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Great Western ITT reveals expansion plans

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THE DELAYED Invitation to Tender for the next Great Western franchise has been published. However, the delay in the bidding process means that the existing FirstGroup contract must be extended to July next year, as Railnews reported earlier this month.

The new operator will be running Great Western during a critical period, which will see electrification from London to Swansea, Oxford, Newbury, Basingstoke and most of the Thames Valley branches completed in the period 2016-2018. Other infrastructure improvements include redoubling between Swindon and Kemble, which should be completed by 2014.

Most of the long-serving HST fleet will have been replaced by new InterCity Express trains, and the launch of Crossrail in 2017/2018 will also mean major changes in the London suburban area. The first section of HS2 should have opened between London and Birmingham before the franchise ends in 2028, although bidders are being told to disregard the implications of the new High Speed line when making their calculations and suggestions.

The GW network is also set to grow, because the ITT includes plans for reopening the line between Bere Alston and Tavistock, plus daily trains between Exeter and Okehampton and the restoration of passenger services between Bristol and Portishead as part of a new 'Bristol Metro'.

New, more frequent 'Metro' services are also likely in the Exeter area, serving such places as Barnstaple and Exmouth. Boosts are planned for the timetable between Exeter and Torbay, and also on the Looe Valley Line. Still in Cornwall, St Ives branch trains are to be routinely extended to and from Penzance.

The West of England sleeper service to Plymouth and Penzance is to be retained, and there will be a new early morning fast train from London to Plymouth.

A contentious proposal to reduce the number of daily through trains between London and Cornwall from nine to six is still not settled, however, in spite of strong protests over the past few weeks.

The Invitation to Tender requires the continuation of nine 'journey opportunities' between London and Penzance each day (in addition to the sleeper) but three of these could involve a change of train at Plymouth in future.

The DfT is known to be concerned that some HSTs with ample First Class seating and on-board catering are effectively becoming local trains west of Plymouth, but bidders are being asked to provide a price for additional through journeys above the minimum of six, as well as a half hourly regional service on the Cornish main line. Decisions on whether these options are affordable and can go ahead will be taken before the new franchise is awarded, said the DfT.

As part of this evaluation, the Government will ask the bidders to explore with stakeholders how rail services in Cornwall might be improved to ensure 'the right balance between long distance and regional services'.

Rail minister Theresa Villiers said: "Passengers using the Great Western Line will benefit from major infrastructure improvements and new rolling stock over the next few years, as a result of the Government's ambitious programme of rail improvements, including extensive electrification.

"For the first time on the Great Western franchise, we will be introducing requirements on passenger satisfaction for the operator to meet which will mean they have to focus strongly on the issues that matter the most to passengers. Extending smart card ticketing across the franchise will provide many more passengers with the kind of convenience Oyster has brought to Londoners.

"This new franchise will see additional capacity delivered to benefit passengers. A more efficient and flexible franchise will encourage private sector investment, for example in improving stations and investing in rolling stock. It will promote greater efficiency and also enable the train operator to react to more effectively to changing passenger demands."

The competitors for the franchise are FirstGroup, Arriva UK/Deutsche Bahn, National Express and Stagecoach.

The bidding deadline for the 15-year contract is now 25 October, and the winner should be announced in March.

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John Gilbert, Cradley

Adding to my comment above, how excellent is the plan to electrify so much of the GWR - eventually amended to be a logical size! Now we must keep watch and see that they, (the politicians,) don't go back on their words. I wouldn't trust them I'm afraid; "Rather see'un than yer tell o'n," as my Devonshire grandmother would have said of these new plans!



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John Gilbert, Cradley

Of course the greatest crime currently committed by the Great Western management is to treat main line services west of Reading as mere feeders to the London commuter belt. This explains why HSTs currently have seats stuffed into them, which is a complete nonsense as far as long-distance passengers are concerned - the latter want comfort, not to sit with no view (a large percentage) and their legs around their necks!! Far from every train stopping at Reading as a matter of course, a reversion to the past, where a majority of these trains does NOT stop there would be fair treatment for long-distance passengers. Let local and interurban trains serve the London area with but an occasional call by trains from the west - to SET DOWN!

Claydon William, Norwich, Norfolk

If the DfT are concerned that Penzance to London trains are little more than local trains west of Plymouth, then run the appropriately sized and number of trains the Cornwall-London market needs non stop between Lostwithiel/ Menheniot and Reading.

Most of the Cornish branches will never make economic sense IMHO.

Extend all Falmouth-Truro local services through to Plymouth (attracting more Falmouth-Plymouth higher priced through tickets),

Rename 'Hayle' station 'St.Ives Bay', build a new 'Newquay Parkway' at Grampound, and rename 'Menheniot' 'Looe Parkway'.

These three simple station projects will allow the conversion of the St.Ives, Newquay and Looe branches to non-subsidized bus operation, and give more strength to London-Cornwall services by adding the Looe, Newquay and St.Ives markets to the direct London-Penzance services.

Melvyn Windebank, Canvey Island, Essex

With electrification announced to include branches near London like that to Eton surely consideration should be given to adding these services to Crossrail and thus making better use of Crossrail on its western side and also freeing up space at Paddington for more long distance services.

Tony Pearce, Reading

I don't think that any Group can offer very much in the way of alternatives (or improvements) on this region so its probably all going to come down to cost - ie who offers the cheapest bid.

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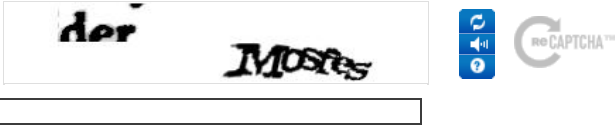
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