

Rail journey times could fall, but union threatens strike over job cuts

Journey times on two of Britain's key railway lines could be cut under industry plans to overhaul the network's ageing signalling system.



Network Rail facing demands for efficiency savings Photo: Getty Images

By David Millward, Transport Editor

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But the plans, which passenger groups fear will be funded by above inflation fare rises, could be scuppered by the threat of a national rail strike by the signallers' union, RMT.

The threat from Bob Crow, the union's general secretary, came as the industry regulator demanded £2 billion savings from Network Rail between 2014-19 while increasing services and improving punctuality.

A key element in the plans will see most signal boxes go and the introduction of new technology known as the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS) – which would see signalling transferred to the driver's cab.

Initially planned for the lines from London to Bristol and Doncaster, the system will allow trains to run closer together and also increase the potential line speed from 125mph to 140mph.

This could cut up to 10 minutes from the 2 hours 37 minutes to reach Newcastle from King's Cross and as much as seven minutes from the current 1 hour 45 minute journey time to Bristol.

Much will depend on the introduction of a new generation of inter city trains which, under current Government plans are due to enter service in 2016.

The Office of Rail Regulation is also demanding an improvement in punctuality by the end of the decade.

It was Network Rail's failure to meet existing punctuality targets which led to the annual bonuses of the company's five senior directors being cut.

The new targets set by the regulator expects 92.5 per cent of trains to arrive "on time" – which in reality means commuter services being less than five minutes late and inter city trains less than 10.

While this figure represents an average for the industry as a whole, the regulator has said that none of the industry's 10 routes will be allowed to see punctuality fall below 90 per cent.

But this has failed to satisfy Anthony Smith, chief executive of the consumer watchdog, Passenger Focus.

"Passengers may be baffled that after five more years of investment the overall target for punctuality at the end of 2019 will differ only marginally from now. The government and industry must clearly explain why this is.

"These decisions will affect passengers for years to come and are based on continuing above inflation regulated fare rises, so ongoing passenger involvement is vital."

While Richard Price, the chief executive of the ORR, said the changes would lead to improvements for passengers, Mr Crow said the proposed savings would lead to more delays.

"Two billion pounds worth of cuts, driven by the Government through their enforcers the ORR, would mean massive cuts to renewals and maintenance, compromising safety and leading to more breakdowns, failures and delays.

"Far from improving performance it would mean overhead lines coming down and track and signal failures leading to travel misery for millions.