

## Great British Railways – what will this mean for passengers?

This article is based on contributions by Railfuture members Nick Dibben and Jerry Alderson published in the newsletter of Railfuture's East Anglia Branch. ([www.railfuture.org.uk/east](http://www.railfuture.org.uk/east))

Nick Dibben begins: In a White Paper the Government proposes a new national body, Great British Railways to act as the controlling mind of the railways. It will maintain the tracks, set the timetable, run the stations and collect the fares. The train operators will continue, but will just run the trains. Although the operators will carry some financial risk, the main revenue risk is transferred to GBR.

The report recognises the role of the railway in helping to grow the economy and in helping to tackle climate change. So far so good. But what is the benefit to passengers and when will they start to notice?

The vast majority of people are not bothered who actually runs the trains or how complex the contracts. The key priorities for many passengers are: getting to the station, buying a ticket, a comfortable seat, frequent and punctual trains, good information and connections. So will the White Paper deliver on these items?

Certainly there are plans to simplify the ticketing system and ensure a more consistent product across the network. The announcement of new flexible season tickets will help many who in future may only commute two or three times a week (and do so at peak time). There is talk about more local input into timetable specifications and getting better connections at key interchange stations and ensuring better spacing of services along a particular route.

On the downside, the government record of providing comfortable seating is not good at all. It will be interesting to see if it will be a case of "passengers first" or "budget first." Although the Government's commitment to climate change will require an overall reduction in the number of journeys people make, a shift away from cars and on to public transport is essential. Good seating and sensible fares are required to achieve this.

Referring to the era before the 1990s privatisation of British Rail, Jerry Alderson continues: BR could be persuaded to change a service, run a new service or open a station without involving other organisations, but since Network Rail's creation and government micro-management of Train Operating Companies, effecting change has seemed almost as difficult as getting blood out of a stone, not least because everything went through a mountainous approval process...

Many rail campaigners would be happy if there were fewer consultations, provided that the railway knew what to do and just got on with it; but that requires trust, and because of a perceived 'what passengers actually want is not important' attitude across the industry, there has not been a lot of that in recent years. However, having to deal with fewer organisations will be welcomed.

If there is one thing that the changes must bring, it is agility: *decide and do*.

By 2023, apart from open access operators, passengers may see only one brand, GBR. They will get information and buy tickets (and claim Delay/Repay) from one website/app, rather than a choice of 20+ government appointed ones, which should save the rail industry a substantial sum.

This does not preclude independent retailers, nor innovators who can built superior apps providing information, since the data will continue to be provided free of charge.

Passengers purchasing from GBR will deal with only one company (at any station in Britain) regardless of where they travel – a massive bonus to customers who were told “Sorry, we can’t do that. You’ll have to go back to where you bought it from.”

Train ownership will not change – Rolling Stock Companies will still purchase and lease them to operators, who will largely remain as monopolies on most routes and they will continue directly to employ on-board train staff and, unless maintenance is contracted out to the train manufacturer, engineers at the train depots.

The concession Train Operating Companies will be rewarded for meeting key performance indicators (as opposed to punishing the former franchises operators for failing to meet them) and “cost control” although the remit of that is unclear.

EDITOR’S NOTE: There are indeed several other aspects of the GBR plan which are also unclear at the moment. We may comment further on these in a future issue of Rail Report Europe.

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