Great Western Franchise

In October 2012 the Department for Transport halted the award of the West Coast rail franchise pending the completion of two reviews on where the franchise competition went wrong and a wider review of the franchise process. The Great Western Franchise process was then “paused” until after both reviews were published.

In January and March 2013 the Department for Transport set out its plans for the Great Western Franchise. The Great Western franchise competition is now terminated. Instead First Great Western will continue to run the existing franchise until October 2013. After that new short term 33 month contracts will be awarded, subject to negotiation and agreement with First Great Western and this will run to July 2016. In the event of the new contracts not being signed the Government owned Directly Operated Railways will step in.

The current timetable will continue under the 33 month contract. Under the contracts the Department for Transport has indicated there will be no service enhancements or additional rolling stock for the West of England area.

On the Severn Beach Line, however, the late evening train service will be included in the extension at no cost to the local authorities as part of the base train service specification. The West of England wrote to Simon Burns, Minister of State, on 20 March 2013 requesting enhancements to services and facilities in the 33 month contracts. The Ministers reply of 25 April 2013 stated that as the franchise extension is an emergency measure there is no opportunities for enhancements.

Beyond July 2016 First Great Western will operate the franchise under a ‘competed management contract.’ Details of this and timescales are unclear at present. Equally unknown is the level of consultation with and input from the West of England councils.

The new contracts will not delay infrastructure improvements or the MetroWest. It includes a “Co-operation and non frustration” clause which will enable First Great Western to work with the West of England on the Metro proposals. The delay to the start of the new franchise will enable the business case for Phase 2 of MetroWest (half hourly services to Yate and a reopened Henbury Line) to be strengthened and hopefully included as a future Priced Option. Prices for Priced Options are not expected until late 2015.

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