

Network Rail starts legal consultation process on maintenance changes

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Network Rail has formally set out its offer to staff working at Network Rail, via the unions.

It is still negotiating with RMT, but this legal consultation process with its trades unions ensures any changes to contracts abide by proper legal procedure.

The proposed reforms, the infrastructure owner says, are aimed at improving safety for both employees and passengers, boosting train service performance, and saving money so that it can run the railway more efficiently and put the industry on a firm financial footing for the future.

It says it has been clear throughout talks with its unions that it wants to give its people a fair pay rise, but it has to be affordable. Its most recent offer – 8% over two years, with heavily discounted travel, a cash bonus and a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies – met many of the RMT's demands, it adds.

Furthermore, Network Rail says it was affordable from within its own budgets. The alternative, it argues, is to ask either taxpayers or passengers to fund a pay increase, and that is neither fair nor realistic.

Andrew Haines, Network Rail chief executive, said: “The way people live and work has changed since the pandemic. On the railway, that means significantly fewer commuters and significantly less income. This year we’ll see a shortfall of around £2bn compared with 2019.

“It would be wrong to fund this deficit through increases in fares or taxes when we know that some of our working practices are fundamentally broken. That’s why we must make progress with modernising the way we carry out maintenance work and making the savings that are necessary for the future of our railway.

“We haven’t given up on finding a negotiated way forward. We have made a good pay offer and our door remains open, but we can’t continue to circle the same ground day after day, week after week and not move forward. These reforms are too important, especially given we started these conversations 18 months ago. It is vital that we progress our modernisation plans to help put our railway on a sustainable financial footing for the future.”

In simple terms, Network Rail says the proposed reforms to its maintenance organisation will deliver:

- **A safer and more reliable and punctual service for passengers and employees** – quicker fault fixes by multi-disciplined response teams and greater use of ‘smart meter’ technology flagging issues to controls rooms before key equipment failure
- **Individual rostering** – enabling Network Rail to send the right number of people to fix a fault rather than fixed-sized teams.
- **Multifunctional teams** – enabling Network Rail to mix skills within a team so that, for example, it could send three mixed specialists in one van to fix a fault rather than two specialist teams in two vans.
- **Multi-skilling** – investing in the knowledge and skills of its people so they are better equipped to fix the most common faults themselves.
- **Accelerated and improved technology deployment** – it says it has a “raft of labour and life-saving technology that have been stuck in ‘trade union consultation’ for over two years”, holding up the deployment of vital safety upgrades that are ready to be rolled out.

The consultation process began with a formal meeting today (28 July) with its trades unions, to discuss the implementation of proposed changes to working practices, with next steps agreed at this meeting.

While the proposed reforms would likely lead to a smaller maintenance workforce – from around 10,000 to around 8,000 (just over 1,900 roles have been identified) – Network Rail says it does not expect to have to make any compulsory redundancies, with the changes we are proposing able to be made through voluntary severance, retraining and redeployment.

RMT: statement to staff a “deception”

Responding to Network Rail’s latest statement, RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said: “Network Rail has issued a statement to staff today that there is an unconditional pay offer available. This is a deception on the staff and is entirely untrue. The offer they have made is entirely conditional on mass redundancies and changes to conditions and working practices that are not yet worked through and are subject to discussions with the trade unions.

“In tandem to this deception on pay the company have started a formal consultation on 1900 redundancies, have withdrawn their offer of no compulsory redundancies and will impose detrimental working practices across the maintenance network.

“Rather than deceiving the staff about what they are actually proposing, the company now needs to get back round the table with RMT and work to resolve the issues in the dispute including their proposals for change and the union’s demands for job security and a decent pay rise.”