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Virgin seeks control of Network Rail stations

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Virgin Trains is lobbying for all aspects of passenger information and customer service at major stations to transfer from Network Rail to train operators.

The company, which operates trains serving six of the 17 major stations managed by Network Rail, has blamed low overall passenger satisfaction scores at its stations (80%, compared to 92% satisfaction with the overall service) on Network Rail prioritising retail opportunities over customer care.

Setting out its case to the Office of Rail Regulation, Virgin said Network Rail's lack of focus on train operators' and customers' requirements at major stations was evident throughout its route, including at Euston, Birmingham New Street and Glasgow Central.

Examples included insufficient seating at Euston, causing passengers to sit on the concourse floor, poor quality announcements, insufficient staff presence, and the dominance of retailers' brands over train operators' branding.

Virgin Trains chief operating officer Chris Gibb said that performance at the six stations was "absolutely key to the success of our operation". However, Network Rail's priorities were being skewed by chasing retail revenue, despite Virgin paying Network Rail over £200m a year for use of Euston. "Sainsbury's and Boots brands are more prominent at Euston than the Virgin Trains brand. Is it because Sainsbury's and Boots payments are in the highly prized 'unregulated income' category?" he commented.

Under Virgin's proposals, Network Rail would retain responsibility for the upkeep of buildings, security and developing retail opportunities, with customer service being managed by operators.

At the stations which Virgin manages, Virgin and Network Rail are discussing how to progress "immediate initiatives" that would have been taken forward under a new West Coast franchise, but were stalled when the competition was cancelled last October. They include automatic ticket gating, wifi internet access, extending shelters to provide cover for passengers waiting for lengthened Pendolino trains and improved information. Longer term, Virgin Active health clubs could be built at stations.

Euston: Virgin says it pays Network Rail more than £200m a year to use the station



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