



**FIRST CLASS:** Elaine Holt, the new boss of Capital Connect with First Group chief executive Moir Lockhead

Picture: FIRST GROUP

# Image and reality

The train is nearly always the best way to travel, but especially so in the first class comfort of a well-designed inter-city coach, as shown in the picture above.

But for most of Elaine Holt's new customers, the reality will be somewhat different. Most of them are used to routinely cramming into 20-year-old trains from Brighton or Bedford for the daily commuter journey into London.

She takes over on 1 April as boss of First Capital Connect, which combines Thameslink and Great Northern.

Under the terms of the franchise – and by order of the Department for Transport – there will be no new trains.

To improve travelling conditions for passengers, First will have to persuade Southern to hand over 14 class 319 dual-voltage trains. Nor at the moment are there firm plans for the new much-needed station adjoining the Eurostar station at London St Pancras which opens next year.

Sadly it seems Thameslink 2000 –

bringing more trains to more destinations – will not now be delivered until 2014!

Rail users believe the new franchise is a cheap and cheerful option, although First will have to contribute £808million to the Treasury over nine years for the privilege of running the trains.

Bedford Commuters Association says passengers ought to be the beneficiaries, not the Treasury. The association also points out that the current 319 trains do not have proper luggage facilities for the many passengers travelling to Luton and Gatwick airports.

The BCA says the railway deserves

additional funding as a way of diverting car drivers from use of the overcrowded M1 motorway. The association is saddened by the failure of the DfT to use the franchise negotiations as a way to get the Luton-Dunstable line reopened as an electrified railway.

Railfuture and the rail user groups would have liked to see a much more pro-active approach from the DfT which still does not appear to realise how important railways are for reducing road and air congestion and pollution.

For example flying from London to Edinburgh produces eight times more carbon dioxide per passenger. London Mayor Ken Livingstone is

hoping to introduce a pollution tax on lorries and even President Bush admits that America must cure itself of its "addiction to oil".

In fact the process may have already started. Ford car factories in America are closing down and according to some, "the age of the American car is passing into nostalgia".

In Britain the Tories are waking up to the importance of the environment and Labour's failure to tackle the issue. At the same time, there are rumours that the Tories want to go back to road building!

There are even scare stories that Labour wants to "mothball" branch rail lines. Can they be that stupid?

They have certainly not got a good record on rail reopenings or tram schemes and we are still waiting for the East-West rail link.

Instead we have the ridiculous situation where an air service operated by Sky Commuter has started between Oxford and Cambridge!

But at least the DfT and First Group saved the Cornish sleeper. Sometimes it seems effective lobbying works.

**HIGH SPEED RAIL:** At last the Government seems to be taking seriously the idea of a new high-speed railway for Britain, even though it seems bedazzled by jet trains and Maglev trains rather than the proved technology already used in France and Germany. The Railway Forum has launched an online petition at [www.high-speedbritain.com](http://www.high-speedbritain.com) and a new organisation called Greengauge21 – founded by Jim Steer – is hoping to build a national consensus to support high-speed rail. It has produced a 44-page briefing document which is available at [www.greengauge21.net](http://www.greengauge21.net)

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