

les of track

engineers from the Far East and working alongside Network Rail will make it best-placed to help to avoid the inevitable travelling chaos at London Bridge, one of Thameslink's

the London Overground network, will try to convince Justine Greening, the Transport Secretary, that it has the necessary experience of running busy tracks and commuter trains in Hong Kong.

The Bedford-to-Brighton Thameslink service has been dogged by controversy. Not only are the big infrastructure works on the line through Central London being completed years late, but also the Government caused a storm by selecting Siemens trains instead of the British-built Bombardiers as the new rolling stock for the upgraded line.

The new franchise — it is now operated by FirstGroup — will be as much about managing the infrastructure around London Bridge as it will be about running trains, according to Jeremy Long, the veteran railwayman who runs MTR's UK operations.

"The complete redevelopment and remodelling of London Bridge is going to be a massive challenge for Network Rail and the new franchisee," Mr Long said. "If MTR wins the Thameslink franchise, we would look at bringing in our infrastructure experts from Hong Kong to work side-by-side with Network Rail and using our fundamental understanding of the issues facing Network Rail to see how as the operator we can deliver the project together more successfully."

The £6 billion Thameslink infrastructure programmes are particularly complex, taking in the rebuilds at Blackfriars and Farringdon, which is also an interchange for the east-west Crossrail network under construction.

Work is expected to start next year at London Bridge station, which handles 54 million passengers a year. The

2½ minutes.

The operation of a more closely integrated network bringing together the track operator (Network Rail) and train operator would be a first in Britain since privatisation. Such a joint vehicle running a franchise is envisaged in the Department for Transport's McNulty report into making the railways cheaper to run.

Mr Long, however, does not see that revolutionary. He says that a similar closely integrated operation has been

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in place, with MTR working with Transport for London on the London Overground and especially in the development of the East London line. The London Overground franchise is run in a joint venture between MTR and Deutsche Bahn — another with extensive experience of running track and train operations in Germany.

MTR is also bidding for the Essex Thameside franchise, better known as c2c. The Fenchurch Street-to-Southend line is seen as the sort of geographically contained network where a closely integrated track-and-train operation would bring better value for money.

"In Hong Kong, MTR runs an integrated railway," Mr Long said. "This means we have the knowledge and understanding to look at how to get the best from both operations and infrastructure. In a post-McNulty world, it is this more holistic view that will help to deliver real efficiencies for the UK rail industry."

## Blackpool tremors reopen questions over fracking

Tim Webb

A loophole that allowed the shale gas driller Cuadrilla Resources to start "fracking" operations in Britain without carrying out a full environmental impact report is being reviewed.

Two earth tremors were detected near Blackpool last summer during Cuadrilla's hydraulic fracturing operations, in which water, sand and chemicals are blasted into shale layers underground to release natural gas.

An environmental impact report was not required from Cuadrilla because its drilling site was smaller than one hectare. The bores below the site, however, spread across a wider area underground.

The exemption is under review, according to Tony Grayling, the head of climate change and communities at the Environment Agency. He added that the agency was also examining the risk of water contamination. American environmental authorities recently suggested that the technique had polluted drinking water.

Mr Grayling said: "Cuadrilla did not have to carry out a proper environmental impact assessment because the area covered was lower than the threshold.

But has the threshold been set at the right level? That could be an area of government policy to look at. We are undertaking due diligence to see if the regulatory framework is fully robust."

He added that the review, undertaken in conjunction with government departments and the Health and Safety Executive, was not complete.

Mr Grayling said that tremors set off by fracking would heighten the risk of water contamination, because they could damage the casing of the pipes that have drilled through aquifers. "We need to understand what is the maximum damage that might be done in such circumstances to a well and the integrity of the casing, whether it would increase the risk of a leak. If there is ground water in the vicinity, that could be a problem," he said.

Full environmental impact assessments are expensive. They must include the effects on plants and animals and the effects of site traffic and would be submitted to the local planning authority.

Jenny Banks, of the World Wildlife Fund, said that because of revelations in the United States, environment assessments should be mandatory in Britain.

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