

A new chapter for northern transport

February 14, 2020



The Transport Secretary has set out his vision for the future of transport in the north of England at the Transport for the North summit in Manchester.

In his speech, Grant Shapps has described the importance for trains to be on time, must not be cancelled, or ridiculously overcrowded, and they should be clean.

He said good connections from Manchester to Leeds and to other northern cities and towns are just as important as the spinal connection down to London.

Below are just some of the key issues addressed in the speech.

“Time for this Northern service to be sorted out”

Mr Shapps said: “As you know, just last month I said it was time for this Northern service to be sorted out, and we’ve brought it back into the public sector at least for the time being.

“Realistically it’s going to take time. Simply handing it to the operator of last resort is not going to resolve Northern’s problems.

“But I know that Robin Gisby and Richard George, who are heading up this public sector operator, are

going to be wholly focused on delivering real and tangible changes, and I've asked them to do it as quickly as possible, whilst understanding they won't be able to work overnight miracles."

"Too damn complicated to run a railway with this level of capacity constraint"

He said: "We are of course working towards what I call the Williams world white paper, where Keith Williams has been working on those plans to dramatically improve services across the entire network.

"I'm absolutely convinced that the level of fragmentation that exists in our railways at the moment, whilst successful in for example doubling the number of passengers, doubling the passenger miles and making our railways go through this extraordinary renaissance that we are seeing today, it's just too damn complicated to run a railway with this level of capacity constraint because of all those extra services in the modern world.

"And that's why what Keith Williams is doing is absolutely essential and I'm looking forward to publishing that white paper before too long."

"1980s - I don't think it was a classic moment for train design in the UK"

He said: "Now those of us who spent our formative years during the 1980s, will know it was a great time for music. It was great time for fashion - at least for some.

"But I'll put it out there, I don't think it was a classic moment for train design in UK and particularly in the north of England. I am of course talking about the pacers.

"I would echo the Prime Minister in saying: 'I like buses but not when they're supposed to be trains'.

"And that of course is the pacer, they are finally coming off the network. Three of them have just gone to a variety of different charities - a mental health charity, a school, a library, so we can remember them and future generations can come and see what it was like when we ran buses on the rails. But I will be very pleased to see the back of those trains."

"Two things that strike fear into my heart"

He said: "But I have to say there are 2 things that strike fear into my heart every time I hear that the railway is going to be improved - and those are:

- Don't worry minister we are going to improve the timetable.
- Which means the timetable won't be running for quite some time. And:

"Don't worry we are going to introduce new trains.

"Yesterday on the way here I had the pleasure of being on I think a class 331, which of course was brand new, lovely, warm, comfortable, with wi-fi, plug in for your phone. And broken down.

"But I do find that we have a problem when we introduce new trains, that they go through these very

significant teething problems which always means we over-estimate the improvements the public will see.

“Those problems aside, the renaissance of the railway I think is very significant as I have been trying to describe.”

“An important step in restoring the sense of connection too many communities have lost”

He said: “Beyond just the improvements in rolling stock we also have our massive programme of reversing those Beeching cuts.

“Nearly a third of Britain’s railway was wiped away by Beeching after his 1964 report.

“2,300 stations, 5,000 miles of track obliterated.

“As you know we’ve already pledged half a billion to begin reversing the cuts – rebuilding old lines, upgrading freight lines, and even creating brand new lines through this process.

“Because I believe that by restoring these crucial links, we’ll take an important step in restoring the sense of connection too many communities have lost.”

Photo credit: Shutterstock