

THREE HORSE RACE FOR GREATER WESTERN FRANCHISE

The Strategic Rail Authority announced the shortlist of bidders for the Greater Western Franchise during April. Only three companies will be invited to tender:

Stagecoach—currently run the Paignton/Plymouth/Exeter to Waterloo South West Trains service plus bus services in Exeter, East Devon Teignbridge and Torbay;

First Group—currently run First Great Western services from Cornwall and Devon to Paddington, plus bus networks in North Devon, South Hams, Plymouth and Cornwall.

National Express Group—currently run Wessex Trains services plus most of the express coach service network in the region. Interestingly National Express Coaches sub-contract many of their Cornish and Devon services to First Group and Stagecoach.

The SRA also confirmed that none of the bidders will be expected to offer options to replace the HSTs, an 'industry-wide' approach will be taken instead.

As all three already have substantial bus or express coach operations in the region, it may be that any one of the companies winning the franchise could find competition issues are considered by the Office of Fair Trading.

This is the second stage of the franchise process, the first having been request of 'expressions of interest'. It is not known how many companies had expressed interest. However Railfuture was aware that Go-Ahead and the GNER/Chiltern Trains consortium London and Western Railways had done so as well as the three shortlisted. Surprisingly both these long established and experienced operators were not allowed to bid alongside the three chosen. Both GNER and Chiltern Trains are highly regarded train operators



Forest Gone. A view not seen since the 1960s has been opened up following the clearance of vegetation above the entrance of Highertown Tunnel Truro. A couple of months ago all that could be seen here was an apparent forest — many walking past may not have realised there was a railway there at all. Although some view this policy as controversial as it can involve the felling of long established trees, Network Rail's policy of clearing vegetation at leaf fall black spots should result in less delays to passengers and reduced rail maintenance costs..

with successful franchises elsewhere in the Country. Commentators in the railway press have suggested that London and Western's exclusion is because their bid involved service expansion. However commercial confidentiality prevents the SRA from giving the reasons why companies have been included or excluded from the shortlist. This is also likely to prevent any Freedom of Information Act request..

Similar restrictions now prevent the three shortlisted companies from giving details of their plans at this stage. However both First Group and National Express Group have widely publicised their intention to bid and together with unsuccessful bidders London and Western and Go Ahead,

have had discussions with Railfuture Devon and Cornwall on our aspirations.

Until now, Stagecoach has kept a rather low profile and we were not aware they had expressed an interest until they were shortlisted. Stagecoach told us they were waiting clearance from the SRA to start consultations. Once they have the clearance they will discuss their plans with Railfuture.

The formal invitation to tender is to be issued in June, with shortlisted bidders expected to respond during August. Evaluation of the responses takes place during Autumn and selection of the Preferred bidder is expected to be announced in the winter of this year. .

ELECTION SPECIAL

The General and local elections are now well under way and transport generally let alone railways has been ignored by the media in their election reports. This is surprising given that everyone needs transport to access those more essential services of health and education. Railfuture knows only of BBC Radio Cornwall asking election candidates about transport—and then only whether they would save Newquay Airport from closure. In an attempt to get candidates thinking about rail, Railfuture Devon and Cornwall asked known political parties for a short statement on what they would do for our local train service. Those that replied are shown below. We also asked the Liberal Democrats and the UK Independence Party for a statement but they had failed to reply at the date of writing—24 April. Railfuture remains entirely independent of any political party and has no preferences but urges all parties to include our ideas and suggestions in their manifestos.

Conservatives

From Charlotte Sabel, Office of the Rt Hon Michael Howard QC MP

First of all, I would assure you that Mr Howard believes that it is very important that Britain's railway network is properly modernised and that standards - both in terms of passenger safety and time-keeping - are raised.

Sadly, the way the Government dealt with Railtrack and Network Rail has worsened - rather than improved - the current situation on the railways. The then Secretary of State for Transport, Stephen Byers, forced Railtrack into administration in October 2001, claiming that it was insolvent. This came after he had promised a 'period of stability to enable all the parties in the railway network to concentrate on providing a safe and reliable system'. According to the former Rail Regulator this decision costs the taxpayer some £14 billion.

The latest annual report of its successor body, Network Rail, says that its 'overall performance did not meet the challenging targets to deliver visible improvements for passengers'.

The House of Commons Transport Select Committee -chaired by a Labour MP - has even said, 'responsibility for the railways rests ultimately with the Government. It has had six years to construct a policy and structure for the railway that works well...it has failed to do so'

A future Conservative Government would seek to ensure that the performance of Britain's railway network is radically improved, both in terms of operating and capital costs as well as of the quality of service that is provided to passengers. We will bring much needed stability to the railways, avoiding damaging upheavals and letting the industry get on with improving performance.

Thank you for writing on this important issue.

Mebyon Kernow

From Dick Cole

Mebyon Kernow - the Party for Cornwall is supportive of the rail network in Cornwall, believing that services should be safeguarded and enhanced. We want a publicly accountable railway network. Our policy document states:

"We are opposed to the privatisation of our community assets to wealthy private investors. We believe that energy, water, rail and vital communications must be publicly owned and publicly accountable.

MK's policy on transport issues is as follows:-

"MK maintain that it is necessary to limit the enormous social and environmental damage caused by road transport, through both freight and the personal motor car. We acknowledge that the car is essential for much of rural Cornwall, and do not intend to unfairly penalise such people who are not yet served by adequate public transport, but the scale of car use must be actively reduced. MK are committed to investing in alternatives to the car, as a major priority.

"The development of a more decentralised and self-sufficient economy will reduce the need for goods to be transported over long distances by destructive heavy road vehicles. We also foresee a situation in which people would tend to live closer to their places of work than they do at present, and this would also limit the need to travel. Moves to encourage people to work at home must be supported.

"There is plenty of scope for delivering an environmentally sound, integrated transport policy including

improved rail services with more freight on rail, and the increased transport of people and goods by sea. A flexible and appropriate public transport system is a must, and more environmentally friendly methods of travel, such as walking, cycling and car sharing, must be encouraged.

"The improvement of certain roads is seen as necessary (surface improvement, widening or increased visibility), but roads will only form part of the Cornish integrated transport network. All improvements will be accompanied by measures to reduce road transport.

Green Party

From Tim Brennan, Green Party Candidate for Exeter.

I am a member of Railfuture and I do not own a car. Transport is one of my key policy concerns.

The past 50 years have shown that continuing and growing reliance on road transport is a failed experiment. Despite massive investment in the road network, it cannot support the transport needs of the UK. The results of our road obsession is increased congestion, deaths and injuries from road transport and a major source of atmospheric pollutants linked both with increased incidence of lung conditions like Asthma and globally with climate change and global warming.

Rail has the ability to provide transport infrastructure with far fewer impacts and should be encouraged to take a significantly greater proportion of both transport and freight traffic. I would like to see Rail infrastructure improvements including

- increased capacity on Salisbury Exeter line to enable an hourly service to Waterloo and increased local services

ELECTION SPECIAL

- increased capacity on line to Exmouth from Exeter enabling greater frequency to Topsham
- provision of alternative route to coastal main line from Exeter to Newton Abbot for service frequency and resilience. This could be through re-establishing the link from Okehampton to Plymouth or the Teign valley line
- Restoring Plymouth - Tavistock services

I am particularly keen to see an Exeter Metro service utilising the Exmouth line, the line to Salisbury and the link to Alphington / Marsh Barton currently unused for passenger services. This could allow frequent and congestion busting services invigorating Pinhoe, St Thomas and other local stations in Exeter that have reduced services currently. New (reopened) stations at Alphington, Exminster, and Whipton should be looked at. This could link into improved services to Torbay, Barnstaple and Hontifon / Axminster. With increased capacity stations for rapidly developing communities such as Cullompton could be looked at.

Rail fare inflation has simply run out of control and is being used to reduce service demand. Fares must be set at a fair and affordable rate (and should be collected by train companies). Bus and rail should be viewed as partners in providing public transport services rather than competitors. Tickets should be valid for all operators (except booked seat services) and should be valid for bus or rail services where there is a choice. Joined up timetabling between all rail operators and increased bus services should be established. Exeter needs a rail bus interchange particularly given the siting of St Davids away from the centre.

Rail freight must be given an even playing field to compete with road with road transport starting to bear the true costs to the community and the environment.

I want people to have the choice of good affordable public transport. The Green Party supports taking rail services into public control and ownership as franchises expire.

Labour

From Candy Atherton, Labour Candidate Falmouth and Camborne

We believe that a good transport network underpins our economy and supports our communities. As our economy continues to grow with Labour, people become better off and want to travel more for work and leisure. Our priority is to provide a reliable, safe and inclusive transport network that helps people move around in a way that respects our environmental objectives. To improve transport, we need to do three things. The first is long-term investment, year on year, decade after decade. We are putting in the equivalent of £260 million of public money every week to help improve our transport system and start to set right decades of under-investment. We are spending 60 per cent more in real terms on transport than the Tories were in 1997 and, unlike the Tories' promise of cuts, we are committed to continue increasing this investment year on year.

Demand for rail travel has increased in recent years as our economy has grown. In 2003, rail carried more than a billion passengers for the first time since the 1960s. And in 2004, more passenger journeys were made by train than in any year since 1959 when the network was almost twice the current size. There has been a 27 per cent increase in the amount of freight carried by rail since 1997.

Labour is committed to delivering the safe, reliable and affordable rail service the public want. We're investing an unprecedented amount in the rail network to address decades of under-investment. In 2005-06, we'll be investing more than double the amount spent by the Tories in their last year in office (1996-97), even after taking account of inflation. It's essential that the structure of the railways is right, to ensure the public gets best value for their money. When the Tories privatised British Rail they sold it off at bargain basement prices, broke it up into 100 pieces and failed to ensure the system worked in the public interest. We're putting this right, reorganising the rail industry to improve performance, drive down costs and get better value from public spending. The Government is taking charge of key

strategic rail decisions. It will have clear agreements with each part of the industry, setting levels of public expenditure and taking decisions about what the money should buy. Network Rail – the public interest company that has replaced the Tories' Railtrack – is taking overall responsibility for running the railway on a day-to-day basis. It will ensure that passengers get a more reliable service, setting timetables and taking charge when incidents on the network threaten delay. Track and train companies will work more closely together. The confrontational system put in place by the Tories is being replaced by one based on joint working. To assist this, the number of franchises is being reduced and aligned more closely with Network Rail's regional structure.

Safety will become the responsibility of the regulator and continue to be enforced independently of both the industry and government.

This new structure for the railway is built on the principle of public-private partnership. It recognises rail's status as a public service, specified by government and delivered by the private sector. We are currently spending £73 million every week to improve the railways and leveraging in a similar amount of investment in our railways each week from the private sector. This investment is paying dividends: Network Rail replaced 850 miles of track in 2003-04, compared with just 200 miles a year immediately after privatisation; and we are undertaking the biggest rolling stock replacement programme ever seen in this country.

The rail industry's safety record is good and is improving. We have successfully introduced the Train Protection and Warning System programme to improve safety by ensuring that trains approaching red signals and other hazards apply their brakes. We are replacing all of the slam-door rolling stock on the network with safer alternatives. We are improving station security so that now two-thirds of rail journeys either begin or end at accredited Secure Stations.

We will also use the new Access for All Fund to make the railway more accessible for disabled people,

Community Railways News

St Ives Timetable Improved

Following concerns expressed by Railfuture and the Friends of St Ives Branch Line, Wessex Trains has agreed to amend the Summer timetable from 13 June by introducing services from St Erth at 1755 and 1855 with balancing return workings. This fills the one hour 20 minute gap between 1811 and 1930 that was created by the March timetable change restoring the evening commuter service. The service will then be the most frequent it has ever been.

Meanwhile, the Friends of St Ives Branch Line have been planting out tubs attached to new benches at Carbis Bay station and hope to do the same at St Ives station itself.

Unique Bus Replacements During Looe and Exmouth Engineering Work.

The recent bus replacements of trains during engineering work at Looe and Exmouth included a new arrangement with bus operators Western Greyhound and Stagecoach Devon. Drivers of the buses charged fares and issued bus tickets for passengers boarding without a rail ticket. Passengers making main line connections could then use the bus ticket as part payment towards their rail ticket at Liskeard/Exeter. This is an arrangement Railfuture wished to encourage for normal bus feeder services, but so far operators seem reluctant to work together on this.

Stagecoach ran a special rail replacement service to Exmouth but also allowed their normal service buses to accept rail tickets. Western Greyhound's existing service was used to replace the Looe trains, with extra buses in the evening. The only downside with the Looe arrangement was that main line connections were not as good as the train timetable.

Rover Tickets Revamp

Railfuture understands that Wessex Trains are replacing their existing rail rovers with a new set of tickets from 12 June.

The Separate Devon and Cornwall Rovers will be merged into a single Rail Rover with 3 in 7 and 8 in 15 day versions extending as far east as Taunton. There will also be a one day unlimited travel ticket for Cornwall priced at around £14. Separate one day unlimited travel rangers are also planned for each of the Cornish branch lines, which will also be

available from local shops and from platform machines on the St Ives Branch.

It is hoped that the Freedom of the South West Railover will be extended from Romsey to Southampton, Bournemouth and Weymouth with the 8 in 15 day version increased from £61 to £95. The difference will be that there will be no restriction on use before 0900 which may make the ticket attractive to long distance commuters as well as those holidaying in the region. It is also rumoured that a first class version may become available. With the cheapest turn up and go fare between Penzance and Bristol now costing £51, the £95 Rover giving 8 out 15 days travel offers excellent value for money.

Join Friends of the Looe Valley

A Friends of the Looe Valley Line has been formed. As well as staffing the summer ticket kiosk at Looe, they hope to provide a refreshment kiosk as well. Looking further ahead the Friends would like to landscape the overgrown area between the track and the river at Looe station in partnership with Looe in Bloom.

Anyone who wishes to join can contact the group at Trencreek, Looe. PL13 2JR or Email sheridan.hughes@tiscali.co.uk

Community Rail Day Saturday 14 May

It is hoped that there will be attractions on all Cornwall and Devon's branch lines on 14 May to celebrate this national event. A sculpture will be unveiled at St Ives station that day and the Friends hope to offer a musical event either at the station or on the train possibly with free pasties. Wessex Trains intend offering a 50% discount in ticket prices on the day, although full details including any conditions were not available at the time of writing.

Other events planned include:

Truro— Falmouth

Friends of Penmere Platform 'at home' Guided rail ale walk (will the pace get slower as more pubs are visited?)

Liskeard—Looe

Guided walks

Plymouth—Gunnislake

launch of bus link from Calstock station to Cotehele House

North Devon Line

Launch of new Rail Ale Trail guide Truro-Falmouth - guided Rail Ale walk

ENGINEERING WORK

This is the latest advice of engineering work received at time of publication. However plans can change and you should check the day before travel.

Exeter St Davids—Taunton

Sundays 8, 15, 22 May
Some First Great Western Paddington services will run from Exeter St Davids via Yeovil Junction replacing South West Trains Waterloo services and calling at intermediate stations. Passengers to Waterloo will need to change at Yeovil Junction. Other services including all Virgin Trains, Arriva Trains Wales and Wessex Trains services will be replaced by buses between Taunton and Exeter.

Reading and Slough

Saturday 30 April until Monday 2 May.
Most Penzance/Plymouth to/from London services will run through to/from Waterloo instead of Paddington. Some trains may start or terminate at Reading with First Great Western Link services operating from there to Paddington except on Saturday when passengers will be directed to the South West Trains Reading - Waterloo service.

Tuesday 3 May and Saturday 7 May services will depart from Paddington up to 15 minutes earlier and arrive up to 15 minutes later.

Bristol Parkway to Cheltenham Spa

Sunday 29 May services from South West to the Midlands and North will be diverted via Newport.

St Erth to St Ives

Buses replace trains on Mondays to Fridays 2 to 6 May and 9 to 13 May 2005 (trains run normally on Saturdays)

Truro to Falmouth

Buses replace trains on Mondays to Fridays 16 to 20 May and 23 to 27 May 2005 (trains run normally on Saturdays and Sundays)

North Devon Line News

The North Devon Line Rail Users Group reports that long welded rail with steel sleepers has been installed around Morchard Road, Umberleigh and Chapelton during the recent blockade. The Pill Girder bridge between Chapelton and Barnstaple has also been refurbished.

One small advantage of the new Barnstaple western bypass is that buses to Appledore, Westward Ho1 and Bideford could be diverted past Barnstaple station entrance on a new bus only road link. However the large roundabout to the north of the station will make re-opening the Bideford line more expensive to achieve..