

All change for rail millionaires

One side effect of the re-franchising process under way at the moment has been to create several more millionaires.

The founder and chief executive of Prism Rail Giles Fearnley made made £6million when his company was taken over by National Express.

Former chairman Godfrey Burley also gained £6million while eight other founding shareholders will make a further £13million.

People waiting for Wales & West trains which did not turn up and on disreputable de-staffed stations on WAGN's system will certainly not be impressed by the Prism bosses' bonanza.

That money could and should have gone into rail improvements.

Now the Government is at last clearing the way for large-scale investment in rail, there should be ways of stopping money being siphoned off from the system in future.

National Express, one of the train operating companies with a better reputation, now has a 30% share of the passenger rail business.

In fact Prism has been at the eye of the storm of re-franchising.

It had already agreed to give up the Great Northern part of its WAGN franchise to allow the new Thameslink franchise to be extended to include Peterborough, Cambridge and King's Lynn in 2006.

In Wales, Prism conceded that it should give up Wales & West and Cardiff Railways in 2001, three years early. Now it appears that an all-Wales franchise could emerge.

The Rail Passengers Committee for Wales also wants a Strategic Rail Authority office for Wales, a Railtrack office for Wales and the Marches and effective powers for the Welsh Assembly on rail.

Some idea of what the SRA wants to achieve from the re-franchising process emerged in June when it issued a map of re-drawn proposed franchises. The



This is one of the new trains for the London, Tilbury and Southend line. In an attempt to hide its "misery line" image, the Prism-owned LTS has been re-branded C2C. By 2002 the entire service should be operated by Adtranz Electrostars, which have "advanced passenger information systems" and CCTV in the trains. Each four-car train however has only one lavatory and in a four-page specification there is no information as to whether there is space to carry cycles. So much for a commitment to integrated transport.

SRA said it was focused on "customer needs, local accountability and the best operational fit" and its aim is to revitalise the network.

Upgrading Trans Pennine to long-distance high-speed status is a good start. Perhaps we will see some German-style regional tilt trains as a result.

But of course there is so much ignorance in Britain, that many rail "customers" do not know about the enormous strides taken in many European countries and what is now possible. Rail managers should be doing more to explain that it is technically feasible to have, for instance, a 30-minute London-Brighton journey in comfortable trains if proper investment was made.

It is in the old Southern Railway area that the re-franchising process looks likely to deliver least. Thameslink 2000-operator Govia, which is bidding to exclude Connex from South Central, does not want to reinstate Lewes-Uckfield, a scheme which makes its own sense and would unlock massive potential on the other main lines.

Strangely, Govia says it will introduce a "people first" policy which is not exactly in evidence on its Thameslink trains which are often overcrowded and

cramped. Even though the Bedford-Brighton journey is 100 miles, there is no refreshment service and frequently out-of-order lavatories.

On the East Coast main line, Virgin's attempts to take over the franchise to deliver a truly high-speed railway – with a 119-mile new line from south of Peterborough to north of Doncaster – look like being frustrated.

Virgin is however making a fresh bid to make the SRA listen.

It says it could quickly enhance the current train fleet by replacing the driver trailer with a high-powered diesel locomotive at each end.

That would immediately save seven minutes on the journey to Edinburgh, improve reliability and give access to non-electrified destinations like Teesside, Lincoln and Sheffield.

Virgin is also not frightened to talk of the need for electrification, unlike many rail managers. It suggests electrifying Sheffield-Leeds, Leeds-York-Selby and the Leamside line.

Of course RDS will also be looking at the re-franchising process to see if it can kickstart many schemes which have been waiting for years. One of them, of course, is the East-West rail link.

BR was forced to abandon implementing phase one because of cash cuts. Privatisation too failed to deliver. Will re-franchising make it work? From talks RDS has been having, it appears that Cambridge-St Ives-Huntingdon has not even been considered as



part of a strategic national rail network. It has been dismissed as a mere local affair.

But there are signs that trains could soon be running on the "mothballed" Oxford-Bletchley line. This train is already running years, if not decades, late.

If you want to keep up to date with progress or the lack of it, the East-West Rail consortium now has its own web site: eastwestrail.org/

Cambridge University also has a new transport website: admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/environment/transport.html

Refranchising insight is at opraf.gov.uk.SSRArelease/replacement_guide.htm

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