
Number of rail bidders whittled down

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The Department for Transport has narrowed down the number of companies bidding to run Wiltshire's railways to just four.

FirstGroup, Stagecoach, National Express and German company Deutsche Bahn are all still possibilities, but Spanish company Renfe has been dropped as an option.

The new Great Western franchise will begin in April 2013, based on the services currently operated by First Great Western (FGW).

First Great Western, which was awarded the franchise in 2005, does not want to take up the option to extend its contract, wanting instead to negotiate a longer-term deal, which it would then bid for.

Roger Newman, who chairs West Wilts Rail Users Group, said: "The company that is successful will be announced in December.

"FGW were not performing very well for some time. However, they changed their management a few years ago and have since made considerable improvements.

"I would favour FGW being awarded a second contract."

Chippenham MP Duncan Hames said: "I hope those bidding are serious about improving performance, addressing overcrowding and sustaining a restored TransWilts service through Melksham and an Oxford to Bristol service through Corsham and Chippenham."

Network Rail already has plans for a complete upgrade of the Great Western Main Line route between London and Cardiff by 2025 as part of a £4 billion project.

Changes will include the electrification from Paddington to Bristol, Cardiff, Oxford and Newbury, provision of an electric suburban fleet, and redevelopment of Reading station.

A consultation on the contract closed at the end of March and the new franchise is due to begin in April 2013.

However, Mr Newman said he was worried that services not running to and from London were being neglected. He said: “The Cardiff to Ports-mouth service has just three carriages per train.

“Those using the service feel there is a real demand for four or five carriages.”

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