

Ref : ORR Consultation “The potential for increased on-rail competition”

- 1) I am providing this feedback as a rail customer who has experienced a significant service degradation as a result of the current “Moderation of Competition” policy.
- 2) I live in Warrington and make extensive use of the railway for business travel – mainly on the Warrington-Birmingham-Oxford axis but also, on occasion, to London and Edinburgh. I also travel widely on the railways for leisure purposes
- 3) Services on the WCML from Bank Quay station are solely in the hands of Virgin
- 4) The decision to split the XC franchise was the first service decline as “connections” in the northbound direction at Birmingham were non-existent and direct trains between WBQ and OXF ceased. While southbound connections are better, Cross Country trains have no incentive to maintain these for a late-running Virgin train.
- 5) Additionally, since the “enhanced” service was introduced, my travel choices have been severely curtailed. This is because of Virgin’s decision to make the majority of WBQ-EUS trains non-stop. This means that any southbound travel options that are not London-based have been reduced from 2 trains an hour to one – and when there’s disruption (which isn’t infrequent) travel plans can be seriously impacted.
- 6) In fact it is made worse by a 2-hour gap in the BHM-WBQ service at a critical time in the evening when a train is terminated at Crewe (for operational reasons) instead of going further north.
- 7) These changes have reduced the convenience of rail travel on this axis significantly and shows how a monopoly provider can work against the customer. This should be compared to the service from Runcorn where London Midland provide an effective alternative to Virgin. At one point, it was proposed that LM provide a BHM-Preston service and this would have certainly provided Virgin with competition and improved the travel and fares opportunities ... I don’t know why this hasn’t happened but suspect MoC had something to do with it.
- 8) The other impact of the Virgin monopoly is on fares.
- 9) While it is possible to get good fare deals by travelling from Crewe using LM, Virgin have no interest in providing cheap fares to Crewe and the additional cost this can incur often makes access to LM fares not worthwhile.
- 10) Over the years, I have also noticed a severe reduction in the availability of cheap advance fares offered by Virgin – particularly to London and Birmingham – and I have certainly reduced my leisure travel because of this.
- 11) In conclusion, I believe that the biggest benefit to rail customers would be to remove the MoC policy which has a demonstrably bad impact by preventing existing franchises competing with each other. While allowing genuine “Open Access” may help, my feeling is that we would just see limited competition on core routes (e.g. to London) and not necessarily an overall improvement in journey opportunities.

Dr Mark Enderby

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