

Suddenly, it seems that everybody wants to go to Blackpool on the train



Blackpool is heavily reliant on tourism Martin Child/Getty Images

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A battle to run direct high-speed rail services between London and Blackpool for the first time in more than a decade is creating a political headache at the Department for Transport.

The Lancashire seaside resort fell off Virgin Trains' direct intercity rail timetable after a rejig of priorities at the turn of the millennium. Now, with two competing offers to run direct train services to London, the town has become a test case for politicians over how far they want to encourage competition on the railways.

Virgin's decision effectively killed Blackpool's long tradition of hosting the annual conferences of the big political parties and is blamed for having a negative effect on attracting investment.

Great North Western Railways, a privately owned train company backed by Arriva and its parent Deutsche Bahn, has spent three years trying to persuade the Office of the Rail Regulator to allow it to launch five direct Euston-Blackpool services each way per day. It has made an application under so-called Open Access regulations, which allow any train company to launch services against incumbent franchised train operators.

With Great North Western's application pending with the regulator, it now appears that GNWR's plans will be trumped by Virgin itself. After last autumn's West Coast Main Line refranchising fiasco, Virgin has been granted a multi-year extension in which it now says it wants to restart direct services to Blackpool, with one train each way in the morning and in the evening.

If the DfT were to agree within the next fortnight or so, Network Rail could rework timetables and enable the services to be running by next December.

It is understood that Virgin's application has created tension between politicians and civil servants within the DfT over whether Great North Western should be allowed a free run at running the Blackpool services.

Ian Yeoward, the veteran railwayman behind GNWR, said: "We would not object to anyone's application to run new services to Blackpool, but it is bit ironic that that, having withdrawn the services, Virgin now wants to start running them again."

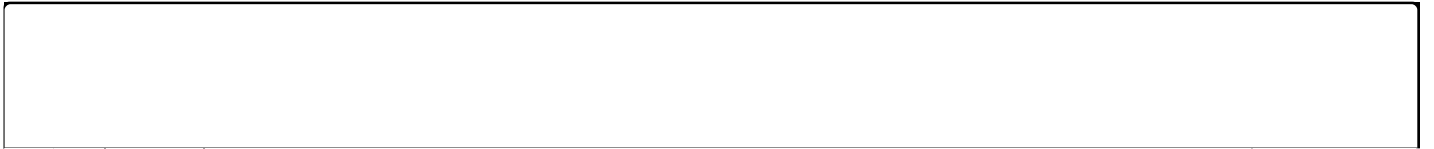
A spokesman for Virgin Trains, which also has applied to restart direct London-Shrewsbury services, said: "We have put in our proposals and we await the decision."

The DfT declined to comment.

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Michael Daventry

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