

## Our Brand New Self-service features

You can now manage your holiday requests\* online, amend some personal details, check out your subscription benefits and sign up to our newsletter bulletins

\*Holiday allowance is only applicable with subscription packages that include newspapers



THE  TIMES

### Ministers rail against block on direct train services



The West Coast Main Line is too busy for new services, says Network Rail Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

Robert Lea Industrial Editor  
Last updated at 12:01AM, June 17 2013

Network Rail is set to be challenged by the Department for Transport over its decision to block new direct services on the West Coast Main Line in a row that could also determine the future of “open access” competitor train companies.

The stand-off is likely to escalate with pressure from the Prime Minister and other ministers on Patrick McLoughlin, the Transport Secretary, to confront Network Rail.

At issue is Network Rail’s decision to block the launch of direct, fast services between Shrewsbury and Euston and Preston and the London terminus. Network Rail said that the West Coast Main Line was too busy on the southern stretch into and out of the capital.

That has caused a storm in both Shropshire and Lancashire, where locals had been led to believe that new services would begin this winter. Owen Paterson, the Environment Secretary and MP for North Shropshire, immediately said that he would be taking up the issue with Mr McLoughlin.

Questioned in the Commons on the Network Rail decision, David Cameron said that he too would be taking issue with Mr McLoughlin, saying: “We want to see more direct rail links [to Shropshire] and there is also a need for better links to Lancashire and Blackpool.”

DfT sources have confirmed that Mr McLoughlin will be attempting to broker talks between Network Rail and Virgin over the decision, which came just days after Virgin had launched a legal action against Network Rail over its recent performance.

“We are trying to resolve this,” an insider said. “We do not believe it is unresolvable and we are still hoping to hit December 13 [the timetable for the launch of new services].”

Industry sources see the Network Rail-Virgin stand-off as a test case for the future of open access — the rail industry mechanism in which independent train operators can launch services against incumbent franchised operators.

Virgin’s plan to launch services to Blackpool had itself been a spoiler to the proposals for an open-access operator to run trains between London and the Lancashire resort.

Great North Western Railway, a would-be rival operator backed by Deutsche Bahn of Germany, has looked at running services to several under-served towns and cities in the region including Blackpool and Carlisle, and even linking West Yorkshire directly to Euston.

However, if Network Rail rules out extra services on the West Coast routes because of capacity issues that could kill

opportunities for open-access operators.

Whitehall sources have insisted that they hope to safeguard open-access opportunities but will initially deal with the Network Rail-Virgin impasse.

Blackpool has become a cause célèbre in the industry, not least because it has lost a lucrative business hosting party and union conferences since direct services were cut a decade ago.

In a statement, Network Rail said: "Today, there are twice as many trains using the West Coast Main Line as a decade ago and just like a busy motorway during rush hour, more trains mean that if something goes wrong the knock-on effects can be significant.

"We have acknowledged that performance on the West Coast line is not good enough and we are taking steps to improve performance on the route. However, adding more services on to what is already the busiest mixed use railway line in the UK would mean a trade-off with punctuality. It would have a significant negative impact on performance for the thousands of other passenger and freight services that rely on this route every day."

4 comments


livefyre 

 **Michael Daventry**


3 people listening  

<a href="#">+ Follow</a>	<a href="#">Post comment</a>


[Newest](#) | [Oldest](#) | [Most Recommended](#)

 **Gilesebop** 4 days ago  
Maybe they can try those 50 mph speed limits they love so much on the motorways if they are worried about how to get more traffic through smoothly :)

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

 **Ramsay Ross** 4 days ago  
Muddle through - what a way to run a natural monopoly. There is no other country in the world operating such a crazy business model. We are trapped in the political dogma of private sector best, in any and all cases. Will we still be saying this when the lights go out?

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

 **Iain Hill** 4 days ago  
I am travelling from London to Glasgow on 15 July. I have to change at Preston and Crewe both. Why, after years of direct service. 2 people, 68, poor mobility, difficulty with luggage. Why?

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

**Alan R MacKenzie** 4 days ago  
Drop HS2 and improve existing infrastructure to increase capacity.

6 [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Livefyre

© Times Newspapers Limited 2013 | Version 4.6.0.0(86651)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

3 Thomas More Square, London, E98 1XY

[My Account](#) | [RSS](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#) | [The Times Whisky Club](#) | [Encounters Dating](#) | [Sunday Times Wine Club](#) | [Privacy & Cookie Policy](#) |

[Syndication](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#) | [iPhone](#) | [Android smartphone](#) | [Blackberry](#) | [Windows phone](#) | [Android tablet](#) | [Kindle](#) | [Kindle Fire](#) |

[Place an announcement in The Times](#)