

GBRTT commission on simpler, better industry processes

Briefing note

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Simpler, better industry processes

Following publication of the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail (WSPR) last year, on 10 May in the Queen's Speech the Government announced legislation "to modernise rail services and improve reliability for passengers". The Secretary of State is asking the Great British Railways Transition Team for advice on simplification and reform of industry processes in order to inform detailed legislative changes and identify other, wider changes to rules and contracts.

What's changing?

At the heart of any successful, customer-focussed railway is a set of shared processes and decisions, and a set of choices about how to use and operate the railway. In recent years, these decisions and choices have been governed by specific regulations, contracts and policies.

For 30 years the industry has been characterised by a passive, neutral-by-design infrastructure manager making decisions on access for private sector train operators, overseen by an independent regulator, even though most of the parties seeking access have been under contract to a public sector franchising authority. Detailed rules and controls have provided valued protections, but have also created unnecessary duplication, delays and costs when changing and improving the railway. Too often, railway managers have not been accountable for the service users receive.

The WSPR is changing all that. Great British Railways (GBR) will be a proactive public body; a guiding mind that will work with stakeholders to identify and decide the best use of each part of the railway. Most passenger train operators will become direct delivery partners contracted by GBR, with a new and different contractual relationship. Some will be in a similar relationship with a devolved authority, and, as now, there will be independent open access operators. The rail freight sector will remain private but supported by GBR planning to deliver national benefits and growth targets agreed with government. This will require simpler, more transparent processes that can support private investment and encourage new freight flows. This new set of relationships and the creation of a guiding mind has to be reflected in the sector's rules and contracts.

Use of the railway

The independent regulator will continue to ensure that access decisions are made fairly. However, the decision-making processes for service specification, access and timetabling could be much better joined-up than they currently are. Today's mandatory system where access decisions are supposed to be decided in advance of decisions on the timetable no longer works. Prior to the pandemic the network had become full or nearly full and performance was declining, so incremental service changes had become complex; and the pandemic response has required more frequent and agile timetable changes. In each case access rights have tended to trail behind the train plan. The GBR Transition Team and ORR will work with the industry to develop a simpler, better-integrated way to decide how train services are planned and delivered, and how commitments are made about future services

to deliver public benefit and encourage investment into the railway. Network Rail is already working with train operators, ORR and GBRTT on Better Timetables for Passengers and Freight users (BTPF) so this wider review will dovetail with the development of the industry's BTPF proposals.

Operations and performance

The key to service delivery is simple, clear accountability; underpinned by good and timely information. Complex contracts with financial incentives as proxies for that accountability have failed to deliver the service quality that passengers and freight users expect. We need to develop mechanisms that establish clear responsibilities and enable accountable managers within GBR to take difficult choices in real time, putting passengers and freight customers first, with commercial protections and compensation where appropriate.

Stations, depots and connected facilities

We also want to improve the arrangements for station and depot access, so that the right choices are made, for the right reasons, and at the right time. We need a simple, modern, and flexible framework, where accountabilities are practical, clear and fair. We want something that is fit for today's railway and delivers the best outcome for the industry and our customers.

Joint working

We need to bring the best brains in the industry together to develop the new railway. No one organisation has a monopoly on wisdom and a workable, practical set of reforms needs to draw on the expert professionals who work on these issues across the sector. The current rail industry parties all have a role to play in exploiting this rare opportunity, to identify real improvements that will deliver for passengers, freight users and taxpayers over the next few years and with a positive legacy over decades. Please join us in the work to develop the new industry model and associated proposed changes to regulations and contracts.

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