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Slow EU reform could halt Eurostar expansion

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Mock-up of new Eurostar Velaro 320 train

Eurostar is reconsidering plans to serve new destinations, including Amsterdam, Cologne and Geneva, in 2015 due to the likelihood of track access charges remaining costly and unpredictable.

The company has previously stated that it planned to use its 10 new Velaro trainsets, due to come into service in 2014 and 2015, to expand into new countries (TB 7097). However, the European Commission's slow pace in reforming access charge payments for cross-border European services means the trains could now be used solely to increase frequency on London-Paris, Eurostar's most profitable current route.

Chairman Richard Brown said unless progress was made the cost of operating London-Amsterdam services was "simply not economic".

Eurostar views Amsterdam, in particular, as a lucrative potential market. But the combination of high Channel Tunnel charges, high berthing charges in Amsterdam and the varying level of access charges in the UK, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, means ticket prices would be uncompetitive with airlines without action from the commission.

New reforms set out in the commission's Fourth Railway Package are seen as inadequate to open up new markets, particularly in terms of assurance over future costs and their predictability. The absence of measures to compel national infrastructure operators to collaborate so that international high speed rail can compete with airlines on routes crossing multiple borders is a further issue.

"We would say that, frankly, the package does not go far enough if you want to open up international passenger services for faster growth," Brown said.

"We would like to have seen this package contain provisions for much stronger regulation within each country," he added. "Stronger regulation of the level and predictability of infrastructure charges is, we would say, the most important single obstacle to faster growth for international passenger services."



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PASSENGER TRANSPORT

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