

# ANYONE'S RACE

**As the Strategic Rail Authority prepares to announce the result of the contest for the East Coast Mainline, Alan Whitehouse looks at the four contenders and finds it difficult to pick a winner**

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Early in the new year we should know who has won the race for what is often described as the most prestigious train operating franchise in Britain: the East Coast Main Line (ECML).

Hopefully, this time around there will be no repeat of the shambles that marked the first aborted attempt to re-let the franchise three years ago. Then, the SRA found itself attempting to compare apples and oranges thanks to its invitation to the two bidders, GNER and Virgin, to submit any proposal, no matter how wacky.

The result was titling trains versus a new high-speed line, and a threat from both bidders that they would be consulting m'learned friend if they lost. After that, the contest was hastily declared null-and-void, with the SRA using a franchise extension for GNER as a get out of jail card.

This time, the contest will be fought along more predictable lines. Virgin, for example, will be wary of promising the earth because, in the current climate, it will be seen as undeliverable.

First Group wants the franchise to consolidate what it hopes will be a firm grip on the inter-city network. If successful, it will, together with Virgin, effectively control the long-distance market, leaving National Express to look after medium-distance services, in the form of Greater Anglia and Midland Mainline.

Next up is the joint bid from Danish state railways and the rail freight operator, EWS. This has to be an outsider, if only because of both companies' complete lack of experience of operating domestic passenger services. But don't write them off just yet.

None of the four bidders could be said to have been shouting from the rooftops about how their bid will transform the ECML overnight. But

DSB/EWS has gone on record to say that its bid will contain some radical cost-cutting measures capable of saving many millions of pounds a year.

On a franchise that is already delivering an annual premium of £22m, that is an attention-grabbing statement, particularly for a cash-strapped SRA. But the Danes and the heavy haulers have one other card up their sleeve.

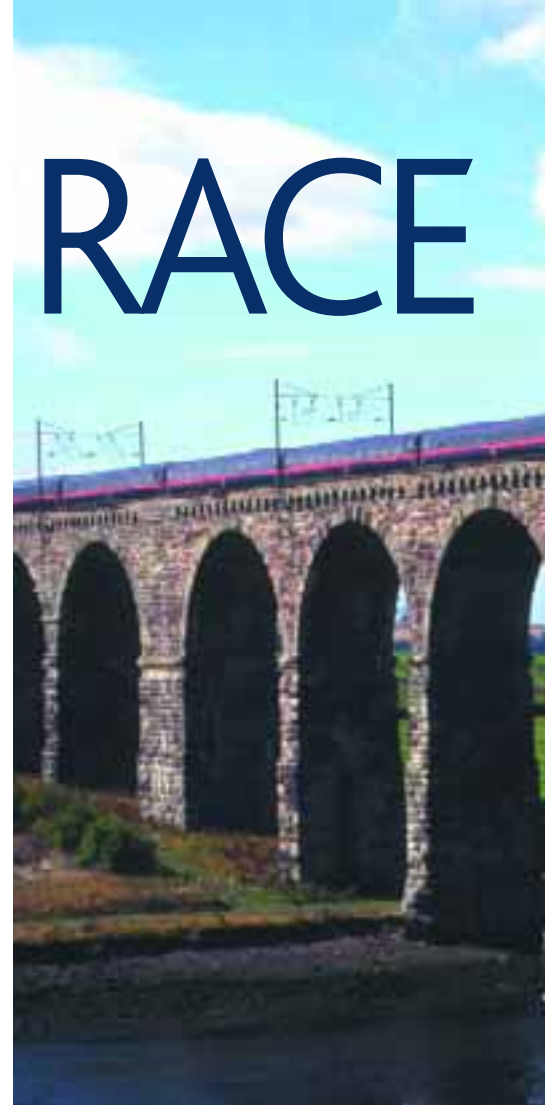
Relentless growth in long-distance rail travel will require innovative rolling stock solutions. EWS has redundant Class 90 electric locomotives. It has already been tinkering with driving van trailers and there's a pile of redundant Mk IIIs lying around. Some are shot, but you would only have to put together about 10 good sets to come up with a cost effective – or cheap – solution to the problem of finding more seats.

That leaves the incumbent GNER. It will fight like a tiger to hang on to this franchise. And it enjoys a huge amount of public support and goodwill.

Despite its mediocre performance record, GNER is still head and shoulders above other long-distance operators, simply because most have performance records that give rise to despair.

GNER's public popularity is partly explained by its good on-board service, quality food and a thoughtful refurbishment programme that has lifted the Mk IV sets out of the mediocre league. GNER can also point to the millions it has spent on replacing air-conditioning that often failed to work, and reconditioning its fleet of Class 91s to get rid of the tuppence ha'penny components that were dragging down reliability.

So far so good, but none of this is exactly a franchise-winner. But does it have a rabbit to pull



out of the hat in the shape of timetabling?

It's an open secret that GNER has been showing a keen interest in the Swiss timetable model, the taktfahrplan. The SRA made it plain when setting out the base case refranchising documents that it would like to see some timetabling innovation and it may be that GNER has something radical up its sleeve.

What cannot be ignored, when considering the relative merits of all four contenders, is the Government's aspiration to see fewer, bigger Tocs. The Greater Western, Greater Anglia, the plans to dismember Central Trains, and combining



Electrification equipment is 30 years old on some parts of the East Coast.



Great Northern with Thameslink, show clearly how government thinking is developing.

Despite its public backing, this makes GNER a tempting target. Give the franchise to First Group and you create two powerful blocs running the long distance services between them. In this scenario, the Department for Transport reaps the rewards of having fewer people to deal with, while proponents of a franchised railway struggle to keep a straight face as they extol the benefits for passengers of competition in the industry.

The paradox in this is that it's the smaller companies that have provided the best service. GNER's reputation for customer care is legendary and something that none of the Tocs run by larger companies has managed to equal. The same could be said of Chiltern Railways, another relative minnow, but one with a big reputation for both customer service and innovation.

It's a knotty problem for the DfT and the Treasury. Do you want a few big players, or – in the case of the ECML – an operator that knows the business inside out?

That might be an important factor because the ECML is getting a bit long in the tooth, especially at the southern end where electrification equipment dates back to the 1970s, as does signalling as far north as Doncaster.

The base case timetable speaks worryingly about cyclical midweek night access, something that will inevitably impact on late-night and,

possibly, early-morning journeys.

Anyone who has followed the fortunes of the West Coast Main Line over the last 20 years can see on the ECML the early signs of that long, lazy spiral downwards, where big infrastructure and renewals projects are delayed, postponed and cancelled and, instead, patch-and-mend keeps the show on the road.

This is all a long way from Railtrack's vision of new flyovers, viaducts and state-of-the-art computer signalling systems. Right now all that is on offer is the Allington Chord, which is important because it clears a bottleneck and may help with some of those innovative timetabling proposals, but will not provide solutions to long-term problems.

With 30 per cent growth predicted on the ECML in the next eight years, thought must be given to how capacity can be increased.

This is why the outcome of the contest for the ECML franchise should not be decided by a crude, first-past-the-post affair. It requires more careful thought about the total package of train, service levels and infrastructure that the West Coast route never received. With the SRA's days numbered, that overview can only come from the DfT. So far, there is little evidence that it properly understands the importance of this contest. If it did, talk of midweek overnight closures and other such nonsensical notions would not even be on the agenda.

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