

## Hong Kong bidder says it can avoid chaos on Thameslink

Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway has 155 stations and 130 miles of track Mike Clarke/AFP/Getty Images

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**Robert Lea** Industrial Editor  
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**The Hong Kong state railway company wants to run the Thameslink commuter network in an alliance with Network Rail.**

MTR says that bringing in its own engineers from the Far East and working alongside Network Rail will make it best-placed to help to avoid the inevitable travelling chaos at London Bridge, one of Thameslink's biggest interchanges, which is to be rebuilt by 2018.

Bids to run Thameslink have to be submitted to the Department for Transport this week. A new franchise begins in 18 months.

MTR, which already jointly runs the London Overground network, will try to convince Justine Greening, the Transport Secretary, that it has the necessary experience of running busy tracks and commuter trains in Hong Kong.

The Bedford-to-Brighton Thameslink service has been dogged by controversy. Not only are the big infrastructure works on the line through Central London being completed years late, but also the Government caused a storm by selecting Siemens trains instead of the British-built Bombardiers as the new rolling stock for the upgraded line.

The new franchise — it is now operated by FirstGroup — will be as much about managing the infrastructure around London Bridge as it will be about running trains, according to Jeremy Long, the veteran railwayman who runs MTR's UK operations.

“The complete redevelopment and remodelling of London Bridge is going to be a massive challenge for Network Rail and the new franchisee,” Mr Long said. “If MTR wins the Thameslink franchise, we would look at bringing in our infrastructure experts from Hong Kong to work side-by-side with Network Rail and using our fundamental understanding of the issues facing Network Rail to see how as the operator we can deliver the project together more successfully.”

The £6 billion Thameslink infrastructure programmes are particularly complex, taking in the rebuilds at Blackfriars and Farringdon, which is also an interchange for the east-west Crossrail network under construction.

Work is expected to start next year at London Bridge station, which handles 54 million passengers a year. The brand new concourse will be the biggest of any British station. The lines will be reconfigured to allow for fifteen platforms, six of which will be through platforms enabling twenty-four Thameslink trains to run through the station at an average of one every 2½ minutes.

The operation of a more closely integrated network bringing together the track operator (Network Rail) and train operator would be a first in Britain since privatisation. Such a joint venture running a franchise is envisaged in the Department for Transport's McNulty report into making the railways cheaper to run.

Mr Long, however, does not see that revolutionary. He says that a similar closely integrated operation has been in place, with MTR working with Transport for London on the London Overground and especially in the development of the East London line. The London Overground franchise is run in a joint venture between MTR and Deutsche Bahn — another with extensive experience of running track and train operations in Germany.

MTR is also bidding for the Essex Thameside franchise, better known as c2c. The Fenchurch-Street-to-Southend line is seen as the sort of geographically contained network where a closely integrated track-and-train operation would bring better value for money.



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