From the Secretary of State  
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Louise Ellman MP  
House of Commons  
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Dear Louise,

I am delighted to inform you that today my Department has concluded negotiations with West Coast Trains Limited (Virgin) to continue to provide services on the InterCity West Coast rail franchise for two years and nine months. This will provide continuity of service until the start of the next competed franchise expected in April 2017.

In negotiating this direct award the Department has secured a large number of benefits for passengers across the length of this important route, totalling around £35 million. These include 5,500 more standard class seats per day, free Wi-Fi at all Virgin stations and improved Wi-Fi services on board trains. Virgin have also committed to providing a business case for the provision of additional car parking at Carlisle, Lancaster and Stafford, with pre-booking of parking spaces available at some car parks on the franchise.

Stations themselves will also be improved with more than £20 m invested in modernising them and improving waiting rooms, shelters and seats across the franchise. This is supported by a scheme to install and operate 200 automatic ticket gates across the franchise and investment to improve station cleanliness and accessibility.

I am pleased to say that as part of this contract Virgin will submit plans to the Office of Rail Regulation that would see new direct services introduced between London and Blackpool and London and Shrewsbury. If approved, Shrewsbury would benefit from two services in each direction Monday to Saturday and one service in each direction on Sunday. Blackpool North would have one service in each direction Monday to Friday.

I am keen that all users of the franchise continue to have a say in how the franchise can improve and Virgin will appoint a partnership manager to facilitate ongoing discussions. They will work with Network Rail and communities to promote and champion schemes that could improve journey times between London and Scotland, including through the work to remodel Carstairs Junction, which is a significant bottleneck on the Network.
In support of the Government’s commitment to getting people into employment, Virgin have agreed to create jobs including apprenticeships and traineeships for young and unemployed people. They have also committed to continue the policy that all Virgin employees are paid the Living Wage as a minimum standard.

This franchise agreement is the sixth direct award to be delivered by my Department since March 2013. I am confident that under this deal the franchise will deliver better services for passengers, more opportunities for industry and communities and improved returns for Government.

THE RT. HON. PATRICK McLOUGHLIN