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Our Ref:Lett6031/Price/AS/ad

Dear Richard

I am writing with concerns about the industry's adherence to the long-standing principle that timetable information should be correct 12 weeks in advance and that train companies should open reservations no later than nine weeks in advance. Our immediate concerns relate to 23 and 24 December and details are set out in the attached document. Quite apart from passengers being given incorrect or incomplete timetable information, they are in danger of paying more than they otherwise would – indeed, some may already have done so.

Following our intervention, industry systems have been corrected so passengers enquiring about journeys from London to North West England and Scotland are now told about the Virgin services running from Euston to Nuneaton via a diversionary route. That the industry failed to look in its own shop window and spot the error is worrying. The situation for anybody wishing to travel between London and Birmingham on 23 and 24 December remains unacceptable, including that tickets are on sale for trains late on Christmas Eve which, almost certainly, will be deleted from the timetable in the coming weeks. Birmingham is Britain's second city and "UK railway PLC" has proved incapable of presenting information or putting tickets on sale according to the timescale passengers have a right to expect.

Passenger Focus feels there is *prima facie* evidence that Licence conditions requiring timetables, fares and reservations information to be in the public domain in advance so passengers can plan their journeys effectively have been breached. I should be grateful if ORR would investigate if this is so and, in any case, consider what can be done to ensure that the industry in future makes greater effort to meet the timescales laid down.



This letter deals specifically with our concerns about the West Coast Main Line and Chiltern at Christmas 2012, but we also have information suggesting T-12/T-9 compliance is not as good as it should be *throughout* the year. I will write to you separately about this shortly.

Yours sincerely

  
Anthony Smith  
Chief Executive

cc Chris Gibb, Virgin Trains  
Rob Brighthouse, Chiltern Railways  
Chris Scoggins, National Rail Enquiries  
Robin Gisby, Network Rail



## Appendix

23 and 24 December 2012

Passengers making journey enquiries about travel from London Euston to the North West of England and Scotland on 23 and 24 December were, until 24 October, offered journeys via either St. Pancras or Marylebone. Before that date passengers would have been oblivious to the existence of the Virgin Trains' hourly service from London Euston to Nuneaton via Coventry, unless they were travelling specifically to Coventry or Nuneaton. This situation appears to have arisen because the industry overlooked the need to amend routing data to allow tickets normally invalid via the diversionary route to be offered for sale on these trains. The impact on passengers was that anyone seeking information about travel from London to North West England/Scotland (or vice versa) on those dates prior to 24 October would have:

- Found, apparently, that no Virgin Trains services were running from London Euston and the only options were via St. Pancras or Marylebone
- Found little or no coherent explanation of why Virgin Trains' services were not showing
- Been offered higher prices to travel via St. Pancras or Marylebone than had Virgin's services been displaying properly in industry systems (it is entirely possible some **have** paid a higher price, believing it was the cheapest option)
- In the case of Marylebone, passengers were offered options using Chiltern Railways' services, the exact timings of which have not been confirmed (see below).

Passengers enquiring about travel from London to Birmingham on 23 and 24 December are generally offered journeys via Marylebone (Chiltern Railways direct) or Paddington (First Great Western, changing to CrossCountry en route). Journey planners do not seem to offer options using all Virgin Trains' departures from Euston, changing at Coventry. On the National Rail Enquiries website, if you hover over a 'caution' triangle placed against the Marylebone options a message appears indicating that these times may change. Our understanding is that Chiltern's permanent timetable from 9 December will not be confirmed in passenger information systems until mid November (clearly nowhere near T-12). And then any commercially-driven timetable changes Chiltern wishes to make, for example, closing down earlier on Christmas Eve than a normal Monday, will not be in the system until December. The impact on passengers seeking information about travel from London to Birmingham or vice versa is:

- Passengers see no prominent explanation that the West Coast Main Line is closed at Bletchley nor related explanation of why no options appear to exist for travel from London Euston – you have to stumble across it, and must click further for a fuller explanation
- Passengers are offered only a handful of options using Virgin Trains from Euston to Coventry, changing there for Birmingham. This route is slower than Marylebone options, but it is also currently cheaper (where these options are shown, on 26<sup>th</sup> October Advance Singles were on sale from £8, whereas the cheapest fare from Marylebone is £27.40 and from Paddington is £46). In several hours, passengers are not being given the opportunity to choose a longer journey time in exchange for a cheaper fare – we think that is unacceptable



- Because Chiltern's timetable from 9 December onwards is not confirmed, Advance tickets are not on sale beyond that date, including for 23 and 24 December. Therefore only 'walk up' prices are available. Eight weeks in advance passengers would normally find Advance tickets for £5, not the lowest price currently on offer of £27.40 (Off-Peak Single)
- Passengers face uncertainty. Those who have located an explanation that major works are taking place on the West Coast Main Line, and have not found one of the few options showing via Coventry, must choose between the certainty of booking a seat from Paddington changing at Reading (£46 Off-Peak Single), or take the risk that Chiltern's 9 December timetable changes will indeed be minor and that they will get a seat on the day. Canny regular travellers might surmise that Chiltern will eventually put cheap Advance tickets on sale, but passengers should not have to second guess
- Confusion about last services on Christmas Eve. Although National Rail Enquiries have applied 'caution' triangles to Chiltern's Christmas Eve trains, the last departures on a normal Monday continue to show in the system. As of 26 October a passenger can buy a ticket from Chiltern Railways' website for the 2307 Marylebone to Birmingham, completely oblivious to the fact that train will almost certainly not run. This has happened before on Christmas Eve and passengers who trusted information in the public domain arrived to catch trains that were not running. The same looks likely to happen this year.