

Hearing with the Department for Transport

Much of the hearing was taken up with a briefing on the regulatory and franchise systems under which Train Operating Companies work, and the timetable for awarding the new franchises. The following paragraphs summarize those points made by the Department for Transport (DfT) that were specific to the anticipated acquisition by the National Express Group (NEG) of the Thameslink Great Northern (TGN) franchise.

The scope for additional services on the TGN network was limited. It might be possible to add a few extra trains off peak on the Great Northern route to Cambridge, where demand was growing, and to lengthen some trains, but there was virtually no scope during peak hours. Thameslink trains would all become eight-car from December 2006, but longer trains could not be accommodated until the Thameslink 2000 project was completed.

The Gatwick Express was protected from competition by the moderation of competition provisions in the Thameslink and Southern franchise agreements.

The 'last 12 months' provisions in the franchise ensured that an incumbent operator could not drive down prices before handing a franchise to a successor. During this period all changes to fares had to be agreed with the DfT. The original Thameslink franchise was set to expire on 1 April 2004. This had been extended for two years and is currently therefore subject to the 'last 12 months' provisions for the second time.

The Brighton Main Line (BML) Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) aimed to improve performance for all users and to reduce overcrowding for commuters. The Gatwick Express contributed to problems by occupying platforms in the middle of the line; by running with only eight cars even in peaks (when the stations on this line could take 12 cars); and by crossing from fast to slow lines eight times an hour. The BML RUS proposed to transfer Gatwick Express services to Southern; running them through to the coast; and running them with 12 cars during the peaks.

The original timetable had envisaged that BML RUS proposals would be decided by March 2005 and implemented in December 2005. Implementation would proceed in December 2006 if appropriate decisions were taken to meet that timescale.

Work on the Thameslink 2000 project would not now begin before January 2007 at the earliest and would take five years to complete.

The acquisition by Southern of new rolling stock was driven by the requirement built into the franchise to replace the slam-door stock for health and safety reasons. In the case of Thameslink the stock dated from the late 1980s with a design life of 30 years, but they would be refurbished during the course of the new franchise.