

Cross Country, the heart of the nation



Source: Greengauge 21 adaptation of Arriva Cross Country website

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Today's Cross Country service (at present run by Arriva Trains) comprises a network of north-south inter-regional routes, operating at up to 125 mile/h (along with two 'medium speed' east-west routes added in 2007: Cardiff–Nottingham and Birmingham–Stansted).

This article is about the (up to) 125 mile/h part of the business, which since 2001 has provided a combination of North East–South West, Manchester–Bournemouth and other services through a hub interchange at Birmingham New Street, as illustrated above.

In May 2001, passengers were allowed in a leading vehicle while travelling at 125 mile/h for the first time (on a Cross Country Voyager).



Photo: Jim Steer

Cross Country is a poor country cousin of the London-centric set of long distance services, yet it serves seven of the top nine British cities outside London and could play an important role in the levelling-up agenda with appropriate investment. But it is notable there is no All Party Parliamentary Group supporting its cause as there are for the East Coast and West Coast. Perhaps no surprise given MPs don't use Cross Country on their regular journeys between their constituencies and Westminster, but equally well there is no active stakeholder-led interest group focussed on improving Cross-Country services.

Demand and service recovery

The timetable for May–December 2022 reveals a service part-way back to its pre-Covid level. There is still an hourly Edinburgh–Plymouth and an hourly Manchester–Bournemouth although not all trains manage the full trip. But the second of the hourly paths on the four limbs of this cross-shaped set of routes have been thinned out: the faster route southwards from York via Doncaster manages just 4 trains/day, Manchester–Reading is reduced to 2 hourly. Paignton and Penzance are each down to a single train/day: so much for supporting the revival of the leisure market!

You won't find improving Cross Country in the Integrated Rail Plan either, where it should have been a central feature. From the perspective of the regions and 'sub-national bodies', what is essentially an inter-regional service is easily overlooked, and it seems that the Department for Transport and Network Rail don't regard Cross Country as a priority either. Operational convenience has trumped commercial perspectives.

Network Rail/DfT seem tacitly to have decided on a plan to reduce parallel running between TOCs, hence making GWR the core player South West of Bristol, SWR South of Reading and LNER North of York. Privately they must have asked themselves this question: can't people just interchange, do we need to give them through services? Already GWR trains to Brighton have been axed, as have SWR services to Bristol. Well in some cases passenger numbers involved may have been modest, but Cross Country is too important to be treated like this.

Can we presume that a full Cross Country timetable will be restored? That will obviously depend on demand recovery and the view taken on Cross Country's role. It will also depend on finding the courage to get more of the fleet in daily service. If PPM is the sole priority, it seems you make the timetable as limited as you can.

In the last full year pre-pandemic (FY 2018/19), Cross Country carried 40.6m trips (2.3% of all rail travel nationally) but this had fallen to 20.6m (2.1%) in FY 2021/22¹: demand has recovered more slowly here than for rail as a whole.

The significance of Cross Country is best measured in terms of passenger-km travelled. On this score, the equivalent 2018/19 (pre-pandemic) Cross Country figures are 3.7 billion (which is 5.5% of the national rail total).² Ten years ago, Cross Country passenger mileage was around 2/3rds of each of the East Coast franchise and just over half the size of West Coast. But by 2021/2, Cross Country passenger mileage as a proportion of the combined total of East and West Coast intercity franchises had fallen from 31% in 2011/12 to just 21%. It is a business in relative retreat.

1. Table 1223 – Passenger journeys by operator | ORR Data Portal

2. Table 1230 – Passenger kilometres | ORR Data Portal

This is doubly unfortunate, because Cross Country, as well as providing for many shorter station-station trips, accommodates the longest of our passenger rail journeys. And why does this matter in broad policy terms? Because while longer distance trips of over 50 miles by all travel modes may account for **under 2% of the journeys** people make each year, these less commonly made trips account for **nearly 30% of annual travel mileage**. These longer journeys (by car, coach or air) are hard to decarbonise except by encouraging as many of them as possible to switch to rail.³

Rail sector indifference

Over much of its route mileage, Cross Country has to fight for spare paths. It has never proven possible, for example, to achieve the ambition of two trains/hour via Leeds: as a result part of the core network, Leeds–Birmingham, remains hourly. And as Phil Haigh pointed out in RAIL 959, on a route such as Birmingham–Plymouth, there are plenty of local authority ambitions for extra local stations, rather than enhancing the route's long-distance intercity status, or advocating its candidature for electrification. Further, Ministers and constituency MPs might prefer the local gains from "Beeching reversal" rather than strengthening long distance connections. This is where the importance of clear guidance on priorities from the upcoming 'Whole Industry Strategic Plan' could be so important:

There are real risks that Cross Country might shrink further because:

- » Its services have not been prioritised by the various regional transport bodies

3. <http://www.greengauge21.net/modal-shift-matters-and-hs2-delivers-it/> January 2022

- » Operating across Network Regional boundaries imports delays from one part of the network to another: so why not invite passengers to interchange at hubs instead, and make it easier to keep trains on schedule? This seems to be the view of Network Rail/DfT, but what do passengers think of this approach: well, surely inconvenient at least and ultimately a deterrent to choosing the train option over car. Already too many have had arguments about ticket validities arising from late connections
- » Local authorities are understandably keen to open new stations on existing main lines making the task of finding ‘clean’ paths for inter-regional services and high standards of operational performance impossible.

And then there are risks to Cross Country services arising in the longer term once HS2 is in place:

- » The value of the hub station at Birmingham New Street will be diminished (for example, no direct connection from South West England into Birmingham-Preston-Carlisle-Glasgow trains which will have been transferred from New Street to HS2 from Curzon Street)
- » On current plans, ‘Midland Rail Hub’—the conjunction of Moor Street and Curzon Street—will have only a potential connection for Cross Country from the south, so the existing Cross Country service pattern could only survive if dismembered or if left serving New Street. The full Midland Rail Hub scheme would allow NE-SW/Solent trains, at least, to call at Moor Street (with a reversal)

- » The idea has been floated that Old Oak Common should be used as an interchange for travel between places currently served much more directly but at lower line speeds, such as Bristol and Manchester (see Chris Howe, RAIL 959). Maybe for large places with fast connections to London Paddington (and so, in future, Old Oak). But not much use at all for other intermediate cross country locations, and a loss of Cross Country revenues.

In the meantime, the case for replacing the current Voyager units with 125 mile/h trains better suited to long distance travel, and a reduction in diesel dependency through electrification schemes such as Bromsgrove-Bristol Parkway (which, along with Midland Main Line, could create an electrified railway from Edinburgh to Bristol) is being overlooked.

Why Cross Country matters in national policy terms

The rail sector as a whole will have to fight hard for its continuing share of scarce public sector funding. With commuter markets diminished, and some people finding it possible to work more remotely, longer distance services can have an important role to play in sustainable travel. But the prime reason why Cross Country is worthy of tax-payer investment comes down to an inescapable part of the Government’s—and any likely successor Government’s—policy priorities. The levelling up agenda is important not just for reasons of making a difference in parliamentary marginal seats: it is also essential to find ways to strengthen the performance of economic sectors outside the South East.

The UK’s economic performance is regionally imbalanced, severely so. London dominates with 38% of national GDP generated in London & the South East region (with the other seven English regions and the three devolved nations accounting for the balance).⁴

Part of the London /South East advantage is that it is uniquely well connected with the rest of the country through:

- » A radiating national motorway network (M1,M11, M2, M20, M23, M3, M4, M40-M6)
- » The intercity rail network, also radiating from the capital
- » A set of domestic airline services, mainly serving Scotland and Northern Ireland.

And London has other connectivity advantages over the rest of the country:

- » An integrated public transport system
- » As of 2022, a regional express rail (RER) service with Crossrail and Thameslink cross-linking major centres across the South East
- » It has six international airports and is the only British city with direct high-speed rail services to the near continent (France, Belgium, Netherlands, with Germany likely to follow soon).

Together these features provide London with employment, business and customer markets of incomparable scale (in European, leave alone national terms).

This makes it hard for the private sector, given a choice, to justify locating business, new attractions or services in places other than London/South East except on cost grounds. At a time when it is being recognised that the nation suffers from low productivity levels and (by international G7 standards) low economic growth, any reluctance to invest outside the over-priced south eastern corner of the country needs to be overcome. So what can the rail sector do to help?

In short: improve connectivity between non-London locations so that major regional centres can offer access to wider employment, business and customer catchments. Some of this comes down to local or metropolitan rail services on the one hand and to international connections on the other. But good connectivity to the rest of the nation is also a key factor: London has this in spades already, what can the rest of the country achieve? This is where Cross Country can be asked to do more.

This is rail service development playing a role in large-scale strategic economic planning. At a time when people and businesses are making location decisions based on travelling less frequently for work/business, contemplating longer journeys on a less than on a 5 day/week basis becomes viable. The prospects for Cross Country growth are good, provided the Covid-era service cut-backs are not allowed to perpetuate.

4. Source ONS latest data (2020) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/regionaleconomicactivitybygrossdomesticproductuk/1998to2020#gross-domestic-product-by-uk-country-and-region>

Unique focus on regional re-balancing

If we start by looking at our largest cities, we come across definitional problems, but here is a ‘top nine’ lists in terms of scale as measured by population (London in top place being omitted) from Centre for Cities:

Britain’s biggest regional cities

1. Birmingham	2,560,500
2. Manchester	2,517,500
3. Glasgow	1,019,900
4. Newcastle	868,800
5. Sheffield	854,200
6. Leeds	798,800
7. Bristol	753,700
8. Nottingham	685,200
9. Liverpool	653,000

Source: Centre for Cities 2021 data based on Primary Urban Area definitions

The 125 mile/h Cross Country network serves directly the seven largest regional cities (but not the 8th and 9th (Nottingham and Liverpool). No other rail service group comes anywhere close to this level of coverage.

Improve the Cross Country network and these cities and the wider regions in which they are located will experience an economic stimulus without, as an unintended by-product, also handing further connectivity gains to London/South East. Once this logic is better understood, there will no doubt be pressure to add Liverpool and Nottingham to a future Cross Country service specification.

Meanwhile, the existing service connects the seven largest regional cities with each other and with many other key centres: Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Durham, Darlington, Doncaster, Wakefield, Stockport, Stoke-on-Trent, Stafford, Wolverhampton, Derby, Coventry, Cheltenham, Oxford, Reading, Basingstoke, Southampton, Bournemouth, Taunton, Exeter and Plymouth....

The seven top cities served by Cross Country have GDP/capita levels in a range of £22–37k/head; by comparison Greater London scores £56k/head. Part of this imbalance is due to a preponderance of corporate HQs in London. But that’s one of the things that levelling up should help change.⁵ Part of this imbalance is due to a preponderance of corporate HQs in London. But that’s one of the things that levelling up should help change.

5. ONS 2020 data, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/datasets/regionalgrossdomesticproductcityregions>

Inter-regional connectivity gaps

Greengauge 21 examined the pattern of major city to city rail connectivity in 2018⁶, and this highlighted where direct city to city connectivity was most lacking. Cardiff and Liverpool were found to be cities particularly poorly connected to other regional centres.

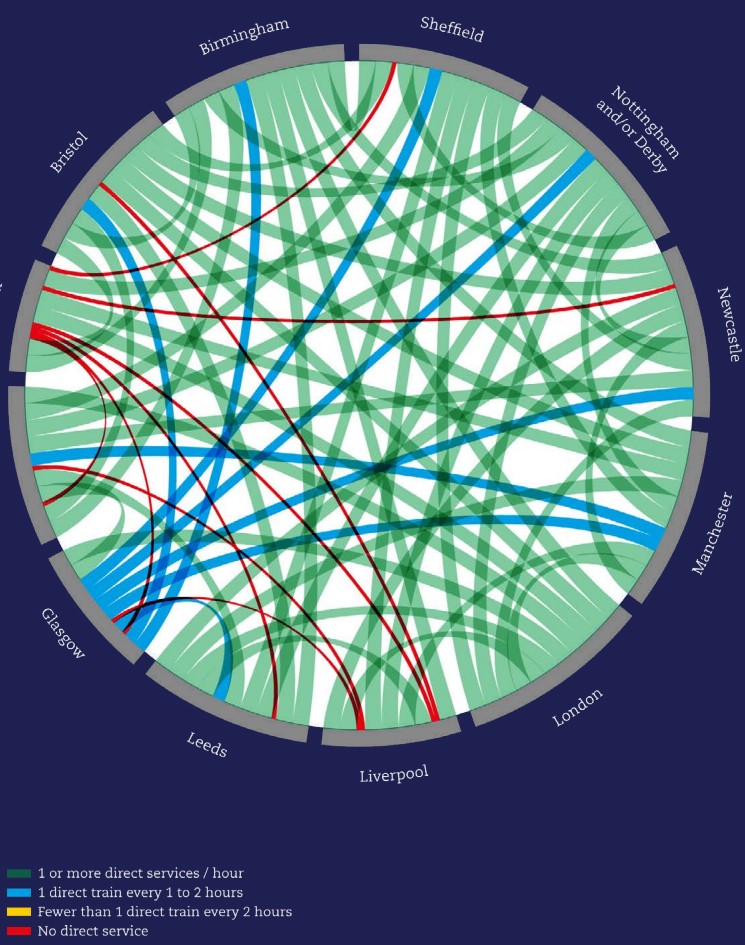
Leaving aside the South East, the 125 mile/h Cross Country network has three notable gaps in its regional coverage:

- » **Liverpool** – where there are good east-west cross country connections to Nottingham/Peterborough and Norwich (although the threat of splitting this service with an enforced interchange at Nottingham has arisen) and across the Pennines to Yorkshire and North East England; but poor north–south connections (London and Birmingham aside)
- » **Cardiff** – which has a direct hourly connection with Manchester, regular but slow connections to Birmingham/ Nottingham and to Bristol, the South West and Southampton, but no direct connections with Yorkshire, the North East, Liverpool or Scotland
- » **Nottingham**, which lacks connections with the east coast main line corridor (Doncaster–York–Newcastle–Edinburgh–Glasgow) and has a very slow connection with Birmingham

6. Beyond HS2, Greengauge 21, May 2018 see http://www.greengauge21.net/wp-content/uploads/Beyond_HS2WEB.pdf

- » Across **Eastern England/East Anglia**. Here, interestingly, Network Rail identified in March this year the case for an East West Main Line vision for the EWR scheme broadening its inter-regional benefits through services extensions to places such as Norwich, Ipswich, Swindon and Cardiff.

Major city to major city direct rail connectivity



Source: Beyond HS2, Greengauge 21, May 2018

To some extent, services provided by other operators already fill some of the Cross Country gaps. Over the West Coast north of Crewe, since Virgin Trains days, there has been a direct hourly Birmingham New Street-Glasgow service. This connection was annexed to West Coast, having been part of a SW-NW Cross Country route. Better trains (Pendolinos) true, but this re-allocation meant that there are no through services from South West/Southern England or South Wales to Warrington/Preston/Lancaster/Carlisle/Glasgow; instead through passengers need to change at Birmingham New Street (or travel via London).

For this SW-NW connection, one option would be to restore the through service via New Street, but several other long distance connections will not be available here once HS2 starts from Curzon Street, a brisk 10 minute walk away—more with luggage. Nobody likes a station-station walk mid-journey. A better option that could allow hub transfer at Moor Street/Curzon Street requires the completion of the Midlands Rail Hub and provision of connections to Wolverhampton from the Moor Street-Snow Hill line.

But if this is too much to ask, then a good approach would be to create (well, re-create) a service bundle that would include say Bristol-Chester-Liverpool and Cardiff-Crewe-Edinburgh operating with limited stops over the more direct 'North and West' line via Hereford and Shrewsbury, a useful addition to the north-south 125 mile/h Cross Country service network.

Moving on from gaps to opportunities, the idea of an 'X' rather than a 'Y'-shaped HS2 network, incorporating high-speed cross country trains as well as HS2 services to/from London and Birmingham should be examined seriously. It was first mentioned to Greengauge 21 by Chris Green as the right approach for HS2, back in 2010. It signals now the need to think first in terms of service opportunities, rather than diving head first into engineering options when considering HS2 options for the eastern side of the country.

Amongst other virtues, the 'X' would bring added use to the planned Birmingham-Trent section of the HS2 Eastern arm, enhancing its business case significantly. It would also allow rail to compete with the most substantial non-London domestic air services. This could take Cross Country to another level in terms of national policy significance—no longer a country cousin but viewed on a par with other long distance services. We explore this opportunity in the third and final article in this RAIL mini-series, when we turn to the question of HS2's Eastern Arm.