



The French come over here, they make our high-speed trains run on time...

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The French state railway company, SNCF, is plotting an audacious attempt to win control of Britain's first high-speed railway line linking London and the Midlands.

A company controlled by SNCF is currently finalising details of its bid to run the 14-year InterCity West Coast franchise held by Virgin Trains due in at the end of this month.

They hope to use the franchise as a launch pad to capture the licence to run the lucrative High Speed 2 (HS2) rail link, which will link London and the Midlands and is due to open in 2026.

The Government is due to make a decision on who will get to run the West Coast main line later this summer.

Industry analysts suggest that a successful bid by Keolis SNCF would offer the company a far greater chance of winning the HS2 contract when it is put out to tender.

"That is the prize they're looking at and the West Coast franchise is the first step to winning it," one source with knowledge of the company said.

SNCF has a vast experience of running high-speed networks in France for more than 30 years and has now branched out internationally. Keolis has part stakes in four UK rail franchises but this is the first time the company has co-opted the muscle of the French state railway in the bidding process.

But it still faces stiff competition from Virgin Trains, current owners of the West Coast franchise, which is also believed to be interested in running HS2.

There are currently four shortlisted bidders for the West Coast franchise, who have until the end of the month to submit their bid documents to the Government. They are Virgin, Keolis SNCF, Abellio (a subsidiary of Dutch Railways) and FirstGroup.

Critical to the Government's decision will be the amount of money each bidder is prepared to pay in return for the highly profitable franchise.

As a result, both Virgin and FirstGroup fear that the presence of what are effectively state-controlled companies could make it harder to compete on a level playing field.

"If you are backed by a state-owned operator then obviously your borrowing costs will be lower so you can be more competitive," one source close to the bidding process said.

The final decision on who gets the West Coast franchise will be taken at the end of August by the Transport Secretary, Justine Greening.

Rail travel: UK vs France

Top operational speed

France: 199mph. UK: 186mph.

Price

Britain has Europe's most expensive rail system; France has the cheapest. UK passengers would save £4.6bn a year if fares were the same as in France, where season tickets typically cost 13p per mile, compared to 23p.

Food

Rail cuisine is little better across the Channel, where the unappetising "sandwich TGV" is the equivalent of the hated "British Rail sandwich".

Comfort

France is judged to have more comfortable trains than the UK, with a better ratio of seats to passengers.