



PASSENGERS NOT PROFIT:

A VISION FOR THE RAILWAYS BILL



**we
own
it**



INTRODUCTION

This government is bringing 30 years of failed rail privatisation to an end. Research from Transport for Quality of Life,¹ the RMT and even the last government's Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail have variously shown that we lose between £1.2 and £1.5 billion to profits and waste per year due exclusively to privatisation, enough to cut rail fares for passengers by 18%.

As Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander has said, **"We're going to wave goodbye to 30 years worth of inefficiency, waste, passenger frustration, and we're going to step really confidently towards a new future for the railways."**²

It's exciting that the government is delivering public ownership, backed by 3 out of 4 people in the UK.³

But there are huge risks for the government here too. Public ownership of rail franchises is absolutely necessary **but that policy change alone is not sufficient to deliver the "new future"** that passengers in England, Wales and Scotland are desperate for.

Without the right implementation and package of broader reforms, the results could disappoint passengers. **Public ownership must be a clear success and it must be seen as such.**

This vision for the railways therefore has three demands for the government:

- **Be ambitious for our railway**, investing at the level of other European countries like Switzerland, expanding lines and reducing fares so that taking the train becomes the easy option.
- **Deliver the benefits of public ownership**, cross subsidy using profits to provide more services, integration, collaboration, efficient planning and a vision for the whole network. The reforms outlined in this document rely on the government recognising and choosing these benefits instead of continuing with disintegration and chaos. This means saying goodbye to competition law from 1993, and instead prioritising economic, social and environmental benefits like increasing services for rural communities and providing access to disabled passengers. It means saying no to continued private profits for rail operators and rolling stock companies.
- **Listen to passengers** as we kickstart this overdue conversation about what public ownership should look like, and give us a new democratic watchdog and representation in Great British Railways.

The vision has been created by bringing together rail experts and campaigners to call for a range of policies that will get this country to its final destination: a successful railway that we can all be proud of.

If you are an MP, please read this vision and get in touch if you are willing to push for legislation that delivers what is needed through the Railways Bill this autumn. We would be hugely grateful for your support.

If you are a passenger, please read and share this vision, add your ideas on our website and ask your MP to read it. Let's show the government what kind of railway we deserve and prove that passengers need to be at the heart of it.





CONTENTS

4

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM
BRITISH RAIL

Christian Wolmar

5

END COMPETITION LAW TO FULLY
INTEGRATE OUR RAILWAY

Emily Sullivan

6

BRING PRIVATE OPEN-ACCESS
OPERATIONS INTO PUBLIC OWNERSHIP

Johnbosco Nwogbo

7

A COMPELLING FARES OFFER FROM
THE NATIONALISED RAILWAY

Jonathan Bray

8

A SINGLE PUBLICLY OWNED TICKET
RETAILER IS KEY TO PASSENGER
EXPERIENCE

Ellie Harrison

9

A RAILWAY THAT IS TRULY FOR ALL – AN
ACCESSIBILITY FRAMEWORK FOR GBR

Disability campaigners

10

BETTER JOBS, BETTER SERVICES
RMT

11

END THE PRIVATE ROLLING
STOCK WASTE

Dr Grace Brown

12

RAIL TIMETABLING – A REGULAR RAIL
SERVICE FOR EVERY COMMUNITY

Jonathan Tyler

13

PASSENGERS MUST HAVE A DEMOCRATIC
VOICE IN GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

Cat Hobbs

14

REFORMS COULD BE PUT AT RISK
WITHOUT THE RIGHT INVESTMENT

Johnbosco Nwogbo

15

CONCLUSION

16

REFERENCES

GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS SHOULD FREE OUR RAILWAY TO TRY NEW THINGS

Great British Railways cannot recreate British Rail (BR). At its core, BR was a totally integrated business that did everything from building trains and running the infrastructure to catering and investment strategy. At their most ambitious, the upcoming rail reforms will not match that level of integration.

However, **GBR can and should be empowered to recreate some of what was good about British Rail.** For example,

1. **British Rail had commercial and social aims**, which it had to reconcile by providing services that would always be loss-making, and by cross-subsidising from profitable ones.
2. **It made the overarching strategic decisions** over rail investment and timetabling.
3. **It was given a budget to which it was expected to adhere.** That provided both certainty and discipline.
4. **BR created a highly successful management training scheme**, which needs to be revived.
5. **BR produced great marketing schemes**, such as “This is the age of the train”, to drive up rail usage.

In France and Germany, the railways are state-owned, but the railway managers have a lot of freedom to make commercial decisions to try to attract passengers.¹ GBR must be freed to attempt new things. It must be adventurous, able to make risky commercial decisions.



A key area where such innovation will be dearly needed is in fares. According to the government, it will be the role of GBR, the chair of whose board the Secretary of State selects, to set fares.² **Political interference and micro-management by risk-averse politicians must not stand in the way of real reform on fares.** More than anything else, passengers want to see Europe’s highest fares start coming down.

And finally, GBR must be a voice for the railways – stressing why we need them, why they are worth their subsidy, and why we need to consider new and revived lines.



CHRISTIAN WOLMAR
RAILWAY HISTORIAN
AND AUTHOR

In France and Germany, the railways are state-owned, but the railway managers have a lot of freedom to make commercial decisions to try to attract passengers.



END COMPETITION LAW TO FULLY INTEGRATE OUR RAILWAY

Competition provisions, running throughout current rail legislation, including, but not limited to, the Railways Act 1993, give the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), as well as the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), **a duty to foster and police competition in the railway system.**

In open access, the ORR is required to treat the encouragement of competition as a criterion in considering applications.¹ In ticket retail, the CMA, under its role of preventing monopolies, has already warned that a single publicly owned ticket retailer would fall foul of competition rules.²

Competition law requires different parts of the railway to maintain separate financial accounts between infrastructure and operations, including severe restrictions on cross-subsidy. **This means that GBR would be prevented from using its own profits to fund and grow other areas of the network.** This also means that the separated parts of GBR would be limited from collaborating, and under strict conditions of commercial confidentiality, even between the publicly-owned companies, since this would otherwise be seen as 'market dominance' and 'anti-competitive' behaviour.

In ticket retail, where the government has pledged to create a publicly-backed retailer, this could require a three-way split in its ticket retail functions between the main GBR body, a GBR ticket retail arm, and a further split of the third-party 'licensing' function. And in open access, competition law restrictions would cause disproportionate damage to the new public body before it has even begun, because its fundamental organisational design will be structured to favour the 'equality' of private companies.

The only way to achieve an effective and integrated railway is the repeal of all competition clauses from rail legislation and the removal of the competition function of the ORR. The ORR must be reformed as a fully 'public interest' regulator, responsible only for: safety, accessibility, passenger rights and rail performance.³



EMILY SULLIVAN
FOUNDER, ASSOCIATION OF
BRITISH COMMUTERS

The only way to achieve an integrated railway is the repeal of all competition clauses from rail legislation and the removal of the competition function of the ORR.



BRING PRIVATE OPEN-ACCESS OPERATIONS INTO PUBLIC OWNERSHIP

Open Access operators are private operators that apply for and run trains on publicly owned tracks independently of a government contract. In considering their applications the regulator, Office of Rail and Road, is required to take into account the need to foster competition.¹ **The belief is that if operators are competing against each other, they will make each other better. The reality has been different.**

All Open Access applications have to pass the "Not Primarily Abstractive" (NPA) test. This means that for every £7 in customer revenue that they attract away from existing services, they should generate at least £3 from new customers. Most open-access operations don't meet this test. The government estimates that they undercut the revenues of publicly owned operators to the tune of £229 million per year.²

Furthermore, open access undermines public investment, with the four-year delay to the East Coast Main Line timetable **undermining the value of £4 billion investment in the line.**³

Recent research on the East Coast Mail Line indicates **LNER could lose up to £1.1 billion⁴ in revenues over the next decade to open access abstraction.** Much of this money will be extracted from the railway system in dividends, rather than being used to improve the service and cut fares for passengers.

While only being about 1% of our railway system, open access poses a real threat to

The government estimates that they undercut the revenues of publicly owned operators to the tune of £229 million per year.

efficiently running the other 99%,⁵ as it weighs heavily on rail infrastructure capacity without contributing adequately to maintenance costs. **It also creates significant complications for planning and timetabling across the network.**

As rail engineer Gareth Dennis has explained, private open access operators "don't have to pay for depot space because they get to use depots that exist for other companies.⁶ They don't have to pay to train their staff because they can just recruit staff trained by the other operators. It's a false economy really."

Therefore, current private open access operations should be brought into public ownership when their contracts end and fully integrated into the rail network to deliver the full benefits of public ownership



JOHNBOSCO NWOGBO
LEAD CAMPAIGNER,
WE OWN IT

“What GBR should have when established is a Commercial Opportunities Department tasked with identifying potential destinations currently under or unserved in the inherited timetable....There has to be a moratorium on processing, let alone authorising, any new open access applications.”



ROGER FORD
RAIL EXPERT
Modern Railways magazine,
August 2025



A COMPELLING FARES OFFER FROM THE NATIONALISED RAILWAY



The transition to a nationalised railway has so far been painfully slow, backward-looking and introverted. It appears to be more about decanting the existing railway into a more workable version of its current self than it does about seizing the massive opportunity that nationalisation brings.

So how can we generate some focus and enthusiasm? A compelling national fares offer should be a big part of that. Rail fares at present are a mess. Though book ahead bargains can be had – this is at the expense of eye-wateringly high walk-up tickets and a fantastically complicated morass of peak, off-peak, book ahead, local offers and concessions.

Reform so far has consisted of tinkering at the margins.

So what could a compelling national fares offer look like? Well, **how about a GB version of Germany's Bahn Card or the Swiss half fare travelcard, where, for an annual fee, passengers can get a third or a half off rail fares?**

A good proportion of the population can currently get a third off through one of a myriad range of national railcards. This new card would both simplify and extend this benefit to everybody (you could charge less for the card for concessionary groups if you wanted).

A national rail card could also make public ownership more tangible and associated with the more positive aspects of life. You could also use it to communicate directly with those who own and use the railway about leisure travel offers, opportunities to get involved and news about how the network is developing.

Back in 1948, the newly nationalised railway nearly ended up being called Great British Railways. It staggered into being and took a long time to find its feet. This time there's the opportunity not just to make the railway more reliable but also to set out a broader and more inclusive vision rooted in how a national railway, owned by all of us, can best serve people, passengers and place. A compelling national fares offer would be a good place to start.



JONATHAN BRAY
FORMER DIRECTOR,
SAVE OUR RAILWAYS

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A SINGLE PUBLICLY-OWNED TICKET RETAILER IS KEY TO PASSENGER EXPERIENCE

Having one publicly-owned Great British Railways ticket retailer, which is run in the public interest would be a huge improvement on the confusing fragmented and expensive fares landscape we have today. **It would provide a “one-stop shop” for all passenger information and tickets** – giving people the confidence that all the money we spend on rail fares goes towards delivering a better service, rather than being sucked out as private profit.

For example Trainline, the most prominent ticket retailer in the present privatised system, takes 6.1% of all tickets sold on its platform,¹ **meaning it took a cut of £274.5 million last year based on revenues of £4.5 billion.**² It dupes passengers into paying booking fees of around 5%, which are generally not charged if tickets are bought directly from train operators, **creating perverse incentives for Trainline to suggest more expensive tickets to passengers.**³

Cutting Trainline and other private retailers out will mean more money in passengers’ pockets and more revenue available to our publicly-owned railway.

A single publicly-owned ticket retail platform is the norm in most other countries with successful state-owned railways, such as in Switzerland and Denmark. For example, Denmark’s Rejsekort & Rejseplan A/S brings together tickets and timetables for rail, bus and metro, enabling passengers to plan their entire journey and buy tickets all in one place. Creating something similar for Great British Railways will be the only way to successfully fulfil Labour’s pledge to “do away with dozens of complex interfaces that currently hold the system back”.⁴

Labour has proposed a “publicly backed” ticket retailer whilst also saying it wants to maintain “a thriving and competitive rail retail market”. **This will be impossible to deliver under current competition rules.** It will create a conflict of interest at the heart of Great British Railways – as one public body simply cannot have the dual

role of setting fares across the network, whilst also “compet[ing] on a fair and open basis with independent retailers”.⁵

That is why the Railways Bill must repeal all competition law in the railway. It is ‘competition’ that has created “the complex and fragmented fares landscape” that we have today.⁶

An obsession with competition will not fix the crisis.

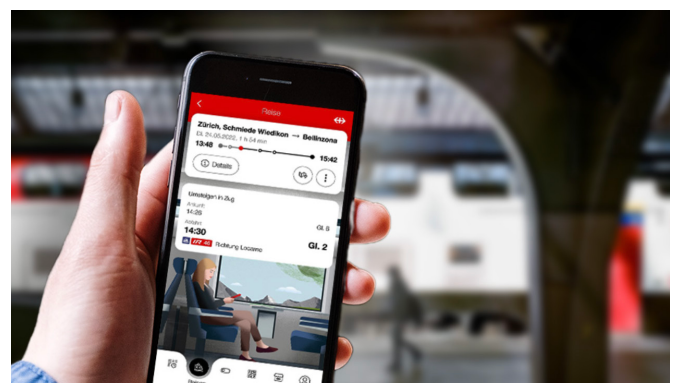
All that passengers want is a simple, reliable, fair public retailer, which we can always trust to give us the best value fare, no matter when we buy our ticket.

We want assurances that all the money we spend on fares is staying in the system and being used to run and improve services.



ELLIE HARRISON
FOUNDER, BRING BACK
BRITISH RAIL

All that passengers want is a simple, reliable, fair public retailer, which we can always trust to give us the best value fare, no matter when we buy our ticket.



frueschwind.ch/sbb-app/

A RAILWAY THAT IS TRULY FOR ALL – AN ACCESSIBILITY FRAMEWORK FOR GBR

Disability rights campaigners and passenger groups have written to the Secretary of State, demanding an 'Accessibility Framework for Great British Railways.'

The letter is an urgent intervention to restore accessibility to the centre of the upcoming Railways Bill, after all of the previous government's pledges were abandoned. It also challenges the government's recent refusal of the Transport Committee's request to conduct an overhaul of laws and regulations in this area.

The removal of accessibility duties from Great British Railways threatens to undo years of campaigning by disabled people, and ignores evidence of systemic discrimination across the network. We have therefore proposed a full 'Accessibility Framework' for the new legislation, which should now be considered the minimum expectation for rail reform:

PRIMARY LEGISLATION AND INVESTMENT

1. Public interest duties at the centre of GBR
2. Investment fund for accessible infrastructure
3. Deadlines for step-free access

REGULATORY REFORM

4. Equality standards for ticket retail and new technologies
5. Guarantee of Turn Up And Go Travel
6. Full staffing model for trains, stations and ticket offices
7. National Accessible Travel Policy

RIGHTS AND REPRESENTATION

8. New complaints body for disabled passengers
9. Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee as statutory advisor
10. Duties to consult disabled people



Read the full Accessibility Framework at www.abcommuters.com

This Framework has been backed by the following organisations and

persons: Association of British Commuters | National Pensioners Convention | Disabled People Against Cuts | Transport for All, Inclusion London | Get Glasgow Moving | Transport Action Network | TSSA union | We Own It | Bring Back British Rail | Disability Rights UK | Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson | Ann Bates OBE (former government advisor in accessible transport) | Anthony Jennings (Co-founder of the Campaign for Level Boarding) | Julian Vaughan (Chair of the Bedfordshire Rail Access Network) | Doug Paulley (disability rights activist and researcher) | Gareth Dennis (rail engineer and writer) | Sarah Leadbetter (disability rights activist) | Sarah Gayton (Street Access campaign co-ordinator)

BETTER JOBS, BETTER SERVICES

NATIONAL UNION OF RAIL, MARITIME AND TRANSPORT WORKERS (RMT)

RMT welcomes the government's decision to create publicly owned Great British Railways, and we have produced detailed research to make the case for ending other profiteering on the railway that is a legacy of privatisation, including that undertaken by the rolling stock companies¹ and open access operators.²

Another consequence of privatisation is that on large parts of the network, **many essential rail services - such as cleaning, station staffing, catering, security, rail infrastructure and engineering - will still be outsourced to private contractors.** That's bad news for passengers and taxpayers as these companies **rake in £400 million annually in profits - the equivalent of a 3.8% fare cut.**³ And it is bad news for rail workers as these profits are made on the backs of precarious employment contracts and inferior pay and conditions, such as poorer sick pay and pensions.

But there is a better way. RMT has launched the Better Jobs Better Services campaign to show that if Great British Railways insources and integrates outsourced rail with the rest of the railway, that would deliver a better deal for passengers and workers. For example, insourcing would increase staffing capacity within GBR, enabling the government to mandate minimum staffing level guarantees to improve accessibility and safety for all passengers.

You can support the campaign by scanning the QR code:



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END THE PRIVATE ROLLING STOCK WASTE

Private rolling stock leasing is one of the most wasteful aspects of our railways.

Since privatisation, **Rolling Stock Operating Companies (ROSCOs) have extracted billions in profits – up to 25% of every ticket sold – while reinvesting little in new trains.** This leaves passengers with outdated fleets, even though ROSCO dividends between 2012–18 could have paid for 700 new vehicles.

The government must reject profiteering models and instead finance new rolling stock through public ownership, by launching Great British Trains. **Research in Scotland suggests publicly funded rolling stock would be at least 40% cheaper, saving at least £362 million.**¹ Rejecting ROSCOs means reinvesting in the British rail system, not offshore tax havens.

For passengers, this reform means newer, more reliable trains, as well as lower fares. It would allow investment in smoother journeys, state-of-the-art accessibility upgrades to carriages and platforms, as public ownership has already enabled in the Liverpool City Region,² revolutionising rail travel for wheelchair users and other passengers who need assistance.

We Own it research shows that private rolling stock dividends paid out in an average year over the last decade could have funded a yearly cut to all passenger fares of at least 4.15%.³

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angeltrains.co.uk/about/



www.imeche.org/news/article/glut-of-new-rolling-stock-brings-challenges-and-opportunities-for-rail-sector

For workers, public ownership of rolling stock supports investment in high-skilled and stable jobs. For the planet, it means faster progress toward net-zero transport.

The government should consider setting up a publicly-owned rolling stock company, Great British Trains, building on the successful branding of Great British Energy.

This company would directly purchase and own all new trains in our railway system to replace privately owned ones as their current contracts end or as old trains are decommissioned.



DR GRACE BROWN
RESEARCHER,
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW



RAIL TIMETABLING – A REGULAR RAIL SERVICE FOR EVERY COMMUNITY

A timetable displays the service that a railway offers travellers. **The current timetable for Britain's railway contains good features, but overall it is a mess.** All sense of a national network has been eroded. Connections between trains are random, and long waits at interchanges must be deterring people. Intervals between trains are often erratic, and departure times vary, so that memorability is poor.

This dire situation is a consequence of the Railways Act 1993, which introduced competition between train operating companies. The legislation ignored the strong ongoing challenge from other modes (cars, coaches and planes, and electronic communications) and necessitated a Regulator, the Office of Rail and Road [ORR], whose approach is legalistic, which is incompatible with the complex task of planning workable timetables.

Incorporation of Open-access demands and expectations, and the specific requirements of freight operators, has led to the abandonment of repeating timings across large parts of the network. **In contrast, standard timings are commonplace in mainland Europe, particularly in Switzerland and the Netherlands.**

Fragmentation of the industry exacerbated the problems, as did the arrival of profit-seeking Open Access [OA] companies. Fixing the railway timetable is about planning the optimal use of capacity. Getting the best out of our network for the benefit of passengers. The right specification for the rail network would be:

- **A mix of frequent services** appropriate to the route and the places served, and each running at least hourly;
- **Available daily** from early morning to late evening;
- **Repetition of readily memorable timings;**
- **Symmetry of services** in the two directions;
- **High standards of layouts and signage** to assist travellers throughout their journeys, especially the disabled and those unfamiliar with the system, among other things.

Only such an offer, modelled on the successful system in Switzerland, can excite interest in Great British Railways.



JONATHAN TYLER
PASSENGER TRANSPORT
NETWORKS, YORK

Fixing the railway timetable is about planning the optimal use of capacity. Getting the best out of our network for the benefit of passengers.



PASSENGERS MUST HAVE A DEMOCRATIC VOICE IN GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

This government has a huge opportunity with Great British Railways to create a future where passengers have a real say. Just as trade unions represent workers, **the people who use the railway need their own independent, democratically accountable organisation to represent them.**

Giving meaningful power to passengers in a publicly owned railway has a number of benefits:

- **It provides checks and balances in a monopoly system.** There is no market in rail so passengers need other ways to influence decisions, be represented and input into decisions as a distinct group
- **It helps to improve the quality of services** as it creates new mechanisms for passenger feedback beyond just the simple metric of whether people are buying tickets
- **It creates a political force invested in driving growth on the railway.** A group of people, represented within Great British Railways, who have a vested interest in expanding and improving the service (and defending against cuts and privatisation). This is necessary if the government is serious about making it easy for people to use public transport instead of driving and flying.

What does meaningful power for passengers mean? The publicly owned railway will be managed by professionals day to day, but the supervisory board that holds it accountable should represent the broad, long term public interest. **We Own It has proposed a model of 21st-century public ownership where public service users** – in this case passengers – sit on this board alongside experts, elected local politicians, unions and wider community and environmental groups.¹

We call on the government to create an independent organisation, or repurpose Transport Focus, to give passengers across the UK the power to vote for the leadership.

As a passenger, when you buy a rail ticket, you automatically have the option of registering and joining the organisation as a member. You can vote for representatives, attend board meetings and access data about decisions and performance. You are encouraged to contribute your ideas and experience – online and offline – to improve the quality of services and contribute towards a vision of the railways over time.



CAT HOBBS
FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR,
WE OWN IT

“Public ownership isn’t a silver bullet, but we are really firing this starting gun in that race for a truly 21st-century railway, and that does mean refocusing away from private profit and towards the public good.”



HEIDI ALEXANDER
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT
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REFORMS COULD BE PUT AT RISK WITHOUT THE RIGHT INVESTMENT

Our railway system has historically been starved of investment, and as a result is lagging behind the top railway systems in Europe. **Switzerland, which consistently appears at the top of railway rankings, invests around €477 per capita into their railway system. Britain invests around €116.**¹ Britain cannot get a Switzerland-quality railway without comparable levels of investment.

The government should consider a policy of investing a minimum of 0.5% of GDP in the railway system every year, which would take government spending on the railway from £12.5 billion last year to £14 billion.²

This investment will enable the government to rebuild track, expand electrification, and upgrade ageing rolling stock. **It also allows GBR to set aside a ring-fenced Beeching Reversal Fund, which should be used to reopen previously closed lines as well as consider future opportunities for expanding the network.**

For example, a proposal by the Campaign for Better Transport, which would add 343 miles of passenger rail track, create 72 new stations and generate up to 20 million new rail journeys, would cost £639 million per year for 10 years.³

This kind of investment would reduce the incidence of cancellations and delays, as well as overcrowding. Crucially, proper investment further gives GBR more scope to cut rail fares for passengers, making it easier for people to take the train instead of driving or flying. This would have enormous benefits for our environment.

Investment also pays for itself. £2.50 of economic activity is created in the British economy as a result of every £1 the government invests in the railway system.⁴



JOHNBOSCO NWOGBO
LEAD CAMPAIGNER,
WE OWN IT

Investment also pays for itself. £2.50 of economic activity is created in the British economy as a result of every £1 the government invests in the railway system.



CONCLUSION

Imagine a world in which our railway delivers for us, passengers!

You make a trip to visit family, go to work or to enjoy a nice Saturday trip to the seaside. You buy your tickets on a single publicly owned app, listing all tickets and fares. If you don't use a smartphone, it's not a problem – staff are there to help when you arrive at the station.

The fares are easy to understand and best of all, substantially cheaper than driving (or flying). You have a Great British Railways railcard which gives you a third off discount, wherever you live in the UK.

It's easy to walk, cycle or take a bus to the station. Your local buses join up with the train. Your train is publicly owned. Your carriage is clean and not jam-packed, with working toilets and superfast wifi. If you are a disabled passenger, you have support at the station and on the train, including step-free access, working elevators, clear signs and enough staff to help you if needed.

There is a 'clockface' timetable that is easy to remember. Whether you live in the countryside, suburbs or the city, you have regular, reliable trains. The train departs on time and connecting journeys are smoothly joined up.

The service is constantly improving thanks to the innovative culture in Great British Railways. If you are unhappy with the service you get, or if you have ideas for improvements, you can ask the passenger watchdog for help – they are directly accountable to you.

You find the trains and public transport in general so seamless, affordable and easy that you consider not having – or not wanting – a car.

This is not pie in the sky. **The best railways in Europe are in public ownership, from track to train to operations.** Northern, TransPennine Express and LNER, publicly owned operators that serve the North, have already been able to work together to cut fares for passengers on some routes by up to 50%. For example, the price for a ticket from Harrogate to Manchester went from £33.90 to £14.10. Similarly, going from Burley to Manchester, which used to cost £32.60, now costs £10.10. Impressively, those operators have, in the process, generated £200,000 in new revenue from more people now choosing to travel by rail.¹

The previously failing TransPennine Express, brought into public ownership in March 2023, is now firing on all cylinders and reopening previously cut services. Cancellations? Down by 75%. Customer journeys? Up by 42%. Revenue? Spiked by 54%.²

If the railways remain underfunded, with a hodgepodge of private and public interests battling it out on our tracks and in the boardrooms, with billions still leaking out to shareholders, there is a huge risk of failure.

But the government can make sure that Great British Railways is truly great. **To make the most of this historic opportunity, the government must have an ambitious vision and provide funding for it, stop profits leaking out of the system, prioritise socioeconomic impact instead of competition law and put passengers at the heart of the new structure.**

“TransPennine Express’s remarkable turnaround shows exactly why we’re bringing our railways back into public ownership as part of our Plan for Change. These impressive results demonstrate what happens when we put passengers and communities first rather than private profit.”



LORD PETER HENDY

MINISTER OF STATE FOR THE RAILWAY

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