discuss any of these points further.

I hope that you find these comments useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Sasse', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael Sasse

Rail Technical Advisor

cc. David Reed, ORR ()

¹ An alternative option would be for the 0.5tph Harrogate – London train also to stop at Wakefield Westgate, supplemented by another train such as a Leeds – Doncaster shuttle also operating 0.5tph in the ‘other’ hour; this would be likely to require cooperation with another operator, most likely the new Northern franchisee.