

Rail Devolution: What It Means for the Stourbridge Line

By Keith Flinders

There are three ways of running passenger trains since our railways were privatised. One is to apply to be an **Open Access Operator**. We have only ever had one in our region, the Wrexham Shropshire and Marylebone Railway. The quality of service set a new standard but progress was painfully slow, as Network Rail never came up with good paths. Such an operator receives no subsidy so, if no profit is being made, it will not last. The Stourbridge Line did well out of WSMR, as we gained its superbly refurbished coaches, now Chiltern Railways' Silver Sets.

The second way is to win a **Franchise**. This is the most common service provision. The Department for Transport specifies to a level of detail that most rail users don't realise exactly what and how a train operator must provide. The company that comes up with the best bid [for which you may wish to substitute 'cheapest bid'] wins the franchise for a set number of years. Most of our trains are provided by London Midland, but the morning commute into Birmingham has five Chiltern services – because that is written into Chiltern's franchise. The evening peak does not include any commitment from Chiltern. That comes later in the evening and includes the last train of the day out to Stourbridge Junction. This in itself occasionally throws up one of the weaknesses of franchising. Our stations are run by London Midland and if the last train is running late, the Chiltern/LM interface sometimes does not take good care of our rail users. The detail of these franchises also makes it hard to produce a sensible evening timetable for the Stourbridge Line. We have, for example, Kidderminster arrivals from Birmingham at 20.39 and 20.48, then nothing until 21.26 and 21.36. SLUG members frequently ask why they cannot be better spaced. From Chiltern's point of view, its services originate in London as part of their core Mainline business. Getting it right for London to Birmingham is what matters most. That the trains continue onto the Stourbridge Line is just our bonus. So Chiltern looks to LM to time its trains along the Stourbridge Line midway between Chiltern services. These are the trains that also provide the hourly service for stations like Acock's Green. So couldn't LM just move them back by about half an hour? The answer is no; the detail of LM's franchise does not allow the gap in service that would result, and no one is willing to fund an extra service just to fill that gap.

The third way is a **Concession**. This means decisions are taken locally, about services and staffing, fares and facilities. Only Merseyrail and London Overground are concessions at present. The latter is experiencing massive growth, the former gets the highest satisfaction scores in the country. A new organisation, **West Midlands Rail**, is planning to take over Stourbridge Line services from London Midland. LM's franchise is being extended to June 2017 as DfT has a mountain of work to do following the collapse of the West Coast franchise. When our turn comes, we are likely to see a 'handover franchise' during which WMR will gradually take more responsibility. This is prudent, as WMR needs to prove it has the competence and that costs to the tax payer will not rise. Don't expect blank cheques to be signed, but do expect cleaner stations, a greater feeling of security when using evening trains and better integration of rail, bus and metro. London Midland's appointing of Route Managers has recently given us a very effective channel for communication, but still the big decisions have to be taken in London. Rail devolution should enhance the role of SLUG when decisions are made more local.