

Virgin Rail given extension to run West Coast main line

Virgin Rail Group has been handed a three year extension to its franchise to run the West Coast main line which will see it operate rail services on the route until April, 2017.



Virgin Rail, a joint venture between Virgin and Stagecoach, which owns 49 per cent of the business, saw its franchise extended to November, 2014 last year.

The Department for Transport had initially awarded a 23 year franchise to run the West Coast line to First Group, but the contract had to be scrapped due to DfT errors.

Following the abandonment, Virgin and the DfT reached a deal to run the franchise until November 2014.

There are also delays to the start-up dates of a number of other franchises, including the Northern and TransPennine franchises, operated by FirstGroup, which were extended to February, 2016.

Emma Antrobus, transport policy manager at Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, said: "After the Department for Transport's failure to award the West Coast franchise properly in Autumn, 2012 and the Brown review of franchising, it is imperative that a new approach is adopted and allowed to become established.

"Government must ensure that the terms of the franchise extensions are not detrimental to allowing train operators to invest in stations and other services, which could lead to

worsening of rail services for business travellers and commuters.”

The announcements are the result of an independent review into the West Coast failure and another into the whole rail franchise process.

Transport secretary Patrick McLoughlin said: “This programme is a major step in delivering tangible improvements to services, providing long-term certainty to the market and supporting our huge programme of rail investment.

”Above all, in future franchise competitions we are placing passengers in the driving seat by ensuring that their views and satisfaction levels are taken into account when deciding which companies run our railway services.”

But rail unions highlighted the fact that the taxpayer is likely to have to foot a bill as high as £50 million over the botched West Coast franchise.

RMT general secretary Bob Crow said: “Despite wasting hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on the franchising circus, and instead of learning the lessons of the privatisation disasters on the East and West Coast main lines and across the rest of the network, the government has this morning given the green light to a whole new wave of profiteering that will have the train companies laughing all the way to the bank.”

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