



Business news

Radical proposals unveiled by Virgin Trains to reform rail by importing airline model



Train overcrowding and complex ticketing could be abolished, customer experience improved, and fares cut under radical ideas from Virgin Trains to overhaul the UK's rail industry.

Train overcrowding and complex ticketing could be abolished, customer experience improved, and fares cut under radical ideas from Virgin Trains to overhaul the UK's rail industry.

As part of a root-and-branch reform, Virgin has called for long-distance rail services to be operated along similar principles to airline routes, with passengers reaping the rewards of greater competition.

Standing on trains would be all but abolished through a reservation-only system which guaranteed every customer a seat in normal operations, while today's complex and confusing mix of tickets would be replaced by airline-style ticketing, with one fare available at any given time for any one service.

The model would also generate higher private sector investment in rail by giving operators longer-term control of rail businesses, enabling them to focus on customer satisfaction over the long-term rather than managing short-term operating contracts.

The proposals are Virgin Trains' contribution to the debate around rail's future and the Williams Rail Review. This was launched by the Government in September to consider reforms which would better serve train customers and taxpayers.

Virgin Trains' submission draws on more than 20 years of operating long-distance rail services, during which time it has led the sector on customer satisfaction, growth and innovation while also driving up payments to taxpayers.

Patrick McCall, Senior Partner, Virgin Group, said the review offered a “once in a generation” opportunity, urging the review’s chairman, Keith Williams, to back “fundamental and bold reform” to benefit passengers over the coming decades.

“This submission was written before the recent Government decision to disqualify our bid for the West Coast Partnership. However, we believe the recommendations are more pertinent than ever given this news. Keith Williams has said that franchising cannot continue as it is now, and it is clear we need systemic industry reform which is driven by principles and a whole-system redesign. Indeed, it is highly questionable whether any franchises can be let sensibly, or robustly, as things stand.

“This will not be an easy fix. Every option will have downsides and there will be some difficult decisions to be made. But there should be no dogmatic fixation on models or ownership. Instead, we must develop a system which optimises the benefits for passengers, taxpayers and communities and which enables train companies to evolve as the world evolves around them. We must be both visionary and pragmatic”, Patrick said.

Key recommendations include:

- An airline style model for long-distance operators which would see them competing against each other via slots that they own indefinitely
- A modified, devolved and longer-term franchise system for short distance commuter routes which would be integrated with devolved infrastructure management by local governmental bodies
- A more positive development environment for stations
- Creation of a single independent and strategic regulator

The submission calls for track and train to be re-aligned on commuter routes, with responsibility for rail infrastructure and franchising devolved to appropriate regional authorities.

On long distance routes, where there is greater customer choice between competing modes of travel, overly-specified franchises and regulation would be replaced by a market-driven approach, giving operators freedom to innovate and respond to customer demand.

The move to an airline model would see operators take part in auctions for bundles of train services, allowing customers greater choice than at present with multiple operators competing against each other. Market forces would drive the quality of customer services up and fares down.

While the model could be widely-applied on the UK’s long-distance routes, Virgin’s submission suggests that the East Coast route or new HS2 services would be the most straightforward initial starting points for the new system.

The reforms would also help drive better value for money, increasing the benefits for taxpayers, by ensuring operators were incentivised to sell all the seats on trains and invest over the long-term, the submission concludes.

Virgin price-guarantee app to cut £1bn from rail fares



Rail passengers will save around a billion pounds in fares thanks to a price-guarantee app being developed by Virgin Trains.

Rail passengers will save around a billion pounds in fares thanks to a price-guarantee app being developed by Virgin Trains.

The new technology, which is due to go live by the end of this year, will cut through confusing and outdated ticketing systems to ensure that customers are automatically given the best ticket for their journey at the tap of a button.

Customers across the whole UK rail network will benefit from an Oyster-style fares cap which will work out the cheapest fare for their journey retrospectively, ensuring they have the cheapest fare combination available.

The app will also deliver a seamless split-ticketing function, automatically calculating if a cheaper combination of fares for one journey is available, without having to change train or purchase multiple paper tickets.

The revolutionary new approach builds on Virgin Trains’ experience of innovation over the last two decades, having introduced the industry’s first automatic delay repay system, rolled out digital ticketing on all routes and recently abolished peak restrictions on Friday afternoons.

It also follows on from the fares reform consultation overseen by the Rail Delivery Group, which found that passengers were frustrated by arcane ticketing regulations which frequently led to them buying more expensive tickets than others

available.

Phil Whittingham, Managing Director of Virgin Trains, said: "We've been in the UK rail industry for more than twenty-two years, leading the industry in areas such as introducing automatic delay repay and digital tickets and scrapping the Friday evening peak. But we want to do more. The changes we've announced today, which align with the Rail Delivery Group's Fares Reform agenda, could save UK rail passengers around a billion pounds a year, and ensure Virgin Trains continues to deliver for customers whatever happens with the West Coast franchise".

Customers are expected to save nearly 10% of the £11bn spent on fares every year by automatically finding the most appropriate ticket.

The development will be of particular benefit to commuters who do not work regular 9-5, Monday to Friday shifts, travel on some peak and some off-peak journeys or want greater flexibility over when they travel.

The ticket-management system developed by Virgin will automatically and retrospectively allow someone who has a peak-time return but who ends up travelling off-peak to pay the lower fare. Alternatively, if a customer ended up making multiple journeys where a weekly season ticket would have been cheaper, the system will cap their fares at the price of the weekly ticket.

The system will now be subject to industry approval and is expected to go live by the end of the year across the UK, though roll-out on London Underground and Overground routes is due to take a year longer while necessary ticket-scanning technology is introduced.

Virgin Trains introduce new innovations to help customers during disruption



Two major tech innovations developed by Virgin Trains to improve customer service at times of major disruption – 'Back on Track' and 'Track 'n Travel' – are set to change the industry.

Two major tech innovations developed by Virgin Trains to improve customer service at times of major disruption – 'Back on Track' and 'Track 'n Travel' – are set to change the industry.

In a global first for a transport company, the new 'Back on Track' app now connects teams both behind the scenes and on the frontline across the network during periods of disruption.

The improved communication and coordination means front line staff can outline up to the minute, accurate information to customers. This could include alternative routes and information on ticket acceptance.

Co- created by the digital workflow company ServiceNow for Virgin Trains, the bespoke app is now being regularly used by hundreds of Virgin Trains employees across its UK network.

The second development is Track 'n' Travel, which is fuelled by the same data which Back on Track uses and is a one-stop shop for customers to review their journey pre and post departure in real time. This now means there is one source of truth, for staff and customers alike.

It is the main feature of a new onboard portal vthub.uk - recently launched alongside free Wi-Fi on Virgin Trains. It will also be built into the Virgin Trains website, giving customers up to date disruption information directly to their smart phones.

With both developments, it means Virgin Trains' customers will be able to have seamless, up-to-date information to help them navigate their journeys during rail disruption.

Chief Information Officer at Virgin Trains, John Sullivan said: "Our main problem at times of disruption is simple - thousands of Virgin Trains colleagues trying to find out the latest information to communicate to as many as 100,000 customers.

"Our Control Centre can get a thousand calls a day from staff across the network during disruption. If the information they need is instantly available on their mobile, there's no need to make that call, freeing up control to deal with the root cause."

Estimates predict that calls to inbound teams could reduce by nearly 50 percent and reduce times to resolve incidents by at least 20 minutes.

“By getting the most up-to-date information to all our colleagues we ensure that they know what the latest plan is,” John Sullivan added. “Less time on the phone means they can spend more time helping customers face to face, and they can feed information about the situation on the ground back to Control via the app.”

He continued: “Track ‘n’ Travel gives customers real time information on exactly what is happening and lets them work out the best route. Disruption inevitably does happen - we want to give our customers the best information to get them where they’re going in the quickest and safest way possible.”

Jason Webb, Customer Information Director at the Rail Delivery Group, representing the rail industry, said: “Rail companies are working together to improve communication with passengers throughout their journey, with the aim of ensuring people can get the information they need, when they need it. The technical innovations developed by Virgin will help to drive forward further improvement across the industry and boost trust in the information people are provided.”

Customers on Virgin Trains can now bid for last-minute First Class upgrades with Seatfrog app



Virgin Trains customers can now secure a last-minute upgrade thanks to a collaboration with Seatfrog, an app which lets users take part in an auction for seats in First Class.

Virgin Trains customers can now secure a last-minute upgrade thanks to a collaboration with Seatfrog, an app which lets users take part in an auction for seats in First Class.

The train operator has partnered with Seatfrog on its routes across the UK, to enable more people than ever to enjoy the perks of upgrading.

From 8 May, customers were able to bid from 24 hours right up to 30 minutes before departure with just a few taps of their smartphone where upgrades to First Class can cost from as little as £10. Completely seamless and easy-to-use, there's no hassle of extra paperwork, printing tickets or additional fees when bidding on a Virgin Trains journey with Seatfrog.

The Seatfrog app works by creating a live auction system for unfilled First Class seats, allowing passengers to bid against other travellers to upgrade as solo travellers or as a group. Those not wanting to wait can upgrade immediately through Seatfrog's 'buy it now' option, even if they've booked through a third party.

Customers who successfully bid on a First Class ticket are now able to enjoy all the benefits of Virgin Trains' First Class experience, including complimentary food and drink, additional legroom and the First Class lounge.

Sarah Copley, Executive Director, Commercial, at Virgin Trains, said: “This is a great opportunity for our customers who fancy treating themselves at the last minute.

“This new partnership with Seatfrog is another example of our strong record in innovation – giving customers a unique chance to enjoy our First Class experience, which includes complimentary food and drink served by our amazing on board teams from our award winning menu.”

Iain Griffin, Co-Founder and CEO of Seatfrog, said: “At Seatfrog we're all about taking people's journey beyond the ordinary and making it something special.

“Our partnership with Virgin Trains is just the latest stop as we rapidly expand across the UK and Europe, giving more travellers the opportunity to upgrade their trip”.

Last minute upgrades will be available on selected Virgin Trains' West Coast services for business and leisure travellers.

For more information see <https://www.virgintrains.co.uk/seatfrog>

Journeys soar on Virgin's Blackpool route

Virgin Trains has revealed figures for record journeys taken on its Blackpool route one year after introducing electric Pendolino services, which strengthened connections to and from the resort.



Virgin Trains has revealed figures for record journeys taken on its Blackpool route one year after introducing electric Pendolino services, which strengthened connections to and from the resort.

Latest figures from Virgin Trains show over 150,000 journeys have been made on the 36 Pendolino services that launched in May 2018 – with 34% (51,000) made between Blackpool and London Euston. Adding journeys taken on the original services, a total of 56,000 journeys have been made between the resort and the capital – a record number since Virgin Trains first reintroduced a direct link in December 2014.

The electric services, which launched following Network Rail's work to electrify the line between Blackpool and Preston, have also generated growth in local journeys in Lancashire -- with 7,000 journeys between Preston and the seaside resort over the last year.

Following the boost in services, journeys on Virgin's Blackpool route have increased by 1600% since May 2017 – when Virgin Trains only served Blackpool with two direct services a day Monday – Friday.

The inter-city operator now operates eight direct services each weekday and five services on a Saturday between Blackpool and London. A direct service from Birmingham on Saturdays also offers the West Midlands a direct service to Blackpool, contributing to the growth of tourism and the local economy along the West Coast Main Line. To celebrate one year of Pendolino services, customers were treated to Blackpool Rock – made by local SME, Coronation Confectionery Promotions and birthday cupcakes.

Forthcoming engineering work - Acton Grange



Network Rail are carrying out improvement works on the West Coast Main Line at Acton Grange (between Crewe and Warrington Bank Quay) for 16 days between 20 July – 4 August. During this time there will be changes to Virgin Trains services between London and Scotland – with journeys taking longer and services across other routes expected to be busier than usual.

Network Rail are carrying out improvement works on the West Coast Main Line at Acton Grange (between Crewe and Warrington Bank Quay) for 16 days between 20 July – 4 August. During this time there will be changes to Virgin Trains services between London and Scotland – with journeys taking longer and services across other routes expected to be busier than usual.

No Virgin Trains services will be able to run to/from Warrington Bank Quay between 20 July – 4 August. Passengers are advised to take rail replacement services for part of their journey – between Warrington Bank Quay and Crewe (for Southbound journeys) and Warrington Bank Quay and Wigan North Western (for Northbound journeys).

An hourly direct service between London Euston and Glasgow Central will be diverted via Manchester Piccadilly, extending journey times by approximately 50 minutes.

The hourly Anglo Scot services (via West Midlands) will be split into services between London and Crewe (via Birmingham) and between Preston and Edinburgh/Crewe. Intermediate stations between Crewe and Preston will be served by rail replacement services.

Working with Network Rail and industry partners, we're advising passengers to plan their journey in advance, make a seat reservation and check before they travel. More details can be found on the [Virgin Trains website](#).

CRP Corner

Community Rail Lancashire

Working with Virgin Trains

Community Rail Lancashire is excited to continue our work with Virgin Trains; with a focus on our inclusive employment opportunity, 'On Track to Train', giving underrepresented groups in rail the chance to explore rail careers. We are also delighted to be working with them across our LGBT+ inclusion project, 'Ticket to Pride', engaging young LGBT+ people across the north, and with 'Park View 4U' and 'Grans on the Make', creating a wonderful bee-conservation project. We would also like to thank Virgin for their continued support with travel for our team members.



Mid-Cheshire CRP

Stockport Marvellous Days Out Exhibition a great success



The Mid Cheshire Line's "Marvellous Days Out" Exhibition came to Stockport Station in May. The Mid Cheshire Line runs from Chester-Delamere Forest-Northwich-Knutsford-Altrincham-Stockport-Manchester Piccadilly.

The Exhibition showcases all the posters created for the "Marvellous Days Out" Campaign in the platform 3 "lock up". As well as viewing the posters, the many visitors take away copies of the Marvellous Days Out, Amazing Women by Rail and Along Mid Cheshire Lines publications.

John Oates, Chair of the Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership says: "This is a further example of excellent co-operation between partners along the Line". The Exhibition moves to Northwich in mid-July.

Conwy Valley Line CRP

Transport for Wales launches Community Rail Vision in Wales and the Borders



TRAFNIDIAETH
CYMRU
TRANSPORT
FOR WALES

Transport for Wales has launched a new Community Rail **Strategy**. The vision will see new Community Rail Partnerships set up across the entire Wales and Border network to promote and encourage rail use in communities.

More than £600,000 will be invested every single year, with 22 new community ambassador roles created alongside marketing roles which will focus on promoting regional tourism and local economic growth.

Melanie Lawton, Community Rail Officer for the Conwy Valley Partnership, said: "The Conwy Valley Railway will see refurbished 230 units on the line and greater promotion to help people get the most from their railway."

Community Rail Cumbria

Carlisle Railway Day

Working with Virgin Trains, Community Rail Cumbria recently held a Railway Day at Carlisle station, offering members of the public a unique insight into the railway in

Cumbria.



The Carlisle Railway Day followed the success of a similar event last year bringing together industry partners, local businesses and community groups to celebrate the region's railway and raise money for Virgin Trains' charity partner, Rethink Mental Illness.

Copyright © 2019 West Coast Trains Ltd, subsidiary of the Virgin Rail Group Ltd. Registered in England No. 3007940. Registered Office:
The Battleship Building, 179 Harrow Road, London, W2 6NB.