A Railway Fit for Britain's Future[1]

mailto: Railreform.bill@dft.gov.uk Closes 15th April 2025

We are seeking views on new policies to be included in the forthcoming Railways Bill, which will enable the establishment of Great British Railways (GBR). GBR will be a single directing mind that will run our rail infrastructure and passenger services in the public interest.

The overall aim of these proposed reforms is to provide a railway that works better for both passengers and taxpayers across Great Britain. They also include:

- the establishment of a new passenger watchdog
- reform of fares and online retail of tickets
- a new statutory role for devolved leaders in governing, managing, planning and developing the rail network
- streamlining processes and reducing regulatory burdens to empower GBR to deliver the best service for railway users
- ensuring the private sector continues to play a key role, including a statutory duty for GBR to promote rail freight.

Questions

Question 1: Do you agree that GBR should be empowered to deliver through reformed incentives and a simplified and streamlined regulatory framework?

Yes, but there must be much more focus in that regulatory framework on ensuring passenger rail meets the needs of today's users (affordable, clean, safe, frequent, for example) and the prioritisation of sustainable freight. There must be a duty of public interest and care embodied in the regulatory framework to ensure the importance of safety and accessibility requirements are fully recognised. Furthermore, there must be true accountability, with clear checks and balances to ensure GBR operates efficiently, transparently and with integrity.

Question 2: Do you agree that the Secretary of State should be responsible for issuing and modifying a simplified GBR licence enforced by the ORR, and that the ORR's duties with respect to GBR should be streamlined to reflect the new sector model?

Yes.

Question 3: Do you agree that the Secretary of State should be responsible for setting a long-term strategy for GBR to align with government priorities?

Yes, but citizens must be involved, as key stakeholders, in the development of that strategy and in the prioritisation of competing government priorities (regardless of the role of the passenger watchdog).

Question 4: What are your views on the proposed functions of the new passenger watchdog?

The watchdog should have real teeth and must be much more than just a 'tick-box' exercise. It must not be seen as replacing the citizen's role to be fully consulted on important rail-related issues. It should work in conjunction with other community bodies, such as those supporting disabled passengers or conservationists/environmentalists, for example.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future

The wider modal scope of the organisation would be welcomed as many passengers use a range of different services.

The passenger watchdog should also be responsible for providing a link between issues related to rail freight and passenger services, where that is required.

There should also be a rail freight watchdog (which may be a different part of the overall GBR organisation/structure). The rail freight watchdog should cover complaints about rail freight and should provide information to those who wish to consider the use of rail freight services.

The watchdog(s) should also be involved in planning decisions and should be consulted when any new roads are being discussed, to ensure that alternative, more sustainable transport options are fully considered. Adding new road miles in the UK should be a thing of the past. Developments should be encouraged to introduce sustainable passenger and freight transport options as a priority.

Will a watchdog provide responses to operator complaints (including freight operators) or would this be part of the revised responsibilities of the ORR?

Question 5: Which of the approaches would best enable the establishment of the new passenger watchdog?

The passenger watchdog should fulfil all the roles set out in Table 1. It should not be an either/or.

Question 6: Which of the options to establish the Alternative Dispute Resolution function as part of the passenger watchdog would deliver the best outcome for passengers in your view?

The independence of the Rail Ombudsman should be valued and retained.

Question 7: Does the proposed new access framework enable GBR to be an effective directing mind that can ensure best use of network capacity?

Yes, reducing fragmented control to create more integrated processes and the associated more effective decision-making, along with greater access to accurate and up to date information, should bring real benefits in return for public funding investment. The framework must be created with the public interest in mind, including improving the reliability, affordability and capacity of passenger services and maximising freight growth to reduce pollution, traffic congestion and spend on unsustainable transport options (new roads). These rail freight benefits would also reduce NHS spend given the reduction in health-related incidents due to traffic collisions and pollution.

Question 8: What – if any – key access rules and requirements for GBR should be updated and included in legislation?

GBR should have a key role in all transport-related initiatives and should, therefore, be a statutory consultee in associated plan-making and planning decisions. In particular, it should be a requirement that, where traffic congestion is seen to be a problem, GBR is required to provide a solution prior to any consideration of public spending on new or expanded road systems. Such solutions could extend to tram services as well as trains. No parts of the railway service should be considered less important than others.

Question 9: Does the proposed role of the ORR, acting as an appeals body to ensure fairness and non-discrimination, provide sufficient reassurances to operators such as freight and open access wishing to access the GBR-managed network?

Yes. It must retain its independence and should also cover complaints resolution for operators.

Question 10: Do you foresee any unintended consequences of the ORR retaining its existing powers with regard to other infrastructure managers which might affect the smooth passage of trains between the GBR and non-GBR network?

Others will be better informed to consider this question.

Question 11: The government intends to include in primary legislation a power to enable amendments to the Railways (Access, Management and Licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations 2016 to ensure consistency between GBR's processes and those used by other infrastructure managers. Do you agree with this approach?

Others will be better informed to consider this question.

Question 12: Do you agree with the proposed legislative approach regarding a 5-year funding settlement for Great British Railways?

Is a 5-year funding settlement appropriate for a strategic transport network such as GBR? Should the period be longer (a minimum of 10 years) to provide certainty of funding availability.?

Question 13: Do you agree with the legislative approach set out above to retain the Secretary of State's role in securing the overall affordability of fares and continuing to safeguard certain railcard discount schemes?

Yes. More prominence should be given to encouraging citizens to use train services, including driving modal shift by making all journeys more affordable.

Question 14: What, if any, safeguards are needed to ensure a thriving and competitive rail retail market while also ensuring GBR can deliver a high-quality offer to its customers?

Any incentives offered by TPRs must be genuine, accurate and truthful.

Question 15: The government intends that GBR's statutory duty in relation to devolved leaders should strike a balance between enhancing their role whilst also ensuring that GBR has the appropriate flexibility to direct the national network. Do you agree with this approach?

Yes.

Question 16: Do you agree with the proposed approach in Scotland on enabling further collaboration between track and train while preserving the devolved settlements?

Others will be better informed to consider this question.

Question 17: Do you agree with the proposed approach in Wales on enabling further collaboration between track and train while preserving the devolved settlements?

Others will be better informed to consider this question.

Question 18: Do you agree with the government's approach of making targeted amendments to existing legislation to clarify the role of devolved leaders in relation to GBR?

Yes, but this should not reduce the role of the citizen as a key stakeholder in the national rail network.

Question 19: The government intends to create a new delegated power that would enable the Secretary of State to update, amend or revoke provisions in TDLCR and related assimilated law in Great Britain, subject to public consultation. Do you agree with this approach?

Others will be better informed to consider this question.

Question 20: Please provide evidence on anticipated transitional or ongoing costs or benefits for you or your business resulting from these proposals. For example, please provide evidence on the scale of transitional costs associated with familiarising with the new proposals and structure, changes to administrative burden resulting from these proposals, or any other direct impacts associated with the proposed changes.

Others will be better informed to consider this question.