

# Concern over Welsh franchise consultation

Fears expressed as the Welsh Government keeps its cards close to its chest about the new Wales & Borders rail franchise. **Rhodri Clark** reports

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► There is growing unhappiness over the quality of consultation on the new Wales & Borders franchise, after a Welsh Government officer said the specification would remain under wraps until the 15-year contract had been awarded.

Last week the Welsh Government's Transport for Wales company completed its second and final consultation on the franchise, which is due to begin in October 2018. However, critics say TfW has focused on background issues and market research, instead of canvassing feedback on the proposed future services for each line.

At the Welsh Assembly's inquiry into the franchise's procurement, Plaid Cymru AM Adam Price asked if the draft specification would be published. Simon Jones, the Welsh Government's director of transport, replied: "No, because it's draft and it's part of the process. I think once the final specification is dealt with and we've been able to award a contract, then that finalised specification is something that ministers could consider making public."

TfW is using a "competitive dialogue" process with bidders to help shape the franchise specification, which may include splitting off the Core Valley Lines for conversion to light rail.

Infrastructure secretary Ken Skates said TfW would assess how bidders respond to feedback from TfW's public consultations,



Four bidders, including incumbent Arriva, are vying for the 15-year contract

"And then, through the process of competitive dialogue or the next phase of it, we'll be able to judge what best aligns with citizens' expectations, based on those consultations."

Commenting later, Dr Andrew Potter, chairman of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport Cymru, said TfW's latest consultation appeared to be focused on background issues, or even market research where respondents were asked to rank issues such as legroom in trains and seats aligning with windows. This was not a substitute for

providing clear indications as to what would be in the documents for franchise procurement, said Potter.

"This contrasts with the English franchises, where the final consultation is on a more detailed document. It's useful to compare the Wales & Borders franchise with South Eastern, as these are on similar timescales for the start of the new franchise. What is clear is that the DfT has a much clearer vision as to what the franchise will look like and that stakeholders can comment accordingly.

"Given the financial commitment by the [Welsh] government and the long term nature of the decisions being made, it would be beneficial if a more detailed vision was made publicly available ahead of the formal Invitation to Tender being issued."

**"Implementation of this franchise process... is confusing"**  
**Sheila Dee**

He suggested that it may be appropriate to extend Arriva Trains Wales' franchise, to enable public feedback on the specification during the procurement process. "However, there are risks with this, such as the replacement timescale for rolling stock, which need to be considered."

Railfuture Cymru said TfW had not sought to "fully capture the rich knowledge of Welsh rail services that exists amongst the communities of Wales".

The four bidders - Abellio, Arriva, Keolis-Amey and MTR - have been meeting some stakeholders separately. However, Sheila Dee, community rail officer at the Chester Shrewsbury Rail Partnership, told the Assembly inquiry: "The implementation of this franchise process and the engagement with stakeholders is confusing.

"Workshop invitations appear to be random, with many relying on word of mouth to seek an invitation. The 'rules of engagement', with bidders apparently being constrained to meeting with elected members with a transport portfolio or 'of influence', again has been restrictive.

"The scope of the stakeholder list is also unclear. This is a Wales & Borders franchise and ... will be vitally important for the development of those English regions."

She also said no information had been provided on the franchise's governance. "The needs of the English regions need to be appreciated and included, both in the specification and the ongoing governance. The English regions need to be included in any decisions that are made on how the franchise is developed or changes made to the services offered." ■