Franchise challenge

Rail campaigners face a big challenge following the Government's decision to let future franchises run for a minimum of 10 years with some spanning 22 years.

They will have to ensure that big improvements are promised if their franchise is to run for such a long period.

In several areas, passengers have been glad to see the back of train operators who clinched the deal, only to fail to deliver the goods.

Although the Government says there will be tough, regular "performance" reviews, 10 years is a long time to be saddled with an inefficient operator.

The Government believes longer franchises will give more scope for innovation.

Chiltern, one of the few operators which has been genuinely innovative, is the first of the operators to benefit from a longer franchise.

The new system will face its first test though when the East Coast, Greater Anglia and Essex Thameside franchises begin in 2011.

However, the existing system is crumbling with widespread passenger dissatisfaction on First Capital Connect.

Some MPs accuse FCC of mismanagement by not employing enough drivers to cover the shifts needed and are calling on the Government to terminate the franchise.

A petition from more than 6,000 passengers has called for FCC to be stripped of its franchise due to a "gross lack of competence".

Luton North MP Kelvin Hopkins has asked transport minister Sadiq Khan to consider nationalising the franchise.

Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT union, said: "Every corner that can be cut is cut and now they are getting found out.

"The rolling stock is like something out of the 1970s Bronx, and the sheer tension among commuters means it's a pressure cooker on these trains.

"Combined with the fact that FCC got a £140 million subsidy last year while making operating profits of £90 million, this is a state-sponsored rip-off."

The website, firstcrapitalconnect.co.uk, is scathing.

It says: "The train has been cancelled. This is due to no decent management being available."

It adds: "First Capital Connect blames the Department for Transport for most things, claiming – for instance – that the franchise forbids it from buying rolling stock.

"The DfT confirms it gave the franchise to FCC because it offered good value to taxpayers, not necessarily the best service for customers. It does not know why First Capital Connect now runs shorter trains in the rush hours. Nor does the DfT know why FCC does not offer more peak-hour services.

AT LAST: The Department for Transport is spending £20 million to introduce smart and integrated ticketing into England's major urban areas. The strategy can be found at www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/regional/smart-integrated-ticketing/

The franchise system is also being questioned by Brian Souter, chief executive of Stagecoach. He wants to be able to control the tracks as well as the trains."

But Louise Lucas of the *Financial Times* questions that approach. She wrote in February: "Running the rail network in tandem with your own trains can be open to discriminatory behaviour, as German academics among others have noted.

"No prizes for guessing whose trains would be front of the queue after a forced standstill if Mr Souter were playing the Fat Controller.

"Conversely, as the World Bank noted in a 2006 report , separation – alongside access rights – helps foster competition and private sector participation in rail freight markets. "

She added: "It is not as if operators can boast an unblemished track record on their route franchises. One of the continuing problems of franchising is that the operators drive up the unregulated fares."

In February, 59 MPs joined a call from the Campaign for Better Transport for rail fares to be reviewed with the aim of making them cheaper.

In January, Passenger Focus reported that London Midland had changed the off-peak ticket restrictions so that many passengers have to pay significantly more than they used to if they want to travel on the same trains.

Passenger Focus said: "For example, a passenger travelling from Milton Keynes to London who previously paid £14 for a day return will now pay more than double the price for their journey if they want to return at a peak time."

LOCAL ACTION

North East

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■ ■ All Change on the Metro

Operation of the Tyne and Wear Metro has been handed over to Deutsche Bahn. The new contract was signed in February and starts on 1 April. The decision follows 15 months of deliberation and the contract is expected to run for seven or nine years.

Around 400 staff who operate trains and stations transfer to DB. Conditions of service, including pension rights, are protected for the lifetime of the contract. A further 270 staff will remain with Nexus in management, planning, engineering and maintenance roles. Nexus will continue to own the system, set the timetable and manage the infrastructure which includes 60 stations.

The switch will allow Government finance to be released and the £15 million programme for refurbishing the 90 ageing Metrocars will begin. The original three-phase development programme envisaged delaying the introduction of a new fleet of trains until the third phase started in 2019. In view of the reduction in national expenditure now upon us, this may be ill-advised, as the existing vehicles are already 30 years old. The creation of the operating contract was a condition for H M Government funding phase one, and may prove to mirror the weaknesses of the split between Network Rail and the operating companies on the National Rail system. There is however good news for passengers, the 40 million a year of them which use the trains. Fares are being frozen at existing levels for 2010. When Transport Minister Sadiq Khan visited Newcastle in early February he said there would be £350 million to spend on overhauling trains, stations and ticket machines. Adrian Shooter, chairman of DB Regio Tyne and Wear, said: "We very much share the vision of making this a Metro system that everyone is proud of here and envious of in other places. I'm sure we can take a really good system to being a world-beating system." Councillor David Wood, chairman of the Tyne and Wear Integrated Transport Authority, said: "This announcement is worth something like £2.5 billion to the economy through the impact Metro has supporting jobs and opportunity, as well as creating scores more in the engineering and construction sectors."

■ ■ Coals from Wolsingham

The newly cleared Weardale Railway track from Wolsingham to Bishop Auckland was inspected by HM Railway Inspectorate in January. The Weardale Railway and UK Coal held a public exhibition and consultation in December 2009 on draft proposals for a temporary coal dispersal point at the former Wolsingham steel works site. It is envisaged that the opencast site at Park Wall North could produce 1.27 million tonnes of coal and 500,000 tonnes of fireclay over four years. The proposed use of the railway for transporting coal will reduce the number of lorries in this area of natural beauty and benefit the environment. The Weardale Railway 2009 Santa Specials were oversubscribed and in their final week ran in snow.

■ ■ New bridge for the Yorkshire Moors line

Work on the replacement of 145-year-old Bridge 30 spanning the Murk Esk at Darnholme between Goathland and Grosmont began in January, but was hampered by snow. The target date for completion was the start of the main running season on 27 March. A well-planned operation was overseen by Construction Marine of Leeds, assistance in moving materials came from rail-freight operator DB Schenker and A V Dawsons of Teesside with support from Network Rail. The new bridge was engineered by Mabey Bridge of Chepstow and moved to Tees Yard by road. The final leg of the journey was by rail.