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## Seven shortlisted for three rail franchises

By Mark Odell, Transport Correspondent

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The renewal of three of the UK's 19 rail franchises moved a step closer on Thursday as the government announced a shortlist of seven companies that will bid to run them.

[FirstGroup](#) was the only operator to make all three shortlists although it is the incumbent on two of the franchises that are due to be retendered – Great Western, which runs services out of London Paddington to the south-west and Wales, and Thameslink, a network that runs north-to-south through London between Bedford and the south coast.

The only newcomer to make the shortlist is [MTR](#), the Hong Kong-listed, government-controlled transport group, which is one of five bidders competing to run Thameslink and one of four bidding for the Essex Thameside franchise, which operates services between London Liverpool Street and Southend.

There was also good news for [National Express](#), after it made it on to two shortlists – Essex Thameside, where it is the incumbent, and Great Western. There was some concern about the group's future prospects in the UK rail sector after it was shut out from bidding for the Greater Anglia franchise which it ran until earlier this year.

The other shortlisted bidders for Great Western are Arriva, a division of Deutsche Bahn, and [Stagecoach](#). The latter is also shortlisted for Thameslink alongside [Abellio](#), a unit of Nederlandse Spoorwegen, the Dutch state railway, and Govia, a joint venture between [Go-Ahead](#) and Keolis, a subsidiary of France's SNCF.

Renfe, the Spanish state-owned operator, put itself forward for all three franchise bids but failed to make any of the shortlists.

The government expects to announce the winner for Great Western in December, with the other two franchises awarded next year. It is also awaiting bids from the four shortlisted companies for the new franchise to run West Coast mainline – covering services out of Euston up to Scotland. The bids are due in by May and a winner is expected to be announced in August to take over the services in December.

The rail sector is facing unprecedented turnover in operators as more than half of the franchises are due to be renewed in the next three years. The four listed UK transport groups – FirstGroup, Go-Ahead, National Express and Stagecoach – are facing growing competition from foreign-based, state-controlled operators.

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