

POWER

It's normally a loss of electrical power that stops the trains and causes inconvenience to passengers. But in the West Midlands it's the loss of a different kind of power that's currently worrying commuters.

Peter Plisner **has been investigating**

The message from the transport secretary couldn't have been clearer: 'I will act to give the local transport authorities that need them real powers to make a real difference.' Bold words from Douglas Alexander, who was speaking at this year's Labour Party conference.

But what was he talking about? No, not the railways, but the buses! Since privatisation, in the mid-1980s, passenger transport authorities and executives around the country have complained that they have not been able to improve patronage because of a lack of control. Now it looks as though their prayers have been answered.

But why should the current happenings in the bus industry be of interest to readers of a rail magazine? The reason is, at a time when the Government's on the verge of delivering 'real powers' to local councils to control the buses, in some parts of the country Ministers are taking policy in the opposite direction when it comes to the trains.

When privatisation of the railways came along, many local authorities, particularly those in conurbations, were keen to avoid the free-for-all that existed on the buses and as a result lobbied successfully to become co-signatories to franchise agreements. It meant that they effectively became an equal partner with the train operating company in the running of the franchise. More importantly, it gave them a great deal of control over the way the Tocs ran services. Aside from the odd spat, the co-signatory concept has worked well and has, to a certain degree, ensured that service levels have remained, more or less unchanged throughout the period.

DRAIN



Centro's Network Safety and Security Control Room – CCTV images from hundreds of cameras are monitored here.

It's also helped to maintain standards of reliability and punctuality. Under the arrangement, passenger transport authorities (PTAs) and passenger transport executives (PTEs) have also been able to provide the funds for things like additional late-night services and better staffing of stations – something that wouldn't normally be commercially viable. But that could be about to come to an end.

In the West Midlands, the DfT is in the middle

of a major refranchising exercise. Three bidders have been shortlisted and, as *Rail Professional* went to press, they were expected to be asked to submit bids under a new franchising regime that doesn't involve the PTA, or the PTE, which operates under the Centro banner. The Railways Act 2005 removed the automatic right for these bodies to be co-signatories with franchises and it's left many in the region deeply concerned about the future. Keith Chambers, rail member of the West



The new franchises in the Midlands are likely to have less input from local authorities.

Midlands Passenger Transport Authority, says: 'We feel that the PTA and Centro are much better placed at a local level to determine what is best for the rail users in the West Midlands.'

The changes come at a time when the Government is still talking about devolving more powers to a local level. In an effort to halt the changes, a major lobbying exercise has been launched. Chambers says: 'We have written to over 150 stakeholders, including MPs and members of the House of Lords – and the business community – asking for their support. The feedback we've had back has been absolutely excellent.'

In a joint response to a DfT consultation document on the new arrangements, Centro and PTA spelt out their collective concerns. They have worries on a number of levels. Currently, Centro takes a share of the revenue risk with Central Trains and, as a result, has control over the level of fares charged throughout the day. Under the new arrangements, peak-time fares remain regulated with the national formula of RPI-plus one per cent, but there will be no such regulation for off-peak fares.

Another issue is the proposed change in loading standards. In the West Midlands, for every 100 seated passengers, only 10 are allowed to stand and for no more than 15 minutes. However, the changes mean the London measure called PIXC will be used instead. It allows 35 standing passengers for 20 minutes for every 100 seated. Keith Chambers says: 'We've always taken the view that the standards we apply are more appropriate to the West Midlands. Unlike London

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and the south-east, the West Midlands travellers do have an alternative and are more likely to change modes from rail to car. And that's the exact opposite of what we want to see in the West Midlands.'

Another major issue is a loss of control of the service-level commitment, what used to be called the passenger service requirement or PSR. Centro would like a service from Wolverhampton to Walsall to be retained, but the DfT has already indicated that it's unlikely to survive. Previously, as long as the PTE has provided the funding, the service ran. Under the new rules that won't automatically happen. However, the DfT has indicated that relevant authorities will be given the ability to vary service specification or fares, provided they bear the cost.

There's also uncertainty about the staffing of stations. Phil Davies, chairman of the rail watchdog group, TravelWatch West Midlands says: 'The current Centro specification includes certain minimal standards about station staffing. They require any operator at a staffed station to ensure it's staffed from the first train to the last train. This is, of course, not just useful operationally, but valuable for personal security and passenger safety reasons. It is unclear that

the DfT franchise requirements will specify this. My guess is that they will not, despite the heightened fear of terrorism.'

The changes being proposed come at a time when rail patronage in several conurbations outside London is growing faster than ever before. In the last decade, rail patronage in the West Midlands has grown by 40 per cent. Some are concerned that any changes might have a major affect on the upward trend. Johnathan Bray, spokesperson for the PTE lobbying group PTEG, says: 'PTEs have used their franchise powers in supporting and promoting their urban rail networks. It's one factor in these rail networks' extraordinary success story, with passenger growth now faster than in London and the south east.'

So why is the Government pushing through the changes? Some have suggested that ministers and civil servants could be still playing out the post-Hatfield agenda of securing the railways' finances by centralising control. Bray admits that, in the desire to keep a tight reign on the railways' finances, it's quite understandable. However, he maintains that with the PTEs, the Government is picking the wrong target. He adds: 'We have always used our franchise powers in a responsible and effective way, and the DfT has yet to provide hard evidence to the contrary. PTE rail powers are an example of devolution that works.'

Not surprisingly, those planning to bid for the West Midlands franchise have chosen not to comment on the proposed changes. It's been argued that this will allow more flexibility – and, perhaps, a chance to make bigger profits than in the past. However, the Association of Train Operating Companies maintains that much of the regulation in place now remains within a framework determined by the Government.

A spokesperson for Atoc says: 'Train operators invariably have good local relationships with the PTEs and PTAs, and are happy to work with them to achieve the best possible local/regional rail services for passengers and the community.'

Many feel that the loss of local control of the franchise is a detrimental step, which can only lead to a lowering of standards. Lobbying efforts are now concentrating on encouraging Douglas Alexander to invoke a clause in the Railways Act 2005, which gives him power to allow PTEs to co-sign the franchise. All the DfT will say is that it's currently considering Centro's formal request. But before it makes a decision it will need to ask the successful bidder to consider the financial impact of agreeing to it. And that means the current uncertainty will continue well into next year.

Peter Plisner is the BBC's Midlands transport correspondent.