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Ministry delays West Coast report

By Mark Odell

The Department for Transport has delayed the publication of an internal report into the West Coast rail fiasco, days before MPs were expecting to scrutinise its findings in a Commons hearing.

Sam Laidlaw, chief executive of Centrica and a non-executive director of the department, handed over his final report into what went wrong with the West Coast rail tender on Wednesday but ministers have decided against immediate publication.

Patrick McLoughlin, transport secretary, had previously indicated he would make the report's findings public shortly after its submission.

MPs on the Commons transport committee had planned to question Mr Laidlaw and his co-author Ed Smith, the former chairman of PwC and another non-executive at the department, on the report at a hearing on Tuesday.

"I am concerned about the failure of the government to produce the report as promised without any notification," said Louise Ellman, who chairs the transport committee. "Major errors at the department have already been exposed and actions like this will only increase concerns. This is not the way to handle the crisis."

Mr Laidlaw produced a scathing interim report last month into the decision to hand the West Coast franchise to FirstGroup ahead of Virgin Rail, the incumbent operator, for the next 16 years. The deal was unexpectedly cancelled in October after the discovery of "serious flaws" in the award process following a legal challenge by Virgin Rail.

The department said the government still planned to publish the report, possibly by the end of next week, but cautioned that commercial or legal considerations might prevent it being published in full.

"It is a complex and detailed document and we need a bit of time to consider it," it said. Mr Laidlaw, who could not be reached for comment, is understood to be angered at the hold-up in publication.

Ms Ellman said she had received no notice of the delay despite writing to Mr McLoughlin last week notifying him of her plans to summon the report's authors. She said the committee

would discuss on Monday how to respond.

The timing is awkward for the government as the most senior of the three officials suspended by the department over the West Coast debacle will appear in court on Thursday after launching legal action against the ministry.

Kate Mingay, director of commercial and technical services at the department and a former Goldman Sachs banker, is expected to claim her career has been damaged by her suspension before the conclusion of an official inquiry into what happened.

Rail industry executives, who have worked with Mrs Mingay believe she has been made a scapegoat, and describe the atmosphere within the department as poisonous, amid reports of infighting among officials as to who is to blame.

Mrs Mingay was suspended on October 3 just after the government said “completely unacceptable mistakes” had been made in the handling of the West Coast bid. Also suspended were John Gilbert, head of rail procurement, and Supriya Bhol, another more junior civil servant.

She issued a statement within days of her suspension, accusing the department of “inaccurately” portraying her role through statements and comments. Mrs Mingay said she “did not have lead responsibility for this project”.

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