

Shake up in service for East Coast rail passengers

by Adrian Pearson, The Journal | Aug 6, 2012



A train goes through Morpeth Station

EAST Coast rail passengers face yet another rail shake up as the Government prepares to off-load the franchise.

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Ministers have raised the possibility of services on the East Coast Main Line – linking London with the North East and Scotland – being cut on some weekdays as long as the Monday to Friday total is “broadly” consistent with the current level of service. The East Coast trains franchise is due to be let from December 2013 and could run for up to 12 years, with a successful bidder expected to commit to specific savings to cut operating costs.

Last night Gateshead MP Ian Mearns called for guarantees that Intercity services from the North would not suffer if such a plan is implemented.

But the Department for Transport has raised the possibility of more services following the introduction of new Intercity trains – being assembled in County Durham – on the route from 2018 and completed in mid-2019.

It also wants franchise bidders to consider running to locations that currently have limited or no direct services to London.

A number of train routes not part of the current East Coast franchise could also be included in the next contract, with the operator able to better co-ordinate long-distance and connecting local services, and provide improvements as it saw fit. The DfT is currently asking for views on the ideas as part of its public consultation on the next East Coast franchise, which is ending next month.

Ian Mearns, Labour MP for Gateshead, said: “I would like to see guarantees from the Government that they have ambition for Intercity rail on the East Coast Main Line from Scotland, the North East and Yorkshire to London rather than free-up time and space on the heavily congested southern part of the network in order to free-up time for South East commuting journeys.”

In its consultation document, the DfT sets out its plans to give rail operators as much commercial freedom as possible while protecting key outcomes for passengers, the economy and the taxpayer.

As part of that, ministers intend to give companies greater flexibility to respond to demographics, market changes and commercial opportunities than is currently the case. In the document, the DfT added: “We recognise that passenger demand is not constant through the week.

“It might therefore be appropriate to give the franchisee further flexibility by specifying the weekly (Monday-Friday) number of through journeys for each key flow so that there is scope to reduce the number of journey opportunities on any individual weekday provided that the Monday to Friday total is broadly consistent with the current level of service.”

The document highlights a number of services associated with the East Coast Main Line in a section discussing the potential for other routes to be brought into the new franchise.

They include trains operated by Northern Rail running between Sunderland-Newcastle-Hexham-Carlisle, along with Newcastle-Morpeth-Chathill, Nunthorpe-Middlesbrough-Newcastle, Middlesbrough-Whitby and Bishop-Auckland-Darlington-Saltburn.

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