

Virgin faces competition from Arriva for the West Coast Main Line



The introduction of services to poorly served destinations threatens also to revive ailing or closed stations en route
Alamy

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Having been frozen out of the battle to take control of the West Coast Main Line, Arriva is pressing the rail regulator to allow it to launch services from London to northern towns in competition with Virgin Trains.

The German-owned group has lodged applications to launch direct services between Euston and the likes of Huddersfield, Blackpool, Rochdale and Barrow-in-Furness that remain unserved by Virgin. If it gets the nod, it is understood that Arriva could order high-speed Pendolino tilting trains — like Virgin's — on the services.

The Office of the Rail Regulator has filed papers with Network Rail to see how such services can be fitted into the network timetable. An initial decision is due by the spring.

Arriva is going ahead with its so-called open access application after the success of its Grand Central operation on the East Coast Main Line, running into and out of King's



Cross from Sunderland in the North East and Bradford in West Yorkshire.

Open access is the mechanism by which non-franchised train companies can run services on the same tracks as incumbent operators but with no recourse to Government subsidy or profit-share arrangements. Grand Central was launched in 2007 as an independent operator, backed by money from Eddie Davies, the tax exile kettle magnate who owns Bolton Wanderers. However, it was only after it was bought by Deutsche Bahn and its British subsidiary Arriva 15 months ago that it turned its first profit, last year.

Buoyed by that success, Ian Yeowart, the veteran railwayman and former Grand Central chief, is working up Arriva's open access plans on the West Coast Main

Line. At present, residents of Huddersfield and Rochdale have to change at Manchester; Blackpool and Barrow passengers have to decant at Preston.

Mr Yeowart has the rights to the GNWR brand — Great North West Railways — which it is understood will be used if the regulator gives the go-ahead.

Arriva is also looking at extending Grand Central's operations to direct London services to Skipton, the North Yorkshire town for which travellers now have to change at Leeds.

Richard McClean, Grand Central's managing director, said: "We believe that rather than sidelining our application, the delay in the award of the West Coast Main Line franchise actually clarifies the position.

"The success of Grand Central has focused the plans for open access operations on the West Coast Main Line. There is plenty of capacity on the lines on which to run more trains. These would be additional services, not instead of."

It had been feared that the collapse of the West Coast Main Line retendering process, in which FirstGroup was pitched against Virgin, could have sent Arriva's proposals into the long grass. Arriva failed to make it on to the West Coast shortlist. The regulator, however, has confirmed that it is talking to Network Rail, the track operator, over the application.

The Government's hopes for widespread "open access" operations have not been a success. FirstGroup runs the only other existing operation, to Hull on the East Coast Main Line. Services operated — by Deutsche Bahn — from London to Shropshire and North Wales were closed two years ago because of losses.

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Marco42

3 days ago

According to the Department for Transport, the West Coast Main Line is full which is why they say we need a new high speed line in HS2. However, according to this, not only is it not full, there is sufficient capacity for another company to run trains. They can't both be right, can they?

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Chris Miller

3 days ago

"Arriva could order high-speed Pendolino tilting trains" - they'd have difficulty reaching their destination since those highlighted are not fully electrified. Probably you mean the tilting version of the (diesel) Voyager sets.

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