

On rail competition

Comments from Jim Middleton

1. Given the Government fixing rail price increases for at least the next three years at RPI plus 3% it seems to be rubbing it in to try and make out there is significant competition for passengers that will reduce fares. Competition is minimal and we are largely stuck with one operator and ever increasing fares.
2. The DfT seems determined to eliminate competition where it can by reducing the number of intermediate stops for trains on main lines. For example on the WCML the new timetable makes services much worse for places such as Milton Keynes, Rugby and Nuneaton with new platforms built largely for us to stand on and watch trains pass straight through. Currently it is more important for a few seconds to be saved than to have a proper integrated set of services on a route that suits all passengers and not just end to end. It seems that Peterborough is being treated in the same way and no doubt Reading will end up with more platforms and fewer trains. DfT dictate the timetable and are only interested in fast end to end journeys.
3. It seems to me that services like Hull trains are plugging gaps that should be included by the main operator. I am not sure of the rules but I see no reason why the main operator should not bid for open access on the same lines that he operates. He could do this and there would be no abstraction problems as he would still get all the income and those in the franchise area would benefit from a more comprehensive integrated service.
4. Looking at the bids for open access on WCML they were trying to fill gaps left by DfT and Virgin. They were rejected for whatever reason. If Virgin had bid for these services they could have been plugged into their timetable, with free interchange, and created a better service. This seems to me more important than extra trains with strange stopping patterns.
5. Where there is competition – eg between Birmingham and London with the two different routes no doubt those who are not travelling from end to end loose out having to pay more for their fares to maintain the income of the franchisee who loses out to competition. There are bound to be these cross payments to make up for any losses. No doubt there will be a lot of fun if HS2 is ever built where there may be some proper choice – but it seems that DfT are very unwilling to commit themselves to a proper set of services on the “old lines” that could compete with HS2.
6. I am convinced that the main focus should be a creating a comprehensive, integrated pattern of services, with convenient interchange, suitable for a small, densely developed country. As the Minister for Transport says rail travel is largely for rich people now and the sort of minimal competition likely in the future seems unlikely to change this.
7. I understand from your paper that DfT are looking at improving franchise bids. It seems to me that operators just run what services that DfT tell them and invest next to nothing to improve the situation. I think they should be encouraged to submit open access bids along with their franchise bids to show how they would create more comprehensive, integrated services, for the benefit of all passengers on the route or area. This would enable them to show that they can do something over and above the basics dictated by DfT.

Jim Middleton