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Network Rail told to fix punctuality or be fined

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Network Rail stands to receive a £42m fine in 2014 if long distance train punctuality remains at current levels and continues to fall short of targets.

The Office of Rail Regulation has instructed Network Rail to deliver plans agreed with train operators for better levels of punctuality on long distance services in 2012-13 and speed up further improvements towards meeting its committed punctuality target of 92% in 2013-14.

If the company fails to hit the 2013-14 target it will be fined £1.5m per 0.1 percentage point it drops below the 92% punctuality target - which equates to 43,661 long distance trains running 10 or more minutes late or being cancelled per year. Network Rail's current long distance punctuality is 89.2% which if maintained would result in a £42m fine, payable in or after April 2014. The ORR says Network Rail has firmly committed plans which would take it to 90.4%.

Passengers are experiencing good levels of punctuality by historical standards, says the regulator, but Network Rail committed to achieving more and taxpayers and customers have paid the company to deliver. An investigation by the ORR found that while incidents outside Network Rail control such as cable theft have affected punctuality, problems with timetable planning and predicting and spotting equipment failures are of the company's own making.

Richard Price, chief executive of the ORR, said: "We expect Network Rail to hit their targets and to achieve this by implementing sustainable improvements that really benefit passengers. In the last year, approximately 13.7m passengers' journeys on long distance trains were affected by late or cancelled trains and this is unacceptable. That is why we are proposing a penalty which puts pressure on Network Rail to achieve its funded target - an incentive for the company to do everything it can to deliver improvements for passengers including reducing the number of long delays that impact so badly on rail users."

The regulator says that when it sets Network Rail's funding for Control Period 5 (2014-2019) it will take into account failure to deliver the outputs for which the company was paid in the current period. In its annual assessment of Network Rail's financial performance the ORR will also consider whether it should adjust its assessment of efficiency for a failure to deliver the commitments.

David Higgins, chief executive of Network Rail, said: "We welcome the ORR's recognition that we, and the train operating companies, have already done much to improve long distance punctuality in this control period - which is currently running at a record level of 89.2% for the past year - and we accept the challenge to deliver an even better service."

Michael Roberts, chief executive of the Association of Train Operating Companies, added: "The regulator is right to take a firm line with Network Rail. The big problem for long distance rail passengers is lack of consistency in train service punctuality and Network Rail needs to do a better job of managing the track and signals to resolve this."

A spokesman for long distance train operator Virgin said: "We welcome the ORR's action to focus NR's attention on long distance routes and press for urgently-needed improvements. However, we are disappointed that there is no focus on immediate improvement, as we and our customers want to see

Virgin West Coast: long distance route recorded 87.3% punctuality (PPM) in April 2012



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short term progress, especially as the Olympics and Paralympics will be a showcase for the industry. The problem has been highlighted in recent days as improved weather has ruined performance through heat-related delays with some days being at around 60% punctuality. Also, Network Rail will only achieve its 2014 target if there is immediate improvement."

The ORR has concluded that Network Rail is likely to be in breach of its licence with regards to performance in the long distance sector in 2013-14 and proposes to make an enforcement order requiring Network Rail to further review and develop plans to meet, as far as reasonably practical, its committed performance target of 92%. In January 2012 the regulator issued an enforcement order requiring Network Rail to develop new, robust plans to help recover long distance performance, showing that it is doing everything reasonably practicable to deliver the performance commitments it has made for long distance services in 2012-2013.

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