

Reimagining & Rebooting our passenger railway

What rail ***must*** do to meet changing needs



INSIDE...

- ➔ Fares and ticketing: going for growth!
- ➔ Cost and convenience
- ➔ The passenger experience



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ALAMY

Welcome

As the country continues to wrestle with one of the greatest upheavals to everyday life in recent memory, passenger numbers have had a turbulent 'snakes and ladders' journey - and continue to lag behind pre-pandemic levels.

Life both on and off the railway has changed dramatically, from the increase in home working to the more urgent focus on building a greener and more sustainable society in the future. The climate change emergency is a major consideration here.

For rail to both maintain and increase its relevance and to fulfil its potential as a key driver of green transport, the whole passenger offering needs to be reimagined and rebooted - and quickly. Passenger expectations have changed on the emerging leisure-led railway and the industry must change with them.

The railway is also entering a new phase with the creation of Great British Railways. Now is the time to consider what can be done quickly, that will set the passenger railway on the right course for a bright and prosperous future under GBR.

RAIL launched a three-part webinar series in January to explore these issues. The first two episodes took place on January 26 and February 23 (and can be viewed on catch-up at www.railmagazine.com/events). The final episode in the series is due to take place on March 31 (register at

<https://bit.ly/PassengerExperienceWebinar>).

This supplement covers the same subject areas as the webinars and explores each area in further detail:

■ Fares & ticketing: Going for growth!

Although now firmly on the agenda, wholesale fares reform could be years away - a challenge for GBR once it is in place. In the meantime, we must act to fill empty seats on trains and boost revenues.

■ Cost & convenience: making rail the first choice

Car travel still dominates and is the first choice for most people when making a journey. How can we encourage people to change their behaviour and choose rail over the car?

■ The passenger experience

Once a passenger has made the choice to travel by train, encouraging them to return to rail in the future is key to the industry's success. How do we retain passengers once we've won them?

These are all subjects RAIL will return to in the coming weeks as discussions around the recovery of passenger numbers ramp up and the creation of GBR gets under way. In the meantime, join us and industry experts over the next 29 pages to discuss and debate the various issues. ■

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Deputy Editor, RAIL



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SHUTTERSTOCK

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London Paddington station. David Brown says that a lot of rail business is now weekend leisure travel, but we have a timetable that does not reflect that demand. JACK BOSKETT.

Reimagining and rebooting the passenger railway

As the railway prepares for a new structure under Great British Railways, PAUL CLIFTON hears some uncomfortable truths from industry leaders about how the passenger offer needs shaking up

There is a real shift in the way people are using the railway.” Suzanne Donnelly’s job is to work out how to deal with that. She leads the new passenger revenue and marketing group at the Great British Railways Transition Team.

“Choosing to travel by rail is now a discretionary choice, rather than a necessary part of working life,” she says. “People can choose whether to take the train, or drive, or fly. But now they can also

choose not to travel: they can use Zoom instead.

“That’s a fundamental shift in emphasis. It means we have to work differently to attract people.”

During the pandemic, passenger numbers fell to just 5% of normal. In the autumn of 2021, they drifted back to around 60%, before beginning to fall sharply again as the Omicron variant began to dominate.

But the headline figures mask seismic

shifts in travel patterns. More than half of all rail journeys are now for leisure, not work. Before COVID, the split was one-third leisure, two-thirds work.

Commuter journeys remain at only 45% of pre-pandemic levels. Dig deeper: the figures are 54% outside London, and only 41% into the capital.

Here’s a key stat: five-day peak commuting Monday to Friday stands at just 6%. There is no evidence to suggest it will ever return.

Most commuting takes place Tuesday to Thursday. Mondays are 20% lower. Fridays are 50% lower.

“We are £10 million in revenue down each day,” says Tim Shoveller, Managing Director of Network Rail’s North West and Central region.

“But even though commuter traffic has halved, and even though leisure traffic has returned, there are still more people travelling Mondays to Fridays than there are at the weekend.

“Simply to switch emphasis to weekends would be a gross over-simplification. And it would ignore that the yields are much higher on weekdays: people travelling to work pay more.

“It would be a curious business indeed



“In terms of matching demand with supply, we are not in a great place. We are over-supplying a commuter market that has not come back. And we are under-supplying a buoyant leisure demand.”

Suzanne Donnelly, Commercial Director, Great British Railways Transition Team

that further damaged a commuter base that is now more discretionary, and is still higher yielding than a much more elastic leisure base that yields less.”

But Suzanne Donnelly says: “In terms of matching demand with supply, we are not in a great place. We are over-supplying a commuter market that has not come back. And we are under-supplying a buoyant leisure demand.”

Donnelly was on secondment from LNER to the Rail Revenue Recovery Group. Now she has shifted to the GBR Transition Team.

“The move to GBR is an opportunity to meet a different railway. We have to attract people who are not currently using the railway. Our commuters are travelling less often, they’re travelling at different times, and they’re using different tickets.

“They’re spending less with us, so we have no choice: we have to capture people who have not even been considering travelling by rail.”

Pre-pandemic revenue from fares was around £10 billion. Anytime and season tickets each counted for around 20% of that. As commuter and full-fare travel are half the previous level, we can anticipate future fare revenue of £8bn.

So, there is a £2bn gap. The railway has received, on average, more than £500m a month in additional state aid during the pandemic. Now it will be cut. Leaner times lie ahead. Workforce reductions and savings are being demanded.

It must simultaneously adjust to a low-carbon electric economy from which the railway would logically benefit.

“The workers have the power now,” says Anthony Smith, Chief Executive of Transport Focus. “And they are not going to cede it back.

“For all those people who can work from home, daily commuting has gone forever. These people have effectively had pay rises, because they’re not buying season tickets.

“That is something they are not going to give up, especially with so many more jobs on offer at the moment.

“This will be felt most in London and the South East. So, we will see a part-leisure, part-business market into our major cities. It will not have the same peaks as before.

“Trains will be slightly less frequent. And the trains will be longer to adjust to that.”

Ripping up the timetable, a new fares format - and no ticket offices

“People have got out of the habit of pre-paying for something they might not use,” says Smith. “The future is about pay-as-you-go value for money.”

“A key problem is the rapid and

widespread acceptance of technology, accelerated by working from home,” agrees Mark Hopwood, Managing Director of Great Western Railway.

“Shops take contactless payments of £100 now. We have to move quickly to simple contactless ticketing, probably leap-frogging smartcards.

“Hopefully supported by some fares reform, that allows us to get rid of the ridiculous anomalies that are hard-wired into the structure. Split ticketing makes life more difficult than it needs to be.”

“Suburban fares are still quite clunky,” agrees Tim Shoveller.

“Peak, off-peak, super off-peak... it’s a lot less sophisticated than long-distance yield management.

“Lowering the peaks and raising numbers in the middle of the day, where we can do it for free, provides a better service for passengers. More reliable, with a greater expectation of getting a seat.

“And you don’t need all those extra bits of infrastructure at enormous cost, like daytime stabling. Spreading demand is a big way into this question of affordability.”

“A lot of our business is now weekend leisure. We have a railway timetable that reflects a lifestyle that is now outdated,” comments Arriva’s David Brown.

“And if more than one person is looking to make that journey, it can be quite tricky to book. A bugbear of mine, as the father of three children, is travel in groups of five. They are not catered for. We need a new offer.

“Anyone who has done transformational change in other industries will know how difficult it is to focus on the customer and not on the process of change. The first step is to keep an eye on delivery.”

“The entire fares and ticketing structure is wrong,” says Alistair Lees, founder of Assertis, a developer of rail ticket retailing, and chairman of Independent Rail Retailers.

“Since COVID, rail managers have invented another 500 ticketing products.

“They have made travelling even more complex. Complexity is the enemy of the customer. It is also the enemy of cost efficiency. It comes with a hidden IT cost that everybody has to bear. And it is deeply unattractive to customers.

“We need a bonfire of ticket types and travel products.

“We need to stop - immediately - train company managers inventing on their own, as if this somehow matters to customers. It doesn’t. GBR could be excellent for this.

“We need a much more consistent offer. Take group fares: we need them to get →



“Lowering the peaks, and raising numbers in the middle of the day, where we can do it for free, provides a better service for passengers. More reliable, with a greater expectation of getting a seat.”

Tim Shoveller, Managing Director, Network Rail North West and Central Region

→ families out of cars. If a family doesn't have a group fare, it's going to stay in the car.

“There are family products at LNER that are different from the family products at Avanti West Coast, that are different from the family products at Great Western, and that are different from those at ScotRail, too.

“There are about 200 different family products on the railway. TOCs only think about themselves.

“So, the LNER family product works from Edinburgh to London. It is available on a few connecting services - to Harrogate or Scarborough. But it dies at King's Cross. What if I am travelling from Reading? Or Brighton? Or Ipswich? Even if the majority of my journey is on LNER, it's no use to me. Same with Avanti. Same with GWR. They all think in their own silos.

“We need much simpler ticketing that works nationally.”

Anthony Smith says it's not just about changing ticketing and fares. The way station staff are employed will have to change, too.

“Costs have to be brought under control. The voluntary severance scheme is a start. Next will come a hard look at the role of station staff - getting people out from behind the glass screens that trap them and out on the platform, where people want them.

“And we have to move towards digital, reducing the cost of retailing. Unless you alter whole areas of activity, you will not see transformative change; you will just see trimming at the margins.”

Smith warns: “You must not lose sight of the fact that not everyone can do contactless payment and mobile ticketing. Not everyone has a bank account, not everyone can use a smartphone, not everyone works cashless. You still require a safety net for people who probably do need a paper ticket.

“But that can be retailed in different ways. It doesn't have to be in a station ticket office. Or even at a station. It could be at a supermarket.”

Changing priorities - track possessions

Network Rail recognises that the shift in passenger business from work to leisure requires changes in the way it operates.

Take the November blockade between Southampton and Bournemouth on the South Western Main Line. Planned for weekends and the autumn half-term, the task was shifted to a normal working week.

It didn't suit everyone. Brockenhurst College, a five-minute walk from the New Forest station, had to close for the week. All 3,000 sixth-form students were told to stay at home, and had their lessons provided remotely.

Project Director Tom McNamee said: “People are much happier working from home and keeping the railway open on weekends. Previously, we would have closed on many weekends. Now, we can condense it all into a single working week, getting it all done and dusted.”

There was an added bonus for the railway. Doing major work on weekdays also brings what Network Rail calls a “substantial” cost saving.

But the weekday closure brought a new problem: there weren't enough replacement buses. Partly because many were required for school duties. And partly because there were insufficient drivers -

bus operators were already short of drivers due to COVID. And recently, some have been tempted by the higher pay now being offered to drive lorries instead.

John Halsall, Network Rail's Southern Region Managing Director, explains: “It makes a lot of sense to go for blockades outside the traditional Christmas, Easter and Bank Holidays. Post-COVID, that has become even more the case.

“Partly because those periods are more expensive. You're paying double or triple time. You're fighting over resources against the rest of the railway. Everyone is trying to do big work over the same handful of days.

“And the symbolism is important. Just when you get passengers who, typically, don't use the railway very often, it's unavailable. It sends out the wrong message. It suggests the railway doesn't care about these people; that it only wants the commuters.

“You could argue that these are modest users, but they are very vocal. And this has been eroding the credibility of the railway.

“We've found these big blockades are a real success. You're not starting and stopping, setting sites up and down. The quality of work is better. Typically, you do the work in one third of the time - the efficiency is extraordinary.

“You can push a whole lot of other stuff into the blockade. Stuff that you wouldn't do over a series of weekends when time is limited. Station painting or vegetation management - peripheral work that you can't do in a few hours.

“It will take another couple of years to work through, but increasingly we are going to try to avoid the big Christmas jobs. This is both passenger-friendly and a more efficient way of doing work.”

It has happened elsewhere, too. Tim Shoveller explains: “We did some work between Northampton and Rugby - the Crick tunnel. We did 72 weekends of work in five days. The cost was halved.

“Train companies are now incentivised differently. That allows us to do our work in a different way. And we've proved that passengers are happy with that: revenue regrows afterwards.

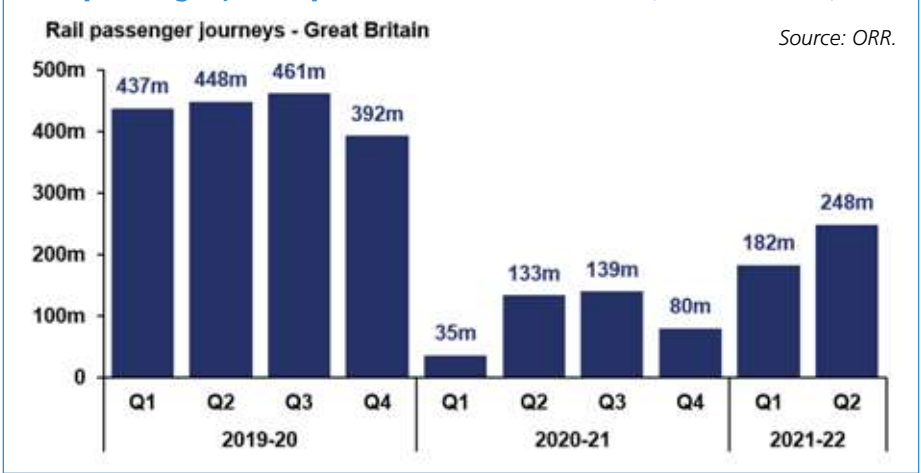
“If you have a blockade in such a way that you damage your passenger base, the ongoing cost can take years to recover.

“This requires looking at the railway as a system, and to really understand that different types of passengers respond in different ways, at different rates, and at different times of year.

“The new game in town is that we can take a cross-industry perspective.”



Rail passenger journeys, Great Britain, 2019-20 Q1 to 2021-22 Q2



A fresh design

“Putting it bluntly, I've spent the last 15 years taking seats out of trains so that more people can stand up,” says train designer Neil Bates.

“People pay the same fare, whether they have a seat or not. But to my mind, the most important building block on a train is the person on a seat. The customer wants a clean seat on a reliable train without any drama.”

Bates is Design Director at Vivarail. His company, Creactive, has also been involved in the relaunch of former SWR Class 707s for Southeastern. He says 85% of his work was overseas, until COVID-19 restricted travel.

“Train design should be like central heating: it's there in the background, making you comfortable, but it's not making a big show of itself. We provide the theatre; the drama comes from the people. That's really important - designers should not be like dogs around lamp posts. They don't have to leave their mark.”

What should a post-COVID train look like? Is there value-for-money merit in changing the layout, the branding, the image?

Anthony Smith points to the new Lumo service on the East Coast Main Line.

“It has configured space the easyJet way. Very good seats, very high quality, but airline. They have one class, which is the right way to go. Most people hate the idea of First Class.

“But they do like the idea of tailoring what they want to their seat. You can make it a First Class experience from a Standard Class seat. The trolley service is basic, but they have a pre-ordering service. So, delivered to your seat is a bag of whatever you have ordered. Such a neat idea. If you

← Wet track bed is removed as part of drainage works carried out on the Southampton to Bournemouth line. This was an example of weekday engineering as opposed to traditional weekend or Bank Holiday possessions. John Halsall says this type of work is likely to become more common. NETWORK RAIL.

want M&S or Greggs, the choice is yours.

“I have a feeling that is what the future is going to look like. I don't follow the mantra of tables and space; it just doesn't match the economics.”

But Alistair Lees warns: “The on-train environment is not just a seat thing. It's about where I put my luggage, not too far from my seat. It's about being able to travel as a group: can we get a table together, or at least seats together? Critical for families. If they can't sit together, they will go by car. Simple as that.”

Neil Bates also thinks interiors need changing. “A little more space. A little more opportunity to spread out. I tire of hearing the claims of ‘we are putting in at-seat charging, we're installing USB ports’. A USB port is not a sales pitch, it's a basic necessity.

“Where do you put your bags? Where do you kick off your shoes and relax? What do you do about a newspaper? Where can you get a decent coffee?”

What about the new Great British Railways as a brand? Should the network under the new identity be the same everywhere - like British Rail?

“There is value in a big, embracing brand,” Bates suggests.

“In an umbrella, paternalistic way, it would say: ‘You're in safe hands, we are going to look after you. We will run clean, reliable trains to wherever you want to go, and you won't be in for any unpleasant surprises.’

“Regional differences, like the areas under mayors, or Scotland and Wales, should appear like different members of the same family. The West Highland Line is unique, and it should appear so. Regional differences run through everything we do, from the way we speak onwards, but we also need the big brand.

“Airlines have always been good at this. In First Class, you get a glass of champagne. In Economy Class, you get a carton of juice. But you're still on the same plane, and you understand the value of the airline brand.”

Bates says the railway needs to be →

→ looking much further into the future. Beyond the next two years, beyond recovery from COVID, beyond the creation of GBR.

"You need that vision in your pocket. You can't get there if you don't know where you are going."

Integration

"We need the government to invest in a multi-modal journey planner," says Mark Hopwood.

"We need what people already have in Switzerland, in Germany, and in the Netherlands, where you type in any street corner, and get a suggestion regardless of whether you are getting a train, a tram, a bus or a water taxi. It will give you options for the whole journey."

"Here, we rely on people using separate systems to work out each mode of travel, and paying for each one separately. That complexity leads people to get in the car."

"We need to avoid looking inwards," says David Brown. "The railway does that too much. We talk to ourselves."

"In Arriva, we are quite fortunate: we operate in 14 countries. Buses, trains, trams. We get challenged from people in the Netherlands, who ask why we don't have a multi-modal journey planner. If we are serious about good customer service and efficiency, we have to look outside for best practice."

"Final mile is often an issue for families," says Hopwood. "We have some very good leisure destinations near the Great Western, but they're not actually on the railway - places such as Blenheim Palace, Stow on the Wold, Kingswear, Padstow."

"They are easily accessible by rail, but only if you know how to do it. If you don't have a good understanding of journey planning, getting there by train can be very confusing."

Fundamental issues

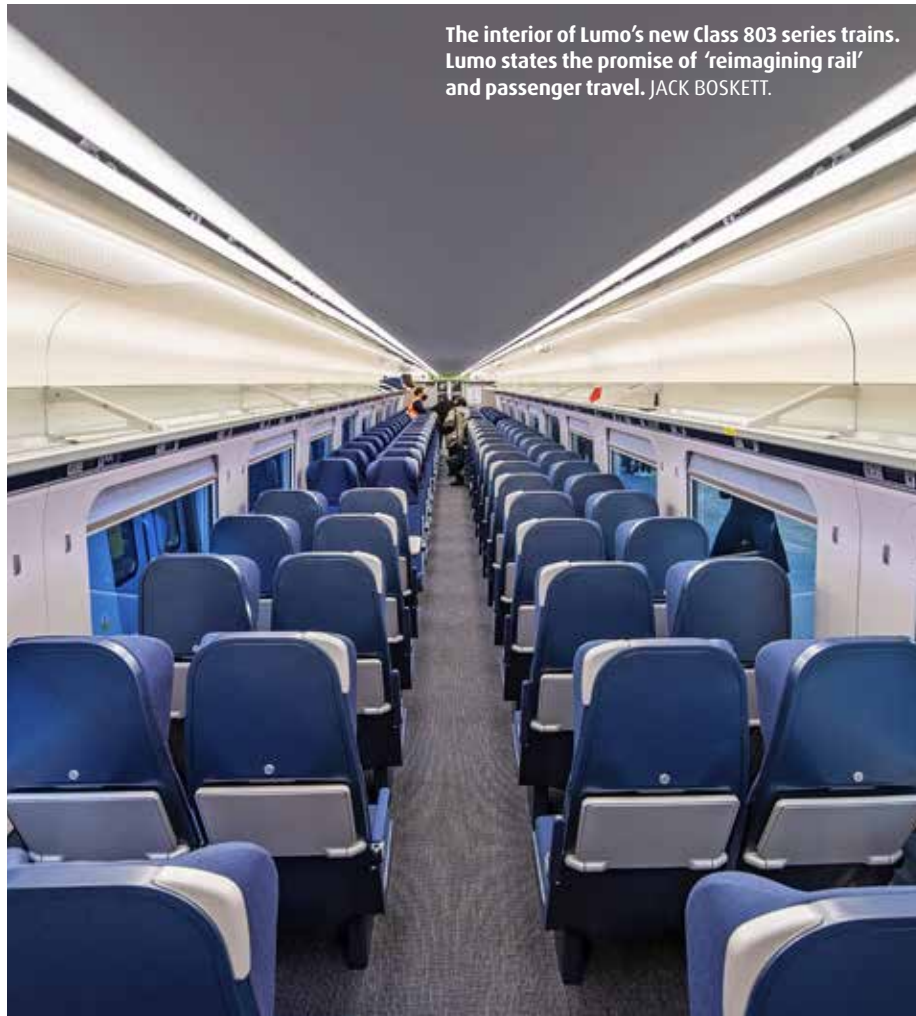
"There are some fundamental issues for the passenger railway that GBR cannot address," warns Mark Hopwood. "They are largely beyond its control."

"Like how the government wants to treat transport. Like the role of the Treasury in its transport decisions. Like the lack of long-term investment planning."

"If we carry on building retail parks that are only accessible by car, we are excluding people from the railway for generations."

"Countless new housing developments are being approved with no supporting public transport infrastructure."

"I am looking to a structure that simply did not exist before," says Suzanne Donnelly. "We can do a lot before GBR



The interior of Lumo's new Class 803 series trains. Lumo states the promise of 'reimagining rail' and passenger travel. JACK BOSKETT.

comes into existence through legislation.

"We've already started to work across the industry. There is a changing mindset."

"We need to remove the fragmentation that currently exists. When I walk up to a customer information point at a big station, I do not want to be handed from pillar to post between different companies. I want to get a question resolved by the person I approach."

"Having more customer focus on how we spend our money will help. We know fares and ticketing and retail can be very confusing. We have to make inroads."

"There is a strong business case because it will both save costs and generate revenue through existing passengers making new trips - and through new passengers."

"We will have a broader, more informed lens in the future."

Anthony Smith adds: "Substantial fares reform is probably five years down the line. I don't think it will happen until GBR gets hold of the railway. But stuff can be done now: pay-as-you-go in the bigger cities,

more contactless, more apps."

"Much of the railway cost is fixed. That's why I think going for growth is the right thing to do. Selling every single seat, even for a quid if necessary, maximising capacity, taking that budget airline philosophy."

"The 'putting passengers first' narrative won't go out of fashion," says Shoveller.

"It will drive everything, replacing a sense of being exploited with a sense of enthusiasm for a journey, with an off-peak affordable seat. That creates a different relationship with passengers."

"It's also about money: we need to understand what passengers are prepared to pay for, and what they are not. We have to increase revenue, as any business would. We have to focus on which bits make most money."

"But the last 25 years have been almost agnostic to value in pursuit of revenue. Not maximising the system, not prioritising the greatest number of passengers, but just getting their money. That has changed now."

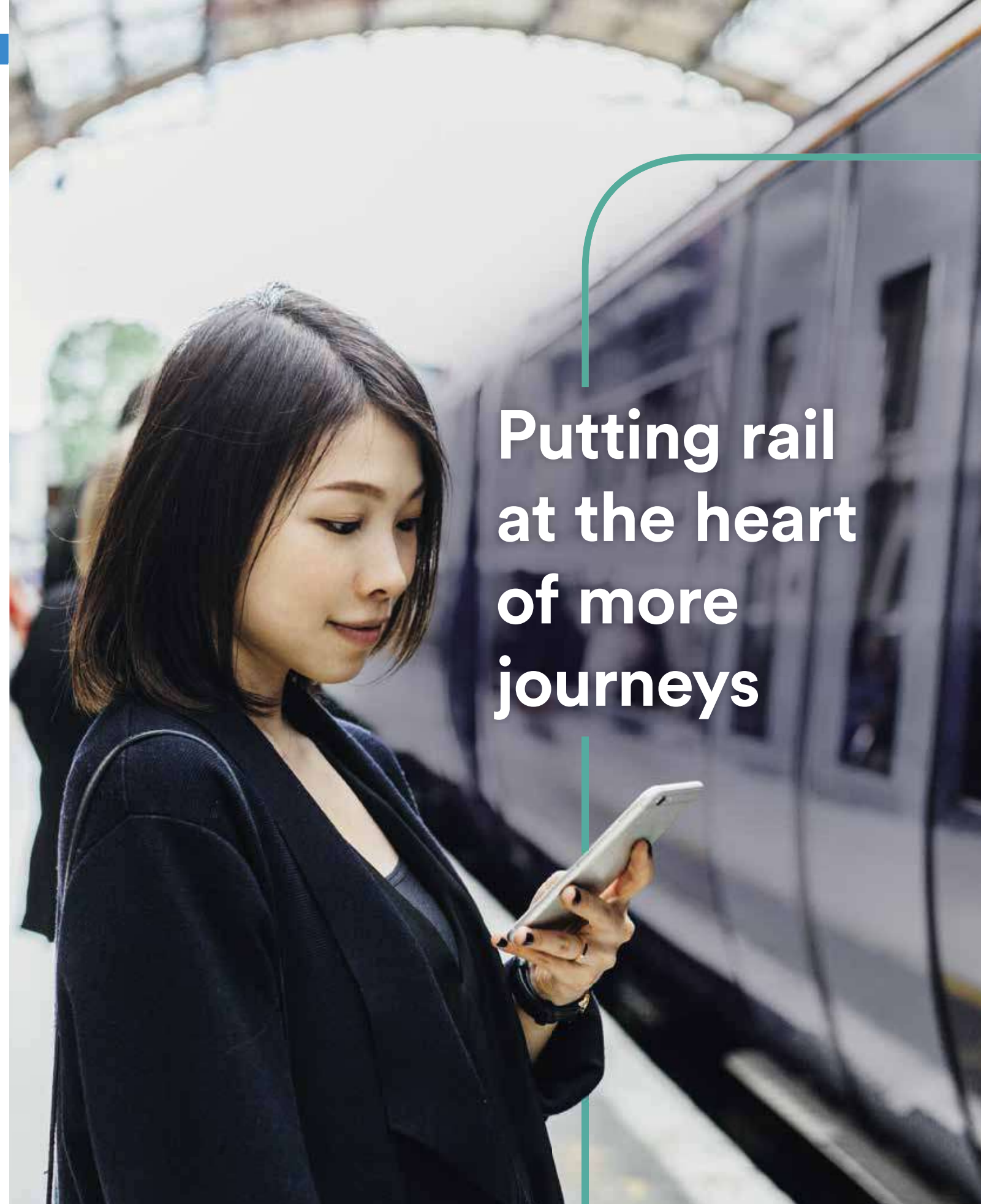
"We need a total change in the way we look at the way we look at our customers. Otherwise, they are not going to change the way they look at us," concludes Alistair Lees. ■

■ A longer version of this feature was published in *RailReview* Q4-2021.



"It makes a lot of sense to go for blockades outside the traditional Christmas, Easter and bank holidays. Post COVID, that has become even more the case."

John Halsall, Managing Director, Network Rail Southern Region



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Manchester Piccadilly station in August 2020. Andy Bagnall calls for a reimagining of the whole passenger experience. NETWORK RAIL.

A reboot for passengers...

Our clear priority as an industry has to be attracting customers back to rail as we emerge from the pandemic. Not only is the revenue this will bring in absolutely vital to our financial sustainability and future success, but getting people to choose to take the train rather than getting into their cars is the best way for rail to tackle carbon emissions, boost the economy and improve the outcomes for communities across Britain.

In order to do this we need to reimagine the passenger railway, with a strategy that is underpinned by an unwavering focus on the customer, and adopt a wholly new approach. Instead of simply meeting customers' needs and expectations, we have the opportunity to be more ambitious, to go further. If we are honest, simply meeting - often low - expectations is letting ourselves off the hook. We need to realise, anticipate and exceed their needs and expectations with a model that is more nimble, more responsive than ever before.

Looking at the numbers, the financial gap gives an indication of the precariousness of our position. RDG commissioned Imperial College Consultants to provide independent

Investing in and enhancing the customer experience is now vital, says Rail Delivery Group's Director General ANDY BAGNALL

modelling on the impact of the pandemic on the railway's finances. This indicated that, by 2025, the cumulative revenue shortfall since 2020 will be somewhere in the region of £20 billion.

If Government had not stepped in financially to keep trains running in March 2020, the industry could not have stepped up in the following months to ensure key workers could get to their workplaces and goods could get to supermarket shelves. Now, however, as we look to emerge from what seems to have been the longest two years most of us can remember, we must be ever more conscious that the competing demands on public money mean that rail cannot take more than its fair share.

When we learn that the NHS backlog may take a decade to clear, and we know that so many of our schoolchildren have suffered such terrible disruption to their education, it simply cannot be right to use taxpayers' money to run empty trains.

So we do not have the luxury of simply going back to what we did before and waiting for the passengers and the revenue to return. We must recognise that a profound change has occurred.

Although we are seeing an increase in people returning to offices, we expect working from home in some form is here to stay for the foreseeable future, which has clear consequences for the commuter market, the revenue from which was the bedrock of the industry's financial model before COVID-19.

Equally, people's increased familiarity with video conferencing, with Teams and Webex and Skype, will make it harder for us to convince business travellers to return at the same volume as before.

More positively, we saw leisure travel bounce back strongly in the summer and autumn of 2021, as people shied away from international travel and passenger numbers rose to almost pre-pandemic levels.

With infection rates falling, it is vital that we regain this momentum. This means we must invest in the customer experience and develop new and innovative products to attract passengers back and grow industry revenues.

Enhancing the customer experience, and responding to developing trends and rapidly evolving customer expectations, will depend on our understanding of our customers. To do this, we must make better use of data, developing meaningful insights that enable better decisions.

Private sector operators already have an in-depth knowledge of customer needs and markets. Over 25 years, they consistently demonstrated their strengths and ability to innovate in growing patronage and revenue, reducing waste, making best use of existing assets and driving modal shift. They doubled passenger numbers, increased the number of services by a third, and were midway through replacing over half the fleet of trains across the country - new for old - when the pandemic began.

With the right contractual levers and incentives in place they can do so again, developing innovative products and

services to enhance all aspects of the customer experience, growing revenue and delivering accessible, multi-modal, end-to-end journeys. This means making innovation central to industry structures, processes and incentives.

In the short to medium term, we have to build services back up in a way that meets recovering demand by maximising the use of the assets we already have to deliver the most punctual and reliable service possible while also meeting evolving customer demand.

Alongside growing revenue, we must also do whatever we can to control costs if we are going to stabilise the industry's finances. This needs to be approached strategically, by targeting waste and focusing on improving productivity and cost efficiency. While it's vital that we flex our timetables to adapt to new travel patterns, we must do so in a way that doesn't risk undermining our offer to customers. If this happens, people will simply avoid rail, with all the consequences that will have for modal shift and the industry's financial sustainability.

Tackling these issues can lay the foundations for a successful future, but the reform process set out in the White Paper from last year will be key to building on those foundations.

We have to get the structures right. This means moving beyond the binary arguments about ownership into a model in which both public and private sectors are able to bring their strengths into rail. Great British Railways needs to be a strong, independent public sector body at the centre, acting as a guiding mind - but not a controlling mind - and setting the direction of travel.

With the guiding mind in place, the next step is to get the contracts right. Government has been clear - and it's right - that it sees a future in which the strengths of the private sector, harnessed in the interests of customers, are an essential ingredient of success.

Contracts cannot be so tightly specified that they prevent operators from looking outwards and responding to customers, and instead force them to look inwards to Great British Railways for permission to act on the smallest issue. They need the right levers and incentives to attract customers to rail, respond with agility and flexibility to changing customer needs, develop innovative products and services, and proactively focus on providing a customer

experience that exceeds expectations. This is how to harness the potential of the private sector, focusing its efficiency and entrepreneurialism on generating value and promoting innovation for the benefit of customers and taxpayers.

Attracting and retaining customers - growing the new markets that can underpin the whole industry's finances well into the coming decades - means providing them with an experience that is at least on a par with the experience they receive from other transport modes, other services and industries.

This also means we must have the right fares. Customers' expectations are for a system that is easier to use, more flexible and provides fares that are not only better value for money, but which make rational sense and that they can trust. Government has made some positive moves in the right direction, most obviously through its investment in expanding Pay As You Go in the recent spending review, but the underlying regulations still need reform if customer expectations are to be met.

If we have the right structures, contracts and fares in place, then we need government to take a step back. It can and should set the framework, the high-level objectives it wants from rail, the contribution it wants the industry to make to the economy, society and the environment. It can also help by promoting modal shift through the policy, fiscal and investment decisions it takes.

Having established Great British Railways, though, it should trust it to make the right decisions - whether short- or long-term - to meet those objectives, resisting the temptation to continually issue mandatory guidance and instead giving the industry's leaders room to plan, make delivery choices and solve problems in the round. If it does, and with the right levers and incentives in contracts maximising the contribution of the private sector, then our optimism for, and confidence in, the future will grow.

The challenges the railway faces are significant but they are surmountable. If we do the right things, if we make the right decisions now and get the balance right between public and private sectors, passengers will return, and government will continue to invest. It will inevitably be different, it will be tough, and everyone will need to work towards the same shared goals and objectives, but there can be confidence about rail's future as the backbone of a sustainable, resilient, zero-carbon transport network, bringing people together and supporting the economy across Britain. ■



“Simply meeting - often low - expectations is letting ourselves off the hook. We need to realise, anticipate and exceed [passengers'] needs and expectations.”

Andy Bagnall, Director General, Rail Delivery Group

Standard bearer

RSSB's Head of External Engagement PAUL OXLEY explains how the organisation is supporting the industry to transition to a post-pandemic future and the continued role it will play as a home to collaboration, data, research and standards

When Paul Oxley arrived at RSSB in January 2019 he, like all his colleagues, knew that the time to reform the rail industry was fast approaching.

That is because although Coronavirus and its subsequent implications on demand for travel remained completely unknown, a sweeping review of the rail system was already well under way.

Commissioned by then-Transport Secretary Chris Grayling and led by former British Airways Chairman Keith Williams, it aimed to not only address some of the obvious failings that had occurred since privatisation in the 1990s but also to safeguard many of the successes.

Before he joined RSSB, Oxley had accrued more than a decade's worth of experience in public affairs at both Greater Anglia and First Capital Connect. He recalls: "In many ways we'd become a victim of our own success with record levels of growth over 25 years and overcrowding on some routes.

"We'd also seen a massive amount of investment in rolling stock and infrastructure, like the £6.5 billion Thameslink Programme of which I was part, and I don't think it would have happened without a privatised network.

"But I also won't shy away from recognising that there were problems, too. For example, my experience of working on franchise bids moulded my mindset that I didn't much like the bidding process. Bidders had to overpromise to outbid others and then face the headache of turning those big promises into reality."

He adds: "We also had the issue that premium payments to

the Department for Transport were based on economic forecasts which were prone to things such as changing employment figures or catastrophic events such as COVID-19 turning it all upside down.

"So, we need to remind ourselves that the pandemic didn't cause any of these problems but has certainly accelerated the need for change."

Having largely completed his review, Keith Williams was forced to heavily revise many of his recommendations following the start of the pandemic and the revenue collapse it triggered.

Now published in the form of a government white paper, this blueprint for reform is currently being implemented against an unfamiliar backdrop of passenger numbers remaining significantly below pre-pandemic levels.

As part of its near-20-year-old remit to lead and facilitate industry-wide efforts to create a safer and better performing railway, RSSB was in the vanguard of helping the industry to meet the immediate challenges posed by COVID-19.

This included conducting its own risk analysis around transmission on trains and supporting the cross-industry groups that established principles around which work on the network could continue safely.

Now that the pandemic is approaching its second anniversary, this focus has shifted towards helping the industry to adjust

to these new operating conditions and respond to any future demand scenario.

"I'm not really a fan of the term 'pre-COVID', if I'm honest," adds Oxley. "We need to realise that things have now permanently changed for the network.

"As infection rates continue to decline, I don't

think we'll see the same levels of travel anxiety as we continue to learn to live with the virus. But workers and employers are seeing the benefits of hybrid working and people spending more time at home.

"From a collaborative point of view, people do want to be in the office some of the time, so I don't think we'll see companies closing down their offices full stop. But a drop in commuting is definitely something the industry needs to plan for.

"Our future success will hang on the speed at which we can adapt to this 'new normal' and if we can continue to show the agility demonstrated so ably during the pandemic."

An example of the support currently being provided by RSSB is via its Data Insights teams which analyse and interpret data from the rail industry's online health and safety reporting Safety Management Intelligence System (SMIS), and other sources, to generate valuable insights for the industry.

By attempting to answer questions that will address key risk areas and drive change, these data insights are designed to deliver improvements to safety and performance and to support industry decision making.

Previous topics include track worker safety, risk management for SPADs (Signals Passed At Danger) and the risk profile for COVID-19 on trains and at stations.

Meanwhile, RSSB is also helping the

industry to address its cost and carbon bases and to make rail a more attractive proposition to passenger and freight customers through its facilitation of the implementation of the Rail Technical Strategy.

The RTS is calling on the industry to find innovative technical solutions to the challenges it faces over the next 30 years.

This activity is underpinned by RSSB's longstanding R&D Programme that enables best practices to be adopted collaboratively and reduces the cost and needs for companies to invent and invest in their own solutions.

The organisation also provides technical support and employs more than 270 specialist staff covering a range of technical disciplines - including operations, engineering, information technology and risk assessment.

Recent outputs include research on seat comfort that has led to a new methodology being created for the specification of new train fleets.

Oxley explains: "We need to increasingly look to adopt new technologies that will help to lower our carbon footprint and make us more cost-efficient. This will help to ease the pressure on emergency COVID funding provided to rail by the Treasury, which is now in excess of £16bn.

"RSSB has a lot of experience in supporting the development and deployment of these new technologies. For example, the trial of the first battery-

powered Class 379 Electrostar on the Manningtree branch in January 2015.

"We're also supporting the industry to get more freight on the tracks through our data insights activity which has shown where it is possible to fit more trains and paths on the network at different times of day. As part of this work, we lent some of our experts to help 3Squared develop its PathPlanner tool - which goes to show how a small organisation is able to leverage its contacts at RSSB.

"There are plenty of opportunities where we can support our members to drive through customer-focused changes and improvements so that they can get on with the day-to-day business of delighting their customers."

RSSB also plays a further role by managing and developing Railway Group Standards on behalf of the rail industry.

This includes standards for cost-effectively opening new and mothballed routes as part of the Government's Restoring Your Railway Fund and levelling-up agenda.

Closer to home and RSSB is also practising what it preaches by driving efficiency throughout its own organisation.

Although it is a not-for-profit company, RSSB recognises the cost pressures faced by its members and has acted accordingly to support them in any way it can.

Oxley says: "During the worst of the pandemic we did things like defer smaller members' levies. We're also getting

← **Freightliners 90012/005 pass a Greater Anglia service at Ipswich on February 1 while hauling the 1113 Felixstowe-Trafford Park. RSSB has recently contributed to the development of a new tool that could help to make the planning of freight paths more efficient and deliver a better customer experience. KEITH PARTLOW.**

more approaches from overseas for our consultancy services which will help to offset the cost of some of our other activities to our members.

"But the key message from us is that members must see full value for their money and that our products and services will deliver savings and improvements in performance and safety in the short, medium and longer term. That's why we regularly consult on what our members' business priorities are and constantly review our existing portfolio.

"We need to stay aware through market engagement of what business risks our members face and make sure they have the right tools at their disposal. For example, as part of our Sustainable Rail Strategy, lots of members have come to us for guidance and support on meeting their carbon targets."

Looking ahead to the prospect of reform and there will be no immediate changes to the safety and standards role of RSSB and other bodies including the Office of Rail and Road and the Rail Accident Investigation Branch.

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail fully recognised the value of preserving critical functions performed by RSSB, including independent safety risk analysis and interoperability standards.

Oxley says this will safeguard the continuation of research related to RSSB's core role in ensuring a safe and efficient rail network while also supporting the other aims of the review to strengthen collaboration and incentivise innovation.

He concludes: "Safety has to remain a number one priority and we need to make sure our excellent record is maintained. History always tells us to be cautious and corporate memory from the earliest days of privatisation tells us that we need to be vigilant if we are to maintain our world-leading safety record.

"*The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail* identified RSSB as an organisation to be part of the future model. One of our key strengths is that we are independent and represent the whole industry so that we are able to get all key players, including trade unions, around the table.

"We have an industry where competence is high, but you still need that validation and assurance. Passengers and industry trust the view of an independent body and it wouldn't be right for the new Great British Railways to be left to do everything on its own.

"We cannot afford to fail or to allow reform to become a missed opportunity for the industry, the wider economy and the UK's ability to meet its net carbon zero targets." ■



Rail fares and ticketing - going for growth

As the country continues to recover from one of the greatest upheavals in everyday life in living memory, rail passenger numbers have been a rollercoaster ride of ups and downs.

Journeys continue to lag well behind pre-pandemic levels, with demand and travel patterns in varying degrees of flux. Hybrid working, different travel patterns (and reasons to travel), alongside an increasing drive to decarbonise in all areas of our lives, add further challenges and complexity.

The creation of Great British Railways (GBR) offers an opportunity to reset and reimagine how a bright and prosperous future for rail might look. To deliver, rail must demonstrate that it knows and understands what is important to passengers, and provide products and services that meet their needs.

So, what do passengers (existing, lapsed and future) need from a modern, reimagined railway?

- Simple, easy-to-access fares and tickets they can understand.
- Services that meet their needs.
- Safe, clean, and reliable trains.
- Incentives and discounts that maximise value for money.
- Positive reasons to choose rail.

None of these is unreasonable. But none of them matters unless there is a compelling reason to choose to travel by rail. If that is harder, more complex and confusing than is necessary, then it helps nobody. People will not choose rail if it represents poor value for money and fails to meet their needs.

The industry's challenge is to be relevant, progressive and flexible. It cannot rest on its laurels, and merely focusing on greater

Transport Focus Chief Executive ANTHONY SMITH discusses the reimagination that's needed to encourage more people to buy rail tickets - and keep buying them...

efficiency is not the answer. To survive and prosper, the industry must grasp the nettle, innovate, and act at pace. It can and must dare to be different - it must 'go for growth'.

That reset and reimagination must be on a different scale than anything that's been attempted before. It needs to start now, and swiftness and agility will be key. The industry's reputation of a tanker-like turning circle and resistance to change underlines the size and scale of what is required.

There is good news. It can be done. Indeed, it must be done - the art of the possible makes it so, not least because: ■ Rail's strong green credentials make it an attractive option in an increasingly decarbonisation-focused society.

■ The emerging leisure-led railway recovery offers significant potential growth through trends such as staycations and family/group leisure travel.

■ The sizeable market of lapsed and current non-users offers real potential growth.

■ The right conditions exist - the required levers are in one place, and the *Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail* provides a natural step-change opportunity.

■ Efficiencies alone will not be enough - rail must control costs and grow revenue. It is not either/or, it must be both.

Rail must attract new users, tempt back former users, and look after the ones it already has. Being competitive, delivering appropriate services and offering value for money are necessities.

The fares people pay and the tickets they buy is crucial to this. If it is easy to buy, meets their needs, and offers value for a service in which they have confidence, they will choose rail. But that's not where rail is right now. Things need to change - and fast. To inform that change, good insight will be essential.

Rail has a huge base of insight to inform a concerted push for growth. In 2020, Transport Focus's *Rail Passenger Priorities for Improvement* re-confirmed that the price of a train ticket offering better value for money was a top priority for passengers, along with reliability, punctuality and getting a seat.

In January 2022, TF's *Rail User Weekly Survey* showed 42% of rail passengers had a choice of mode for their journey. Growing this figure to make rail a mode of choice for more people can only help the industry to recover and grow.

Rail needs to be affordable and accessible for all. Ensuring that there are no barriers to using the railway for passengers with accessibility needs is both the right thing to do and a prudent thing to do. Reducing complexity and the cognitive effort required of passengers, making rail a natural choice, will also help.

TF's insight identified in 2019 that any fares and ticketing approach needs to offer affordable flexibility, greater personalisation, and a basis for consumer confidence and trust.

Our Passenger Confidence Barometer tracks how safe people feel on trains on a weekly basis. Insight from January 2022 showed 82% of passengers felt safe when making a journey. Crucially, only 56% of those not making a rail journey would feel safe if they had to. In the same survey, only 62% of passengers felt rail represented value for money, trailing bus by 12 percentage points.

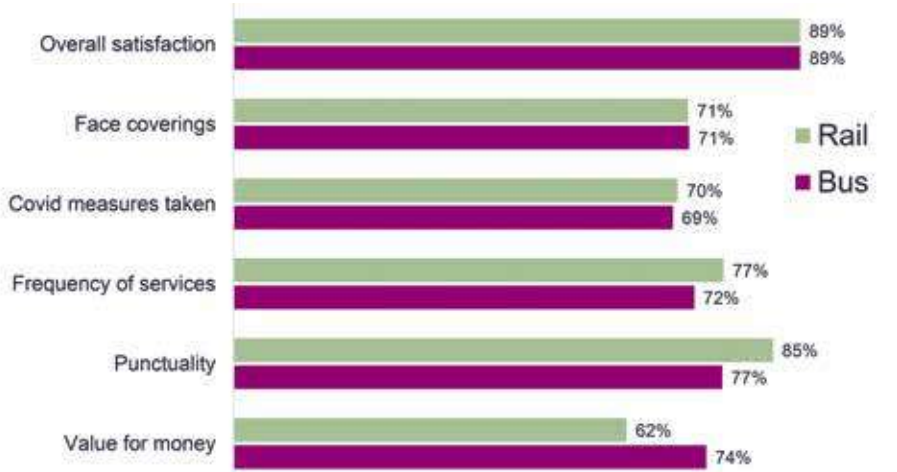
Our report from December 2021 on what drives rail passenger satisfaction illustrates the complex relationship between satisfaction and importance across 16 different aspects of rail journeys.

Punctuality and reliability are rated most important, with 83% of passengers satisfied overall. Interestingly, passengers



Rail to bus comparison - January 5-9 2022

Rail passenger satisfaction higher for punctuality and frequency of services, but lower on value for money



Source: Rail User Weekly Survey, January 14 2022, Transport Focus.

were only 65% satisfied with the value for money for their ticket. This underlines the importance of basing the rail offer around what is important to passengers, grounded in the basics - not least value for money.

The *Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail* identified simplified ticketing and fares reform as a key enabler to meaningful long-term reform. Ticketing has, for way too long, been overly complex. And while GBR must resolve this over time, reforming fares and ticketing is now one of the key drivers of rail's rejuvenation. There is a need for immediate, short and medium-term change and reform that is sustainable and compatible with the long-term strategy of GBR.

So, what does rail need to do? ■ **Start now** - under the current arrangements, what changes can be considered to provide a much-needed stimulus for rail?

Delivering sustained growth and change is not easy, but it is possible. Action now would establish strong foundations for longer-term reform.

Fares and ticketing have, for too long, been 'done unto' passengers. Making early changes to simplify ticketing, remove unnecessary bureaucracy, simplify access, and understand what's important to passengers will further drive satisfaction.

■ **Get bums on seats** - understandably,

in light of Omicron, rail currently has too many empty seats - not on every service and route, but across the industry a lot of empty seats are being moved and not enough people.

When the time is right, furious marketing will be essential - good promotions, competitive and innovative products, and positive messaging campaigns are essential to promoting, driving and delivering growth as restrictions ease.

Positive reinforcement helps today and tomorrow, driving word-of-mouth recommendation further.

Rail does not sell itself well and it must do itself better justice. Its green credentials, ease of use, journey times and strong safety record are often undersold. Cost comparisons, additional information on the carbon footprint of journeys, and better selling of an easy-to-access, easy-to-use, competitively priced and green form of travel (facilitating other things being done while travelling) must be put into place.

The tickets and fares on offer also need to remove peak restrictions that are counterintuitive to revised travel patterns, balancing weekday and weekend peak loadings.

Restrictions under the old system will not be relevant in a GBR-led future, so what can be done now to start that process of reform and drive journeys that are good for

passengers, businesses, and retail?

■ **Focus on leisure** - non-work-related journeys currently form two-thirds of rail journeys. This potential market, if priced and positioned appropriately, has enormous potential.

Incentives to give rail a try, to come back to rail - and whatever innovation is needed - must be employed to deliver new, relevant journeys, which word of mouth will continue to help grow.

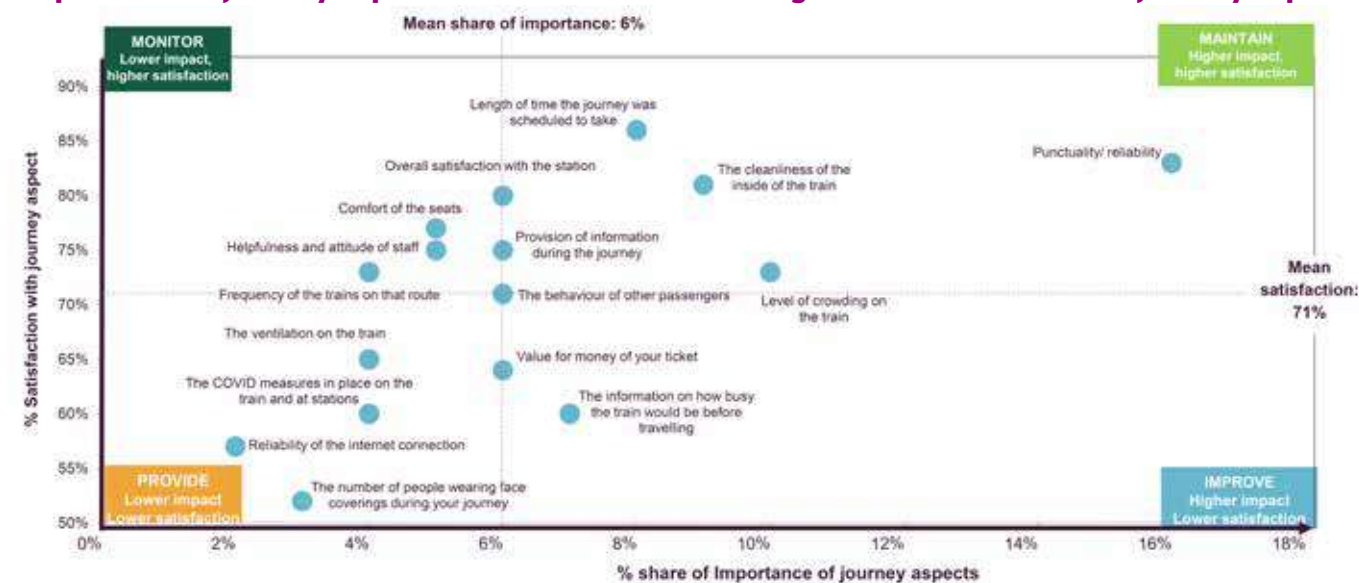
■ **Do the basics brilliantly** - passengers need to be confident in rail and its ability to deliver a clean, safe, reliable journey. Confidence has fluctuated over the course of the pandemic, and Transport Focus's Passenger Confidence Barometer has tracked this over time.

Results in January 2022 show that while more than four out of five rail passengers feel safe when making a journey, fewer than three in five who are not making a journey would feel safe if they needed to. Convincing people to use rail more, and for different reasons, means convincing those who travel (and those choosing not to do so) that it is safe, secure, reliable and clean.

■ **Innovate** - rail needs to offer more than a journey, more than just a ticket - it needs to be attractive and offer different reasons to travel to different places.

Examples of where this has been done successfully do exist, where the concept →

Importance of journey aspects versus satisfaction ratings with those individual journey aspects



→ of 'selling the destination' first, and the journey as an enabler to that destination has become the norm.

The staycation effect offers huge opportunities for rail as more people spend time at home, and will do for some time to come. A reliable, competitively priced travel option that is flexible and easy to use might just tip people towards rail if issues such as travelling as a family and with luggage can be bottomed out. It also makes sense to utilise space available on trains.

■ **Evolve at pace** - there are promising signs that step-change improvement is possible.

The introduction of Lumo services has challenged the industry to market positively, and sensible relaxations to peak restrictions have proved possible

and popular, helping to spread demand more evenly. A reimagining of First Class would add further to changes hinted at by the introduction of Flexi-Seasons, with a revitalised and modern approach long overdue.

■ **The price must be right** - for those considering rail, price is a priority. This was underlined in 2020, when the price of a rail ticket offering better value for money was a top passenger priority, a close second only to reliability and punctuality.

The pandemic has hardened the views of many who are not spending as much on travel as previously, and hybrid working has brought that into sharp relief. Value for money when inflation is high is even more important than it was pre-pandemic.

Pricing and competitive tickets can

work provided they meet new passenger expectations - connectivity to keep in touch via WiFi, useful information on anything that might affect your journey. With growing demands on all our finances, value for money must be front and centre to tempt and convince more people to give rail a try.

In conclusion, placing an immediate focus on moving people safely and effectively around the network makes sense and will maximise revenue.

Opportunities exist and can be capitalised upon if kept simple - reducing unnecessary complexity in processes and procedures, and removing barriers will help to thin out the trees to glimpse the wood in the longer term.

Imaginative and competitive pricing is central to making rail a clear, positive choice. Thinking as a passenger, not as (and for) the industry is a much-needed shift of mindset. Fares, ticketing and other areas need a clear, simple, intuitive structure, not a straitjacket. Responsible risk-taking can and will pay off if rail is prepared and dares to be different. If it can, the industry and its users can look forward to a long-term model that offers:

- Simple, easy-to-access tickets, competitively priced.
- When the time is right and restrictions permit, fuller trains, running on time to a sensible, reliable timetable.
- Innovative offers and promotions that reflect modern living and travel.
- Integrated approaches to joined-up travel, making life easier, not harder.
- An enjoyable experience that offers value for money, and that you would recommend.

To get people to do something different, you need to offer them something different.

Rail needs to show that it can listen, respond with agility, and be prepared to transform itself to win back passengers, and dare to be different. Get those things right and it just might work. ■



↑ Passengers use ticket machines at London Paddington station on July 2 2021. Anthony Smith says that people will not choose rail if its poor value for money doesn't meet their needs. JACK BOSKETT.

We are Britain's rail growth partners.

We sell over £3.2bn* worth of rail tickets every year

Our technology platforms power over £1bn* of TOC ticket sales

We are the lowest cost sales channel

We are driving, and co-funding, the digital ticket revolution

*pre-Covid

assertis

ClickTravel

Commuter Club

evolve
Rail Systems

MyTrainTicket

OnTrack

raileasy

SILVERRAIL

trainline

traintickets.com

Trip.com

IRR Independent
Rail Retailers

www.independentrailretailers.co.uk

Fare play equals revenue recovery

Like it or not, Britain's independent rail retailers have played a leading role in driving rapid growth and innovation in ticket sales throughout the last 20 years.

In a pre-COVID marketplace worth almost £11 billion a year in total ticket revenue, their market share comprised some £4.2bn in online sales with £500m of new business being brought every year.

These sales were not just powered through these commercial businesses' own platforms but by providing the technology to support the website and apps for 18 out of 23 train operating companies.

It meant that 40% of all train ticket sales were being made either directly or indirectly by independent retailers using technology that has been developed largely using private sector investment.

These headline figures are available in a recent report, published in February, by the Independent Rail Retailers (IRR) membership body.

It makes the case not only for how the expertise and commercial acumen of independent retailers enabled them to create this multi-billion-pound market in the first place but also for how they now sit in a prime position to help the industry bridge a gaping post-pandemic revenue gap in excess of £4bn by attracting passengers back to the network.

But to properly understand how this can be achieved, the report first seeks to dispel some myths that have persisted ever since the inception of the first independent retailer (Trainline) in 1999.

IRR Chairman and Managing Director of Asseris Alistair Lees explains:

IRR Chairman ALISTAIR LEES says that an equitable trading environment for all rail ticket retailers will help drive the industry's recovery and growth

"Independent retailers are much misunderstood and there have been plenty of unfair accusations that we just waltz off with vast amounts of commission that could otherwise be saved if we didn't exist. "This report shows that this isn't a fair representation of the financial reality, and it is important that we put the record straight and provide people with the right data and information while the industry contemplates wholesale change and reform."

According to the report, independent retailers in fact receive just 5% commission for direct ticket sales to the public, 3% for corporate sales and 2% for season tickets.

Once the unavoidable costs of industry and payment fees, technology, marketing and aftersales support are subtracted, the real cost of independent retailers is just 1%-2% of ticket sales in the B2C market, but nothing at all in the corporate market.

It should be noted that these sales are also completely risk-free to the wider industry as independent retailers bear the risk of fraud, costs exceeding income and even sharp downturns in demand, as they've been experiencing since March 2020.

"Of that 5% there are a lot of places where that disappears," adds Lees. "We are by far the lowest cost sales channel

compared to train operators, but because we're online and there isn't a physical booking office, what people don't see is the cost that is still attached to running a fast, 24/7, responsive service.

"Pre-pandemic, we also paid a whole heap of fees, such as £20m a year under the Rail Settlement Plan system.

"There's also the fact that independent retailers provide a good way for the industry to completely privatise risk. For example, in 2020, we paid more in fees than we earned in commission, while operators were heavily subsidised with emergency revenue support from government.

"I think that side of things is very under-appreciated, and the story of independent retail is very compelling if you want rail to work properly and the Treasury to spend its money more cost-effectively."

Furthermore, while train operators earn the same commission rates as independent retailers for online sales, they have an added advantage of being able to keep 100% of revenue if directly selling tickets for travel exclusively on their own services.

The IRR argues that this means they can use money taken from operational budgets to cross-subsidise ticket retailing and to offer large promotional discounts.

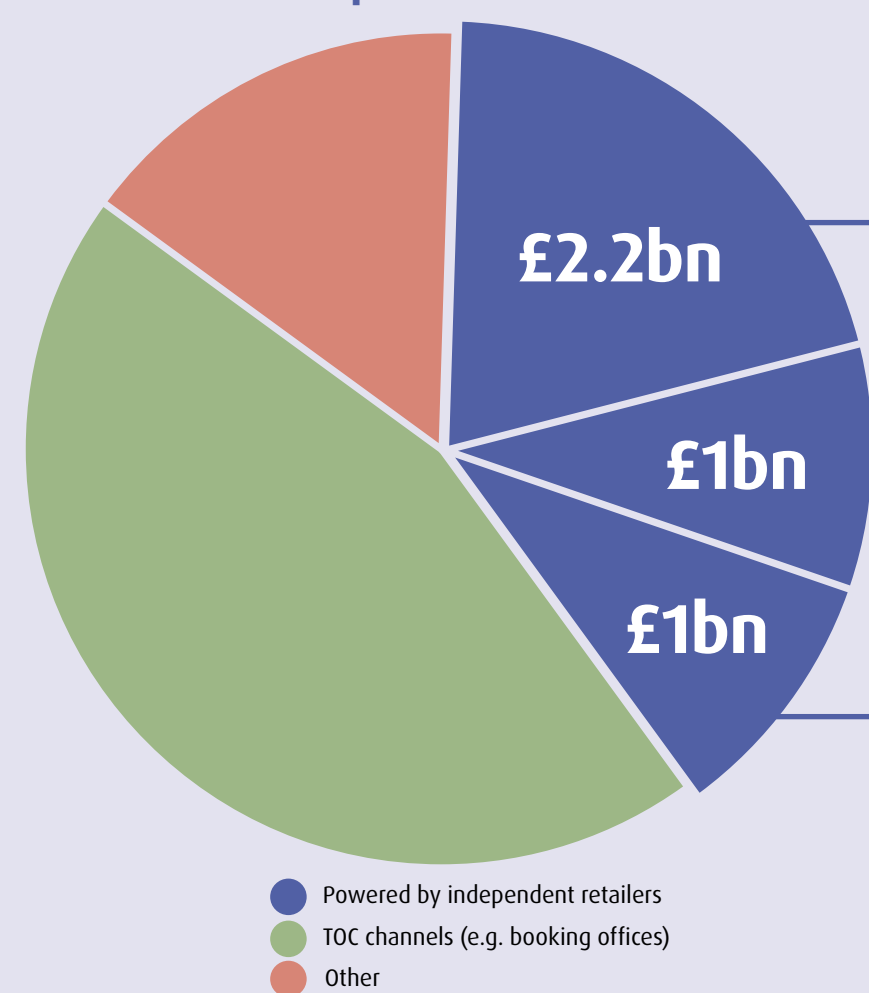
Meanwhile, operators also benefit from further subsidised retailing costs because the online sales channels they use have been developed and paid for by independent retailers, as has the deployment of new digital technologies, including barcode ticketing.

Lees says: "We are responsible for a great deal of innovation. For instance, we were the driving force behind barcode ticketing (see panel), developed a single national standard and then drove the adoption of that standard across the network."

"In fact, about 70% of the cost of the backroom system and devices like handheld and gateline readers were paid for by independent retailers. It didn't happen by itself, and we should be talking about how it's been a huge success that is now embraced by every train operator.

"We also supply the technology behind

Britain's £10.9BN pre-Covid rail ticket market



Direct B2C websites

Modest commission rates mean our success depends on growing the market. Our customer-led innovation and targeted marketing help us bring up to

£10m of new business to rail every week. Our technology is also used by hundreds of travel and tourism businesses both at home and abroad, helping us to access new markets far beyond the reach of TOCs.

B2B/Corporate

We've developed specialist retailing systems to simplify business travel and increase rail use among corporate clients, including over 130 Travel Management Companies (TMCs).

Our teams work with businesses to address specific challenges, from multimodal journey planning, to travel policies and buy now, pay later options.

TOC websites

TOCs have used independent retailers to deliver their online sales channels for over 20 years, saving them millions of pounds in development costs, while still benefitting from our world-class innovation and expertise.

Emerging stronger

Since 2020, we've increased our market share further, as more and more customers make the switch to eTickets.



"The story of independent retail is very compelling if you want rail to work properly and the Treasury to spend its money more cost-effectively."

Alistair Lees, Chairman, IRR and Managing Director, Asseris

the apps and websites of many train operators who subsequently get a great product at a subsidised price."

Following the collapse in demand for rail travel during the pandemic and the longstanding changes it has brought about in commuting habits, the rail industry is now under considerable pressure to achieve growth in a cost-effective way.

That is because, while cost control will undoubtedly deliver a reduction in current levels of rail subsidy, it will not be enough without growing revenue at the same time.

Independent retailers say they are ready to work in partnership to help the industry reform and be more customer-focused.

This will mean a complete overhaul of fares and ticketing to make the system simple, easier to understand and better value for money.

But for independent retailers to continue bringing risk-free private sector investment, innovation, agility and flair, they are asking government to ensure that there is a level playing field provided under its plans for a new Great British Railways public body to sell tickets and provide compensation under a single brand.

The IRR is therefore asking ministers to guarantee that all retailers, including GBR, operate on fair commercial terms that are

the introduction of convenient, contactless Pay As You Go in every urban area in Britain.

"The industry has created more than 2,700 ticket types which makes the current system incomprehensible and difficult to manage. I therefore welcome a single, national GBR website, as long as it's on a fair and equitable basis.

"But I don't think it would be a good idea to have one monopolistic supplier to the market, nor do I see any harm in it having competition.

"Independent retailers are the lowest risk way of selling tickets, so to grow the market you ought to need more of that rather than less.

"What we need now is a level playing field because why should government be subsidising state agents to operate inefficiently and potentially put private companies out of business?"

"We need to end the idea of train operating companies using operating costs and more favourable terms to offer 20% discounts because that will only create user distrust and reinforce barriers to entry for new retailers to enter the market."

■ For more information, the report on Britain's rail growth can be accessed online at: www.independentrailretailers.co.uk

Customer-driven innovations from independent retailers

■ Barcode **eTickets** were spearheaded by Asseris and Trainline in 2016 through a trial with three operators and are now available across most of the network. The industry has experienced a 50% increase in its adoption during the pandemic.

■ Launched initially by Raileasy, automated **split ticketing apps** and websites display the cheapest combination of fares for journeys on any route.

■ **Smart apps** can make buying the right ticket easy and provide information from delay alerts to amending tickets

and claiming delay repay all in one place. Trainline's apps have achieved a customer rating of 4.9 out of 5.

■ Dedicated **corporate booking systems** from Evolvi, Click Travel and Trainline provide a range of tools that make business travel simple, including integration with travel policy rules and buy now, pay later options.

■ **Commuter Club** has helped over 20,000 customers to save money by accessing the benefits of an annual season ticket through a low-cost monthly payment plan.

Cost and Convenience

How do we persuade the public that rail travel is cost-effective and convenient?
TONY STREETER ponders some options

In April 2020, just as the pandemic was gathering pace, the Department for Transport published the results of a survey undertaken into MaaS (Mobility as a Service). That's a neat bit of jargon which basically covers apps that plan journeys for you, and allow you to pay for them in one place.

While the 'acceptability research' carried out by Ipsos MORI particularly pondered the pros and cons of MaaS, it inevitably strayed into why people will (or won't) use public transport at all.

"General barriers... focus on negative perceptions of transport infrastructure", it read.

"This includes perceptions that public transport is: expensive; has limited reach (does not always link to areas where participants travelled); can be infrequent and/or unreliable; can be overcrowded and; is not always accessible (for example, lack of lifts, access to priority seating)."

Quite a bit has changed since that survey was carried out, prior to the collapse in rail passenger numbers which threatens to

become an existential crisis. What seems unlikely to have changed over the past two years, however, is the scope of those negative perceptions.

True, actual overcrowding will have decreased, but a percentage of the population clearly feels insecure about even using public transport and coming into contact with others.

Nor is the sense that transport is expensive likely to have been lessened by many people realising they don't need to travel to work at all.

Where people do travel, the statistics suggest they increasingly prefer to do so in their own steel 'box' (or ordering stuff to their houses that's delivered the same way). Road use in recent months has matched or even exceeded pre-pandemic levels.

DfT figures show that in 2020, 92% of passenger mileage in Great Britain was made using cars, vans and taxis (up from 84% the year before). In terms of trips, 58% was by cars and vans, with just 2% by rail.

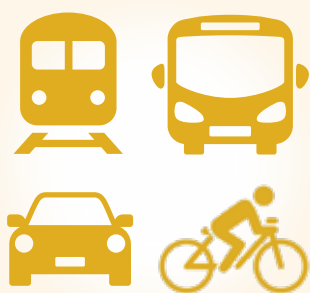
As we know, as passenger numbers collapsed, taxpayer support soared. Of



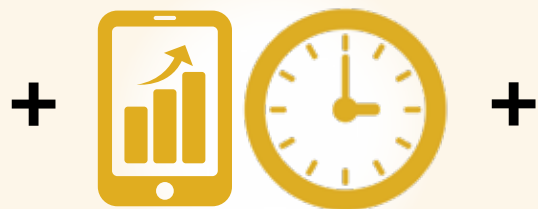
Tony Streeter says the idea of linking tramways and regional rail was pioneered in Germany, with the first of a new generation of tram-train services launched 30 years ago in Karlsruhe (pictured in August 2021). Further cities have since delivered similar schemes, offering what Tony describes as "truly integrated transport". ALAMY.

What is Mobility as a Service (MaaS)?

"The integration of various modes of transport along with information and payment functions into a single mobility service"



All modes
of transport



Information



Payment
(subscription/PAYG)

One platform (online app and/or switchboard)

Source: Mobility as a Service Acceptability Research, April 2020, Department for Transport.

the £20.7 billion costs of the railway in 2020-21, £16.9bn was provided directly by government.

The bad news is that in many ways, Britain's public transport system is poorly placed to respond when compared with those of other countries.

Through the network cuts of the 1960s, bus deregulation in the 1980s, and rail privatisation in the 1990s, the overall trend was a dissolution of transport and concentration on the car, rather than the opposite. This was certainly true when judged against our northern European neighbours.

In my current home city, Peterborough, the bus station is not even in the same place as the railway station, but a five-minute walk away (assuming you're able-bodied). That's despite the redevelopment of the station's passenger facilities and the building of extra platforms over the past decade.

Peterborough station has bike stands - but you'd need to be fairly confident to cycle on some of the local roads (which include dual carriageways). 'Peak' car

"A percentage of the population clearly feels insecure about using public transport and coming into contact with others."

parking costs £15 a day.

Given this, my personal preferred mode of travel to the station is often a taxi. But what if it turns up late, or not at all - as once happened when I was on my way to Stansted Airport? The railway industry might consider this 'not our problem', but it's hardly an incentive for people to shift to public transport.

Nor is the fact that the first service from Peterborough doesn't arrive at Stansted until around 0840, well after the early flights have already taken off. Or the use of three-car DMUs with minimal luggage accommodation on a route that as well as Peterborough, picks up at Nuneaton, Leicester and Cambridge.

All of which reminds us that the cost, convenience and reliability (or otherwise)

of using rail goes well beyond just the moments between stepping on and off the trains. Travel is door-to-door, not station-to-station.

One thing Peterborough certainly does not have is a tramway. Since Manchester Metrolink brought the 'light rail revolution' to the UK in 1992, that system has expanded and another five have opened, including Croydon in London. However, during that time, France has opened 22 tramways (a figure that doesn't include the ten or so built in that same time around the capital).

Most of the places to which the French brought modern trams have a lower population than Peterborough's roughly 200,000, while Leeds (with a population closer to 800,000) is claimed to be western Europe's biggest city without a mass transit system.

France may have shown alacrity in opening new tramways, but because Germany never underwent the closure of 'first generation' systems in the same way, it has many more in total - nearly 60 overall.

→ It's logical then that the idea of linking tramways and regional rail was pioneered there, with the first of a new generation of tram-train services launched 30 years ago in Karlsruhe. Since then, a further five cities or regions have delivered schemes to offer accelerated and 'one seat' journeys from outlying towns and villages. That is truly integrated transport.

The UK's only foray so far has been the Sheffield-Rotherham pilot scheme - perhaps no great surprise since a tram-train without a tramway is just a train. Other cities with light rail have, however, expressed an interest - including Birmingham and Manchester.

Devolution can bring positive changes to local transport, as acknowledged in Sir Peter Hendy's *Union Connectivity Review*.

As well as eyeing tram-train while continuing to develop its light rail system, Manchester has made moves towards better integration and fought to be given the right to re-regulate buses.

The logic of that has recently been accepted, and not only for Manchester - 35 years after bus deregulation was introduced, in 2021 the UK government pledged to bring back regulation as part of its £3bn 'bus revolution' scheme. This also promises electric buses, hundreds of miles of new bus lanes, and a rollout of contactless payment.

"The fragmented, fully commercialised market which has operated outside London since 1986 will end," the DfT said.

"We want to see operators and local councils enter into statutory 'enhanced partnerships' or franchising agreements to receive the new funding and deliver the improvements."

It also spoke of introducing integrated cross-mode ticketing.

That brings things closer to the situation in London, where buses were never deregulated in the first place and which is probably the only UK city to have a truly integrated cross-mode transport system.

Many of the factors demonstrably able to attract people to public transport have existed in the capital for decades: convenience, frequency, cross-mode ticketing, reasonable prices. Almost as importantly, they are mirrored by the relative inconvenience of using private motor transport - through congestion and (more recently) congestion charging.

Contrast the national rail network's currently cumbersome, complicated and often poor value for money system (split ticketing...?) with developments in the Transport for London area.

First the Travelcard (from the 1980s), then Oystercards (2003), and more recently contactless payment has taken the hassle

“Attracting people at lower fares might actually reduce the demands on the exchequer.”



out of ticketing on Tubes, trams, buses and London Overground. With Oyster/contactless, the system automatically calculates the best fare, and there's a price cap. What could be easier, or more convenient?

Even so, there is now talk of binning the Travelcard as part of fares reform and price increases, as Transport for London and the Government wrestle over a funding crisis exacerbated by the pandemic.

While schemes such as expanding public transport into new areas and opening new systems would necessarily involve major investment, some things could be achieved much more quickly.

When the new state-owned but privately orientated Deutsche Bahn was formed out of Germany's previous state railways in 1994, one of its first acts was targeted at attracting custom towards its lesser-used trains.

High-speed InterCityExpress services had gone live three years before, but many 'classic' trains were running virtually empty, especially at weekends.

In response, DB launched a range of tickets - in particular the *Schönes-Wochenende* ('happy weekend'). For (initially) just DM15 (around £10 in UK money today), up to five adults could travel as much as they liked, throughout the country, for a weekend (children counted as 'half' an adult). The only catch was that travellers had to use the classic regional services rather than ICE or InterCity trains.

More than a million *Schönes-Wochenende* tickets were sold inside the first four

months, with (reportedly) around 40% of people buying it new to rail. In various forms, the ticket continued to exist until 2019.

Today, there is still a palette of ticketing options, including the *Quer Durchs Land*. Valid from 0900 on working days (midnight at weekends), it costs €42 (£35) for one person, rising to €70 for five people. In addition, three children can tag along free. For that you can travel throughout Germany - although like the *Schönes-Wochenende* ticket, not on ICE or IC trains.

For more regular travellers, there is a range of railcards offering discounts of 25%, 50% or 100% - the latter effectively being an annual pass (RAIL 925). It currently costs €4,144 (or under £3,500). These passes do cover the ICE and IC.

It's not just Germany. The Swiss version costs the equivalent of around £3,100. And last October, Austria launched a new pass specifically aimed at attracting people to rail (as Ben Jones explains on pages 26-29 of this supplement).

It's been dubbed the *Klimaticket* (climate ticket), and the price for adults is now €1,095 (around £915) per year, and for an extra €110 you can take up to four children with you. By the end of 2021 more than 130,000 had been sold, according to the country's environmental protection minister Leonore Gewessler.

Meanwhile, an annual adult season to cover LNER just between Peterborough and King's Cross costs £8,436.

Luxembourg has gone even further than Austria - having made public transport

completely free since 2020. As minister for mobility and public works François Bausch told the BBC before the measure was introduced: "For people on low wages, transport expenses matter. Therefore, it is easier to make it free for everyone."

Cities in the USA (of all places) are having a similar debate.

That might sound alien to British minds, but the concept isn't entirely unknown here: free bus passes for senior citizens have existed for more than a decade, and at the end of January that was to be extended in Scotland to residents aged under 22. This is, of course, a political choice.

Clearly much of the attraction to passengers of such approaches is price (or lack of it). But it's also about convenience - knowing you have a pass or an all-encompassing ticket is a world away from the potential bewilderment at the UK rail's ticketing system.

Are there challenges? For sure. Critics of Germany's *Schönes-Wochenende* might have pointed to very full trains. In Austria, some have suggested that the *Klimaticket* amounts to a subsidy to existing regular users, rather than truly drawing people from their cars. It's arguably too early to tell.

Clearly, too, such schemes need to be funded, which brings us to another point: is what we're really concerned about in UK rail right now actually the drop in passenger numbers - or rather the fall in revenue that comes with that?

Equally, 'modal shift' sounds great as a concept - but is the idea gaining in popularity less because of its own merits,



← ↑ Tony Streeter compares the national rail network's complicated ticketing system with that of Transport for London. The Oystercard (introduced in 2003) and contactless payments guarantee the cheapest fare when you travel, with a simple 'tap in, tap out' system. ALAMY.

and more because we want motorists' money?

Yet while one answer to a collapse in passenger numbers is cuts (whether to services or booking office opening times), as Ernest Marples and Richard Beeching realised in the 1960s, rail's real costs are in every mile of track, bridge or culvert. Currently, we are actually adding to that infrastructure liability by creating the first true new domestic main line in more than a century - HS2.

So, unless we plan a 'new Beeching' (rather than the trumpeted 'reverse Beeching'), then full trains are surely better than empty trains, or indeed no trains. Maybe, given current circumstances, attracting people at lower fares might actually reduce the demands on the Exchequer rather than increase them?

Mobility problems

Where then, in all this, is Mobility as a Service? Or, as the DfT puts it: "the integration of various modes of transport along with information and payment functions into a single mobility service".

The idea is for a central platform outlining travel options (including information on disruption) and payment in one place, bringing together disparate modes and providers.

It sounds clever - and it is. But the DfT's 89-page report into MaaS didn't just air general criticisms. More specific concerns raised by respondents about the concept itself included fears of limited mobile signal coverage, scepticism about achieving the best fares, and "that MaaS does not offer something significantly different when compared to existing journey planning and payment platforms."

With the perhaps more fundamental concerns raised about the limitations of public transport itself, that's maybe not an

overly encouraging picture if we're hoping for MaaS to lead a transport revolution.

So, where next? Much is pinned on the forthcoming and oft-talked about fares reform which (it is hoped) will deliver a simpler ticketing system.

In the end, though, all of this comes down to political, philosophical choices - indeed, for much of the privatisation era, government's preoccupation has been in getting passengers to pay a greater share of the costs of the railways (such as through RPI+1% fares increases), not less.

That might be a perfectly legitimate policy choice, but it depends on passengers being willing to stick with it (or, at least, being unable to find an alternative).

COVID-19 has broken that link. For many, the alternative is to not travel at all.

Under those circumstances, the only way to get ever fewer passengers to pay even the same total towards the railway's costs would actually be to charge them even more. But that's hardly likely to be sustainable, in either sense of the word.

Clearly, it doesn't have to be like that - much of the agenda is currently moving in the other direction, and methods to attract people to rail (and public transport more widely) are well known.

As others have already shown through the real examples above, ideas to improve the cost-effectiveness and convenience of travel can be delivered into reality. What may be insurmountable is our unwillingness to pay for them. Many of the measures to make a real difference will need funding, time and strategic direction.

Ultimately, then, this is about mindset and money. The question is: do we have the mindset to make the money available? Or would we rather pretend this is all unknown territory, initiate never-ending consultations... and carry on driving our soon-to-be-electric cars? ■

Digital ticket revolution...

Trainline CEO JODY FORD tells RAIL how increased digitisation is proving the power of public-private partnerships and offers the best path to making rail the first choice for passengers

There's nothing new in making bold predictions that the days of traditional magnetic strip tickets are strictly numbered in what has become an increasingly digital world for both business and leisure.

Readers can cast their minds back to January 2016 when then-Rail Minister Claire Perry described them as "woefully inadequate for the future" while arguing that their demise was "inevitable".

While changing consumer habits and customer expectations certainly supported her claim, Perry was perhaps shrewd not to place any definitive timeline on when these orange pieces of card would finally disappear from purses and wallets.

That is because, while rapidly growing in popularity, e-tickets - where a barcode can be scanned from a smartphone or other internet-enabled device - were still in their infancy.

Homegrown tech company Trainline, which became Britain's first independent rail retailer in 1999, was at the forefront of developing and deploying this pioneering technology.

Extending the use of online and mobile

e-ticketing plus contactless Pay As You Go (PAYG) has received fresh impetus following its inclusion in the Government's rail reform White Paper.

Published in May 2021, the *Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail* was also accompanied by the creation of a new flexi-season ticket, allowing eight days of travel within a 28-day period.

Trainline CEO Jody Ford argues that making more use of mobile and online ticketing and products that offer better value for money and even more flexibility will prove to be one of the most essential reforms contained within the White Paper. And that task is now increasingly urgent, given the size of the revenue gap that has emerged from the Coronavirus pandemic and changing commuter patterns.

He explains: "The industry has taken a huge hit, but I think the desire to use rail is still there. Commuting and business travel remains challenged, but I absolutely believe it will come back and that this will prove, over time, to be more of a blip than any permanent drop in demand. The leisure market has returned more strongly, however, and, in some cases, we

are already exceeding pre-COVID sales volumes.

"During the pandemic we saw a 50% increase in the adoption of e-tickets, so we think that, now restrictions have eased and people have more of a choice, using increased digitalisation is a really interesting area to attract people back to rail."

Independent retailers, including Trainline, have contributed around three-quarters of the cost of investment in e-ticket scanning equipment and the 'back office' systems that allow them to be sold and generated for customers.

"We think that digital retail is an extremely cost-effective and efficient sales channel," says Ford. "This is certainly not the time to de-invest in digital retail when we have large government subsidy that cannot be sustained indefinitely and empty carriages carrying around fresh air. We need to get people on trains, and we must be more efficient in how we operate."

By eradicating the hassle of queuing at ticket offices or printing tickets in advance from vending machines, the convenience of e-tickets is obvious.

Their introduction meant that, for the first time, passengers could not only purchase a ticket online or via an app but also use the very same electronic device at barcode readers at gatelines or when presenting them onboard to ticket inspectors.

Initially, technological barriers limited e-tickets' application to buying advance purchase tickets only or using them on operator-specific services.

But a pan-operator pilot was launched

in 2016 to cover more than 230 stations across Scotland and northern England to overcome these obstacles and prove their interoperability.

The trial was a huge success, with more than 100,000 journeys made using barcoded e-tickets and a 97% passenger satisfaction rating.

Northern Rail reported strong demand with volumes increasing by 5% a week, while Trainline said that some 75% of customers offered an e-ticket were taking it.

Since 2016, e-tickets have become available across most of the network and offer a far greater range of products.

UK industry e-ticket penetration has increased to 40% as a result of more people shifting to online purchase during the pandemic (this figure has almost doubled in 18 months).

More than 80% of the UK network is now barcode-enabled, including all major stations. The vast majority of Trainline customers opt for digital tickets. In fact, if you look at data from January 2022, 99% of the time a digital ticket is offered, the customer opts for it.

In addition to enhancing the customer experience, train operating companies and independent retailers have been impressed by the multiple benefits offered in areas such as revenue protection. E-tickets can be made to expire automatically when they have been used or cease to be valid, unlike paper tickets which may have escaped being marked by an inspector.

Meanwhile, e-tickets can also enable a whole host of other useful functions, including the provision of instant refunds,

A CrossCountry Voyager arrives at Darlington on January 7 with a service from Newcastle-Southampton Central. Trainline gathers routes, prices and travel times from 45 countries while its app has been downloaded more than 30 million times, making it Europe's leading train and coach app. JACK BOSKETT.



"We have literally hundreds of engineers looking to solve problems we all face using risk-free investment from the private sector."

Jody Ford, CEO, Trainline

availability and performance and crowding data.

This would enable Trainline to develop new ways to use artificial intelligence and real-time booking data to maximise revenue for the industry by encouraging the greater use of quieter trains and giving customers a clearer choice over the cheapest fares.

Ford argues that this would not only increase the attractiveness of rail to existing or potential customers but also benefit the wider industry's cost base by reducing the operational cost of selling tickets and injecting further risk-free private investment.

Trainline is also keen to bring learnings from its considerable international reach to the UK rail industry.

The company retails tickets for 270 carriers across 49 countries and attracts passengers from across 170 countries to these shores.

"We are hugely supportive of the Government's rail reforms and any plan that looks to improve the passenger experience. It is also gratifying to hear from government on the continued role of the private sector in that new structure because we have a huge role to play, and that tension and competition can only be a good and healthy thing."

"We are fully engaged and incentivised and get up every day to sell tickets. We have literally hundreds of engineers looking to solve the problems we all face using risk-free investment from the private sector."

"The government and rail industry now have an important opportunity with the *Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail* to harness the very best of private sector innovation and passenger-focused retail expertise alongside a public sector guiding mind. We should no longer be thinking in terms of private vs public, but instead focus on how the two work together to get more people on trains for the long-term, in a cost-effective way that elevates the retail experience. Key to achieving this will be a fair retail environment where the same rules apply to independent and industry retailers alike."

"We are supportive of change and this is an opportunity that we need to seize while we think about how to serve the customer better. We can look back at the last 20 years and be proud of what we've achieved, but we think we can use innovation to go even further and faster than before." ■



Barcode readers for e-tickets have been installed on the gatelines at the majority of Britain's principal stations, including here at Bristol Temple Meads. JACK BOSKETT.

Return Ticket

Once a passenger has made the choice to travel by rail, encouraging them to return is key to the industry's future success. BEN JONES considers what operators can do to retain passengers as travelling habits change

If you're reading this, it's probably safe to assume that you're an experienced rail user, comfortable with most aspects of planning and making journeys by train. Lucky you.

Unfortunately, most of the general public don't travel frequently enough to share your confidence. All the evidence suggests that many find travelling by train - and other forms of public transport - a stressful experience. Even regular commuters can lose confidence outside the comfort zone of their usual 'autopilot' route.

Choosing the right ticket from the mind-boggling range of options, getting to the station on time, bagging a parking spot for the car, finding your platform, train and seat, and even making sure you get off at the right stop are all triggers for anxiety. For travellers with additional needs, all that stress is amplified by the uncertainties and inconsistencies of navigating a rail network where the quality of assistance and access is patchy at best.

As life returns to something akin to normal after the disruption of the past two years, leisure travel will be increasingly important for our railways. With the predictable weekday peak-time commute in decline even before the pandemic, off-peak travel for tourism, shopping, family visits and events offer the railway a lifeline capable of filling the hole left by the loss of season ticket revenue.

If passenger numbers only recover to 70% of their pre-pandemic level, as some commentators believe, the railway could be left with a £5 billion hole in its annual income - putting future investment at risk just when the country needs the railway to step up and provide a clean, green alternative to car travel.

However, unlike the daily grind of commuting into a big city, leisure travel is discretionary, fluid and unpredictable - factors that don't sit as easily with the planning and operation of a complex rail network.

It's also dependent on making people feel welcome, and on filling them with the confidence to travel without undue stress - all of which should deliver an experience

that makes them want to come back.

Others in this supplement have looked at the role that fares reform and new mobility technology could play in streamlining the process for passengers.

Fares is an emotive, high-profile issue, and annual increases have become a fixture of the mainstream media calendar - a predictable generator of public anger and clicks for news websites.

Despite the widespread availability of discounted advance purchase fares, railcards and passes, the public impression is that train fares are too high, too complicated, and offer poor value for money - a view that's not entirely without foundation, however much the industry might protest.

Passengers, especially occasional users, shouldn't need a PhD in fares or have to spend hours of research to secure the right ticket at a reasonable price.

Following the example of countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria, one proven method for encouraging rail travel is to introduce reasonably priced national travel passes or discount cards for regular users.

Coupling these with more enthusiastic promotion of existing railcards for semi-regular users (it could hardly be less enthusiastic at the moment) should guarantee more frequent trips by train. After all, when you buy a car, you're making a large down payment on future journeys - buying an annual rail pass or railcard should be no different.

Realistically, given the current febrile climate, there's little chance of securing the long-term, cross-party political and Treasury backing required to revolutionise Britain's disjointed and poorly integrated public transport systems. Even in countries where that support exists, enabling, financing and constructing the necessary infrastructure has taken several decades.

But even as money starts to get tight, public transport providers must continue to work towards offering easy journeys across different modes if we are to encourage more people to leave their cars at home.

Costly infrastructure interventions and



Trenitalia Frecciarossa and NTV Italo trains wait at Milano Centrale station in Italy on December 12 2018. Ben Jones describes Italy's 'Red Arrows' as "superb" and uses them to highlight the significant difference in passenger experience to trains here in the UK. SHUTTERSTOCK.

structural reform aside, there could be plenty of lower-cost quick wins out there if we study and replicate best practice across operators in the UK and overseas.

Normal journeys are rarely limited to one mode or operator, and the need to find, buy and carry all the right tickets and seat reservations adds to the stress of travelling. Even without the kind of simple multimodal interchanges commonly seen in Switzerland or Germany, regional and national travelcards valid across all forms of public transport, such as Austria's new *KlimaTicket*, could help to reduce that concern.

The advent of Great British Railways (GBR) offers some hope for change and for the wider adoption of proven practices that will surprise and delight passengers and keep them coming back for more. GBR's ambition for a unified ticket booking platform will undoubtedly help, but the full benefits will only be realised if it is

delivered alongside fares reform and simplification.

Passenger surveys are a blunt instrument, but they can be useful in highlighting specific priorities for passengers.

Top of the list, of course, is punctuality. If trains don't run as advertised, everything else is irrelevant. A public timetable is a promise to passengers - fail to deliver often enough and confidence will quickly vanish, whatever the reasons behind it.

Away from London and the South East, many lines suffer from poor service at either end of the day, restricting the usefulness of rail for many travellers. If you have to make an early flight or want to catch an evening show in the city, it's often impossible to do it by train.

Changing the focus away from peak-time travel to provide a better service throughout the day will require a change of culture in the industry, as well as

government and regional support. But it could make a huge difference on many routes.

The shock of the pandemic was a full stop after two decades of rising passenger numbers that pushed the British rail network beyond capacity in many places.

The demise of franchising and its replacement (eventually) by GBR offers an opportunity to reset priorities and modify timetables to provide greater resilience. Will we take that opportunity? Or will the need to reduce industry costs force compromises, baking existing weaknesses into the structure for another generation?

If the opportunity is grasped, there is ample evidence from the UK and elsewhere that ridership grows strongly once people know that a service is robust and reliable, and that there will be a train going where they want to go, when they need it.

Couple that with trains that are clean and

comfortable, where everyone gets a seat, and you have the basis of a compelling offer.

But there's much more to a journey than the train itself. Speaking to family members who occasionally travel by train to visit relatives, the main complaint (after the cost of tickets) is the stress of navigating major stations. Clearly more could be done to increase the visibility of signage.

Hopefully, Network Rail's rollout of clear and consistent 'Rail Alphabet 2' signage across the country will help, but what other options are available?

Even single-platform country halts generally enjoy electronic information screens and Help Points today, and larger stations are festooned with screens, posters and information desks. Unfortunately, not every passenger checks the screens, and others read but don't believe them.

Like me, I'm certain you will have →

“A public timetable is a promise to passengers - fail to deliver often enough and confidence will quickly vanish, whatever the reasons behind it.”

→ seen passengers at large stations check departure boards and then ask two, maybe three, different members of staff and other passengers before they allow themselves to believe they are on the right train! How can we help to reduce that level of anxiety?

While acknowledging that looming budget cuts of around 10% are likely to have a significant effect on customer service teams, what changes should we be considering to improve the passenger experience?

If traditional ticket offices fall victim to budget cuts with reduced hours and closures, it's essential that displaced staff are redeployed and trained for high-quality customer care roles.

Staffed stations provide security and reassurance - as the railway's 'front of house' they play a vital role in welcoming passengers and guiding them through their journey, whatever their needs. Ensuring the help desks and ticket offices are staffed more consistently - and able to provide good quality, up-to-the-minute information - is key to establishing passenger confidence.

This is especially important when things are not going to plan - well-informed passengers tend to react better to delays and disruption. Peppering announcements with archaic jargon or trying to fob people off with excuses rarely works, especially at a time when information has never been easier to access.

That said, not every passenger has a smartphone, and even many of those who do are not aware of the full range of information available to them online.

And what happens if your battery is flat or you've run out of credit? Cutting station services disproportionately affects lower-income, elderly and disabled passengers and needs to be avoided if we are serious about encouraging everyone to travel by train.

But before we dismiss technology altogether, there's no question that it can play a huge role in making travel easier for many passengers.

UK train operators have made huge strides in communications in recent years. Social media teams communicate directly with passengers via outlets such as Twitter, keeping them updated about delays, disruption and cancellations.

Largely, though, these are talking to regular customers and commuters - what about keeping occasional travellers informed?

Long-distance operators such as LNER are already making use of the information

“The public impression is that train fares are too high, too complicated and offer poor value for money - a view that's not entirely without foundation.”



↑ **Austria's new Klimaticket provides access to all public transport in Austria with a single ticket. It's described as being simple and inexpensive and "a valuable contribution to the climate of our planet". KLIMATICKET.**

supplied by passengers booking e-tickets to enhance the experience. Departure and disruption alerts are a useful start, but much more could be done to embrace the power of this technology.

Imagine the benefit to nervous passengers if they routinely received a personalised message shortly before departure confirming the correct platform, as well as their coach and seat number.

With many main line platforms now organised into zones and fixed formation trains the norm, the messages could even offer guidance on where to wait so that passengers are in the right place when it matters. The popular 'Exit the Tube' app offers a great example of how existing data can be deployed to save time, avoid crowds and reduce stress.

In terms of information delivery, the GBR team could do worse than study the Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB) website.

Both through its main website and its 'Scotty' planning app, ÖBB provides travellers with a clear, easy-to-follow and comprehensive service covering all transport modes in Austria and beyond. Planning and ticket booking are straightforward, with fare options and prices clearly labelled.

'Scotty' provides real-time information, including which platform your trains will stop at, connection times, delay notifications, and much more. It also helps that Austria has a highly integrated, high-quality public transport system with broad political support and a long-term investment plan, but that's a story for another day!

So, you've made it to your train thanks to a winning combination of friendly, knowledgeable station staff and updates from your smartphone. But what about the onboard experience?

For the past decade, new train design has been dominated by the need to address capacity issues. More and more seats have been crammed into vehicles, seat pitches have become more upright (no slouching at the back!), and seat units have been slimmed to maintain legroom.

Unfortunately, all this has come at a cost. Many new trains feel... let's be generous and say... 'utilitarian'. That might be

acceptable for short-distance urban trips, but it's less than ideal for a five-hour trek to Cornwall or Scotland.

Equally, if you're flying to Corfu for £9.99, you're probably willing to endure a bit of discomfort. But if you've paid £237 for a 90-minute journey from Bristol to Paddington, it's not unreasonable to expect something better.

Interior design is another emotive topic, but there's no doubt that many of the latest British long-distance trains do not live up to their 'world class' billing - at least in terms of the passenger environment. Harsh lighting, hard wipe-clean surfaces, and inconsistent catering provision reinforce the impression that the trains are run for operator convenience rather than passenger 'wow factor'.

When compared with the superb ÖBB Railjet or Italy's Frecciarossa (Red Arrow), to cite just two examples, the Government-procured Intercity Express Trains (IETs) are somewhat underwhelming.

That may not be too much of an issue if you're travelling solo on a £19 advance purchase ticket. But if you're travelling for pleasure or going on holiday with your family, the quality of the train, the on-board service and the view from the window really matters.

New trains such as IET will be with us for another three decades at least, but the Government has already said that it will look into replacing the 'ironing board'



On September 20 2019, German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his wife Elke Büdenbender travel to Naples on a Frecciarossa express train, on a two-day state visit to Italy. Ben Jones says these trains provide an excellent passenger experience. ALAMY.

seats specified by the Department for Transport.

However, if trains are to receive new interiors, it's not just the seats that need to be reconsidered. The growing band of leisure travellers has very different priorities to daily commuters, all of which need to be considered if we are to keep them coming back.

Getting a seat, of course, is top of the list. But adequate (and secure) luggage space, a comfortable seat that lines up with a window, and more usable spaces for bicycles, bulky luggage, pushchairs and wheelchairs are also vital. Providing all of these will reduce overall seat capacity, but should ensure that trains are better suited to the 'new normal'.

In an ideal world, some of the more recent regional trains would receive additional cars with bigger multi-purpose areas to provide additional seating capacity and provision for bikes, luggage or even for group travel. These could also be fitted with low-floor areas or retractable steps to ensure level access for wheelchairs and other users with additional needs.

Beyond the physical space of the train, other factors can make a big difference to the journey experience.

Friendly, helpful staff who take time out to make passengers feel special are invaluable. This is especially important for travellers with additional needs who require assistance throughout their journey.

While the DfT-funded 'Access for All' programme is gradually improving facilities at stations, recent incidents have highlighted the difficulties often faced by disabled travellers when using public transport. Creating the conditions to allow all passengers to travel comfortably and with dignity should be a priority for everyone in the rail industry.

On a more positive note, it takes just a moment to make someone's day - whether it's a conductor letting a young child clip their own tickets or simply saying 'Goodbye' and 'Thanks' to passengers as they alight the train. LNER, led by David Horne, has made big strides in this respect over the past few years.

The East Coast Main Line operator has also introduced an unusual element of 'surprise and delight' into its systems.

Passengers travelling on their birthday are flagged up by the booking software, alerting train crews who can then deliver an unexpected cup of coffee to the lucky passenger's seat. Perhaps this technology could be extended to deliver other services such as flash sales on food and drink, or seat upgrades when First Class is quiet.

Passengers could even 'opt in' to updates providing nuggets of information about what can be seen out of the window during a journey - the 21st-century equivalent of the *Through the Window* pamphlets published by pre-nationalisation railway companies.



↑ **A passenger uses automated check-in at Apeldoorn station in the Netherlands on November 11 2019. Ben Jones says the region uses reasonably priced national travel passes and discount cards for regular users to encourage repeat rail travel. SHUTTERSTOCK.**

Small wins, perhaps, but all encouraging passengers to feel that the railway cares about their experience.

The same software could be deployed to alert passengers to the environmental benefits of travelling by train. App users could be awarded 'green' points for every journey, much like a loyalty card, encouraging them to leave the car at home in return for incentives, discounts and the good feeling of 'doing their bit' for the planet.

Finally, what about promoting repeat business after a journey?

Many other areas of business make huge efforts to keep in touch with their customers and encourage repeat orders. With support from DfT and the Treasury, train operators could offer passengers discount vouchers for additional journeys undertaken within a specific timescale or other incentives such as free parking at their local station.

High parking charges at stations are often cited as a factor in deterring potential passengers. Free parking at stations for anyone holding a valid rail ticket would certainly help to reduce the overall cost of travel.

Could existing operator loyalty schemes be extended to provide further incentives such as discounts on tickets, parking, onward travel by other modes, or on-train catering?

Fundamentally, attracting and retaining passenger business is about getting the basics right - deliver clean, comfortable and punctual trains when people need them and they'll keep coming back.

However, much more can (and must) be done to attract and retain passenger business in a changing world. ■

Part of the community

Professor PAUL SALVESON examines the role of community rail groups in the future development and recovery of the railway

Community Rail has achieved a lot with very little since its formation in the mid-1990s. There are now 74 Community Rail Partnerships (CRPs) across the UK, nearly all employing paid staff (at least south of the Scottish border) - although this is often just one person, sometimes working on a part-time contract.

Alongside CRPs there are hundreds of station adoption groups/station friends - many of them doing amazing work with no paid staff.

Community Rail is supported by the Community Rail Network, which has grown in strength and influence, and which provides a range of services to its membership. It is a highly effective network supported by government and industry funding, light years away from the early days when we were very much finding our way.

CRPs are independent of (but closely allied to) the railway industry. Most of the things they do have to be with the agreement of train operating companies (TOCs) or Network Rail.

This independence can be an advantage, bringing new ideas and energy to rail. But it can also be like banging your head against a wall, with CRPs not taken seriously by rail managers in some parts of the business (franchise obligations or not). It's fine having a 'community manager', but if their colleagues in other areas (for example, property, procurement, fleet, operations) don't know what you do, there can be problems.

Thirty years on from the establishment of the first CRP (in Devon and Cornwall), the lack of awareness of what community rail 'is' among some in the rail industry continues to surprise me. It's far too

important to be left just to a 'stakeholder manager'. It should be embedded across the entire business, with CRP briefings to all managers and frontline staff.

Williams-Shapps

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail gives strong encouragement to CRPs, stating that "Community Rail Partnerships will be empowered to strengthen rail's social and economic impact". Community Rail must rise to these challenges. It's a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and the CR movement must think big.

The activities in which CRPs are involved are hugely varied and (assuming a core emphasis on assuring local accountability, good governance and ensuring that all sections of the community are reached out to) should be able to reflect local needs.

Some act as grassroots-based advocates to promote rail travel, stressing rail's contribution to the health and sustainability agendas. Others are involved in tourism promotion, while some bring considerable expertise to service planning issues.

As highlighted above, some engage in pioneering work around mental health and work with schools. In a small number of cases, a few are involved in 'commercial' activities, while others sponsor local feeder bus services (for example, SE Lancashire CRP).

There is a growing agenda to be part of the wider sustainability programme, and this could be developed into particular strands of work (for example, 'greening your station'). The best contribution CRPs can make to a greener Britain is getting more people using the trains that are already there, getting them to and from the station by sustainable means.

At the same time, CRPs need to be part

Platform 5 Gallery at Bolton with Julie Levy and John Taziker.



A station festival organised by station partnership and CRP.



Vegetable planters at Bolton station with Julie Levy, volunteer chairwoman of the station partnership.



Pam Warhurst of Incredible Edible Todmorden at Todmorden station.



A general view of the exterior of the restored Irlam station with cafe.

The activities of Community Rail Partnerships are hugely varied and should be able to reflect local needs... ALL: PAUL SALVESON.

of local initiatives around sustainability, demonstrating that rail is part of the solution to climate change. "Think global, act local" has never been more apt.

It isn't about a single, unified approach, but one in which 'a hundred flowers bloom'. Existing CRPs are enormously varied in terms of composition and activities, reflecting the very different geography of their areas of operation and the interests of the CRP partners. The 'accreditation' process has brought a baseline of good practice to CRPs and should continue in its present form.

At the same time, there should be more sharing of good practice now that we are (at least mostly) out of lockdown. The annual Community Rail Awards is a great occasion to meet up and hear about great projects, but the only other annual event is the Department for Transport-sponsored Community Rail conference each March.

Train operators are often obliged to organise their own conference from community rail groups in their area. But the CRPs themselves, with support from the Community Rail Network, could do more to develop regional collaboration.

CRPs are not lobbying groups, but many have developed expertise and trust in honing services to local needs.

One senior CRP manager said: "The best thing a CRP can do to help the community is to work to ensure the train service is as relevant and useful as possible to that community (and is well used and stays that way), and that where there is sufficient

unmet local need, the service expands to meet it where possible."

That will involve the future CRP working closely with the Great British Railways divisions, but also ensuring that the 'TOC of the future', working to a Passenger Service Contract, is aware and engaged with its CRPs and uses their local knowledge and expertise.

In some cases, partnerships can play a direct role in developing new technology that improves the viability of rural lines.

The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS) in the north of Scotland is leading the way, with alternative sources to traditional diesel for some of the more remote lines which will never justify conventional electrification.

And Vivarail's battery and hydrogen-powered trains could help revolutionise some branch lines. A partnership with a CRP or rail-based social enterprise could be immensely effective.

Getting people back onto rail post-COVID, on whatever sort of train, is the key challenge we face. CR has a vital role to play in nurturing that rail market and to act as a bridge between 'communities' and 'the railway' without being noisy lobbyists. It's about making good things happen.

Great British Railways

The establishment of Great British Railways is a major development in UK rail. It will change dramatically how railways are managed. It will administer Passenger Service Contracts in which the

actual train service delivery is provided by private companies to a clear contract.

GBR will have wide powers. The DfT press release stated: "A new public body, Great British Railways, will integrate the railways, owning the infrastructure, collecting fare revenue, running and planning the network, and setting most fares and timetables."

It went on to say: "Local communities will work closely with GBR on designing services with local leaders given greater control over local ticketing, timetables and stations. The new model will encourage innovative bidders, such as Community Rail Partnerships, who want to bid for the GBR contract to operate their local branch lines."

Many CRPs are already working with the industry on service planning issues, and this needs to be embedded in the new structure. As for bidding for contracts to operate local branch lines, that's an interesting challenge but one which CRPs (as currently structured) would in most cases be ill-equipped to respond to at the moment.

However, it does point to a more proactive role for CRPs. So, how do we get there?

If GBR is to be focused on the needs of passengers and communities, much of what CRPs now do should form part of GBR's core programme.

There is scope for CRPs to have long-term agreements with GBR to develop specific services - for example, in work with schools, mental health, refugees or

'employability', and around 'trespass and vandalism' which help give long-term stability to CRPs.

There will be regional divisions of GBR, and it makes sense for these to have strong roots in the communities they cover. The regional divisions of GBR should each have a 'community unit' that works closely with its community partners and the relevant TOCs, with a small team at HQ level supported by a director with specific responsibility for 'Community Integration', working closely with the Community Rail Network.

GBR should have regional boards which oversee the work of the organisation as a whole and which include community representatives, including at least one CRP representative.

Where next?

Community Rail has a great future. It has emerged from the worst of the COVID-19 period intact, but like everyone is feeling bruised.

"I think we can hold our heads very high about the way the movement has come through a very difficult two years - supporting communities and their resilience in a range of ways, responding to local needs," says Community Rail Network Chief Executive Jools Townsend.

"I also would highlight the ways that community rail has come together and pushed forward with promotional and engagement activities as we have emerged from pandemic restrictions - including a strong focus on supporting leisure travel opportunities and positioning rail travel as a big part of the solution to the climate emergency.

"A lot of what we and our members have done in recent months has been new and different, responding to what's going on out there at a local and global level."

Community Rail is embedded in many communities. It has strong support within the rail industry and Government, and a sense that it could do much more if it had the right tools. It must relentlessly trumpet its successes and ensure that it isn't just preaching to the converted.

A good friend in a train company made a key point in response to an earlier draft of this article: "We have to make sure we achieve the twin aims of protecting all that's best about community rail, while also evolving into new but relevant added-value areas."

"The clue is in the title - community rail. If it doesn't involve both those elements, then it's probably not the right thing for community rail to be doing, could be a dilution of resources, and may be duplicating what others do.

"We also need to be pragmatic and realistic, while still being ambitious and aspirational, about the resources that might get allocated to community rail. We might not always be lucky enough to have the passionate advocates we have today at the heart of decision-making!" ■



“Community rail has come together and pushed forward with promotional and engagement activities as we have emerged from pandemic restrictions - including a strong focus on supporting leisure travel opportunities and positioning rail travel as a big part of the solution to the climate emergency.”

Jools Townsend, Chief Executive, Community Rail Network



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