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Rail reform: tram line is microfranchise contender

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A consultation on plans to devolve responsibility for local rail services has been launched by the government.

Published alongside the new rail reform command paper, the consultation is a response to Sir Roy McNulty's Rail Value for Money study which concluded that decentralisation of rail services could potentially cut the cost of rail services.

The document says the most appropriate time for decentralisation will be when rail franchises are let - although admits that arrangements will not be firmed up in time for full devolution proposals to be included in the new Great Western franchise.

Five models for decentralisation are considered. Local bodies, such as passenger transport executives, could be co-signatories to franchises - as is the case for the current Northern franchise; they could propose enhancements or decrements to a franchise; alternatively the PTE could propose enhancements or decrements to a specific route or service group. More radical options include letting microfranchises - a proposal currently being considered for the Watford Junction-St Albans Abbey branch line conversion to tram operation; or handing full control of funding and specifying services in a franchise area to an ITA or local authority.



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Transport authorities in London, Manchester, Yorkshire and the West Midlands have already held talks with the Department for Transport in which they have asked to be given control over local rail services. The consultation, which runs until 28 June, says that robust governance structures and funding controls will be needed if the DfT is to devolve responsibility for local rail services. Once the consultation closes, the DfT says it will announce it:

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Geoff Inskip, chair of Pteq, said: "We are very pleased that the Secretary of State has recognised that devolution will bring real benefits to passengers. As we have seen in Merseyside and London - rail devolution can lead to more networks that better reflect the needs of local economies.

"During the consultation period Northern PTEs and Centro will be further developing the proposals in their north and in the West Midlands will best work in practice. Northern PTEs and Centro will also be discussing local transport authorities and partners to make sure that devolution brings benefits throughout the wider

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