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## West of England Franchise Proposed

The £5.6 billion renewal of infrastructure on the Great Western route which has included signalling and electrification has prompted the Department for Transport (DfT) to consider the future of the operational franchise in order to maximise the commercial opportunity that improved services will provide.

After experience from the enlarged Thameslink Southern and Great Northern franchise sentiment has grown that mega franchises do not work well in terms of the customer interest with a potential for the removal of local decision making and loss of market focus.

The most recent user statistics published by the Office of Rail and Road have also raised the tempo of debate as rail passenger numbers in Britain fell by 1.1% based on a year-on-year comparison to the end of 2017. Although revenue from ticket sales increased by 2.6% but this was below the 3.5% level of inflation for the year.

The availability of this data coincides with a review being undertaken of the geographic area to be covered by the future Great Western franchise which is currently scheduled to start in April 2020. Stakeholder consultation has taken place on the merits of dividing the current network into two operational areas as a mechanism to improve market response and tailor the product more closely to demand drivers.

The creation of a *West of England franchise* is proposed that would run current services provided by the Great Western Railway between Penzance and London and associated secondary routes and branches which includes services that offer connectivity between Weymouth, Portsmouth, Brighton and Bristol / Cardiff.

The devolution of the Network Rail investment budget to Route Directors has also brought a need for greater stakeholder engagement with communities served to improve rail connectivity. The MetroWest project that will provide enhanced local services in the Bristol area is already a well-developed plan.

Similarly, a Devon Metro network that seeks to improve the timetable and open new stations to serve Exeter is also planned and the creation of a new *West of England franchise* would bring development expertise including opportunities for funding.



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absorbed into the Great Western franchise at a time when larger TOC's were favoured to reduce operational complexity.

*Over the course of the last 20 years FCP has been responsible for the many aspects involved with franchise re-mapping. This requires changes to the allocation of physical assets and staff resources and in-depth experience can be offered for the processes needed when franchise boundary changes occur.*