
Virgin Trains set for £3.5m refurbishment – to remove smell from corridors

Richard Branson's rail franchise set to work with the Government to finally deal with problem of unexplained spreading toilet odour

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Virgin Trains is set to spend £3.5 million on a project to refresh its entire fleet of locomotives, in an attempt to finally get rid of the smell coming from lavatories.

Tracking down the source of the so-called "Pendolino pong" has been a challenging task for Virgin Trains, even with the Government taking a close interest in the matter.

The unwelcome smell which pervades large sections of the new model trains introduced by Richard Branson's company have become almost an accepted by-product of the experience, and reportedly came up in conversation on a regular basis at the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester last week.

Virgin runs 56 electric Pendolino trains and 21 diesel-powered Voyagers, and according to the Sunday Times every single one of them needs to be treated for its distinctive odour.

The Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin has taken a personal interest in the matter, according to the newspaper, and has a team working with Virgin to fix the problem.

Initially it was believed that the smell could be yet another issue caused by Network Rail – Virgin already blames long sections of outdated and overly-curved tracks for slowing down its 140mph trains, and had feared the excessive tilting could be causing tanks of effluent to spill over.

Now, however, the problem is believed to come from air conditioning inlets placed too close to the toilets, sucking in the foul-smelling air and spreading it throughout the rest of the train.

The £3.5 million refurbishment is expected to bring a solution to the issue. But for some it still doesn't stop Virgin being the best of a bad bunch. Speaking to the BBC, Chris Walmsley from Manchester said: "Are Virgin markedly better than the competition in an already embattled industry? I think so.

"Again, what does it say about the rest of the rail industry when we accept that smelly toilets, occasional delays and indifferent service is still considered the best of the bunch?"

Virgin told the Sunday Times: "Although toilet smells on our trains have attracted comment over the years, it's worth setting that in context. The most recent National Passenger Survey showed satisfaction with our on-board toilet facilities significantly higher, 60 per cent, than the average for long-distance operators, 52 per cent."