

THE WEST MIDLANDS RAIL FRANCHISE - THE STORY SO FAR

by Roger Davis

In issue 3 of Platform, we reported on the public consultation for the new West Midlands Franchise that is scheduled to replace the current London Midland franchise in October 2017. SLUG attended meetings and subsequently responded to this consultation which ended on 22 March. So what has happened since?

On 7 April 2016, the Government announced that three companies had been shortlisted to operate the new franchise. They were :-

- London & West Midlands Railway Ltd, a bid vehicle formed by the Govia joint venture of Keolis (35%) and Go-Ahead Group (65%) which has operated the current franchise since 2007 under the London Midland brand.
- West Midlands Trains Ltd, a subsidiary of the Abellio Transport Group Ltd business of Dutch national passenger operator NS, with East Japan Railway and Mitsui Corp as minority partners.
- MTR Corp (West Midlands) Ltd, formed by Hong Kong MTR subsidiary MTR Corp (UK) Ltd.

However, on 22 June 2016, MTR announced that they were pulling out of the competition, 5 days after joining forces with First Group to bid for the new South Western franchise.

Thus the competition was down to two bidders with none of the “big boys” such as First, Virgin, Stagecoach, Arriva and National Express considering the franchise as important (or profitable?) enough to operate.

Govia, as well as operating the London Midland franchise, currently operates the Southeastern and Govia Thameslink Railway franchises, the latter franchise consisting of Thameslink, Great Northern, Gatwick Express and Southern. Southern and Gatwick Express have been the subject of much negative media publicity recently as the result of rail strikes, last minute service cancellations and late running, forcing an emergency timetable to be introduced with 341 services cancelled. It has meant that some towns have seen their train service substituted by a replacement bus service and this has resulted in one Cabinet member remarking that Govia should not be allowed to bid for new rail franchises unless it can sort out the appalling situation at Southern.



Abellio has operated the Merseyrail franchise since July 2003, and operated the Northern Rail franchise for over 11 years, losing out to Arriva in March 2016. It gained



the ScotRail franchise this year, although this franchise has also been beset by industrial action recently. The East Anglia franchise which it gained in February 2012 was retained in July 2016 and Abellio will operate it until 2025, promising to invest £1.5bn to replace one of the oldest train fleets in the country with 1,043 completely new electric and bi-mode vehicles by 2020, and operate 1,144 additional weekday

services. However, local commentators in East Anglia have expressed dismay at Abellio retaining the franchise.

With the shortlisted companies announced, the timetable for the new franchise was to be as follows :-

July 2016	Publication of the Invitation to Tender (ITT)
29 November 2016	Govia and Abellio submit their final bids
June 2017	The preferred bidder is named
15 October 2017	The new franchise starts

The Invitation to Tender sets out the minimum requirements which bidders must include in their detailed proposals and was published a month late on 30 August. The major improvements promised for the Stourbridge line are an increased evening frequency on Mondays to Saturdays from December 2018 with three services per hour operating to Kidderminster, two of these continuing to Worcester. December 2021 will see the Sunday service increased to six trains per hour between Birmingham and Stourbridge with four per hour serving Kidderminster and two per hour continuing to Worcester. The Stourbridge Town branch would also see six trains per hour on Sundays from December 2021, while the new franchisee is required to address crowding problems encountered on this service. Better connections at Worcester for onward services to Gloucester is mentioned in the ITT. However, although the Rugeley, Cross City, Bromsgrove, Solihull, Shirley and Northampton lines have been promised earlier services on a Sunday morning, the Stourbridge line has not. SLUG will be raising this very serious issue with West Midlands Rail and the shortlisted companies as soon as possible.



Although publication of the ITT was a month late, the rest of the timetable is shown as unchanged with the new franchise starting next October. However, if it is not met, there is a clause in the current London Midland franchise extension agreement that allows the current franchise to continue for up to 13 months to November 2018. We will keep you informed of developments as they occur in future editions of Platform.