

Delivering the green travel pledge with the business travel sector

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Jac Starr, chief executive officer at the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), writes about the work to support business travel including more around sustainable travel

Transport is a crucial driver of economic and social development and its infrastructure connects people to jobs, education, healthcare, and each other.

Sustainable development is about creating a balance between the needs of a growing population and the health of our planet by embracing environmental sustainability, safety, inclusion and resilience. There isn't a "one size fits all" approach for transport and we know that a range of integrated eco-friendly travel options is needed such as buses, trains, e-bikes, e-cars and e-scooters.

Our purpose at RDG is to create a railway that delivers real improvements in customer experience, which drives growth in both the number of customers and the number of journeys and allows us to create a simpler and better railway for everyone in Britain.

As well as improving the lives of millions of customers up and down the country every day, rail has a vital

role to play in supporting sustainable economic recovery and growth while also helping government to meet ambitious zero-carbon targets. Put simply, taking the train helps tackle climate change – it cuts carbon emissions by two thirds compared to travelling by car – and it can do more in future. From our research, a single train removes 500 cars off of the road and that’s why we want more people and freight to switch to rail.

Delivering environmental sustainability is one of the government’s strategic objectives for rail, and working alongside government and the Department for Transport (DfT), RDG provides key rail programmes to government for consideration and implementation, on behalf of the rail industry and on behalf of all rail users. As the cleanest and greenest high-volume transport, rail has an essential role in creating sustainable lifestyles and economies.

Business customers demand the ability to be able to travel flexibly, efficiently and sustainably and the industry has been looking at ways to meet this expectation. Over the last 12 months, RDG has been conducting research with travel management companies, rail tech/distributors and corporates to make sure we better understand the needs of the business customer, establishing a hierarchy of need, so that we can adapt our offering accordingly.

As environment, social and governance (ESG) goals continue to be a focus for companies within the business travel sector, RDG is leading on the Green Travel Pledge, which is a rail industry scheme that has been created in collaboration with the business travel sector and is an important part of the industry’s response to help the country achieve carbon net zero.

What is the Green Travel Pledge? I had the pleasure to speak about it at the recent ITM Sustainability Summit. This rail industry initiative will provide a wide range of industry data on rail travel to inform journey choice, influence travel decisions and enable robust reporting, across business travel. The pledge will see the creation of a common standard to measure carbon emissions in order to influence travel decisions and enable robust reporting; it is certainly a ‘you asked, and we’ve delivered’ moment.

RDG undertook extensive research last year with its partner Black Box Partnerships to engage with a range of companies within the business travel sector to better understand their goals around sustainability and reporting. This research told us that companies thought that current government policy wasn’t providing them with enough information to keep pace with carbon net zero reporting and ambitions to make rail the preferred mode of transport.

The data will be published and can be used by Travel Management Companies (TMCs), Online Booking Tools (OBTs) and corporates to help show the environmental benefit of rail versus air or car. Where there is a choice of rail operator or route, it can also show which option has the lowest carbon footprint.

So when you’re planning your next business trip, rather than automatically choose a car or a plane, we hope companies will use the information available to them and consider going by train. Such information to inform business travellers’ choice will come directly from train operators and will include: locomotive/engine types, fuel type, number of carriages and load factor, as well as scheduled timetable data.

This recognised industry benchmark will enable consistency for measuring carbon emissions to the rail industry. Multiple distribution partners such as TMCs, OBTs and rail technology providers will be able to relay this information to companies, which can be aligned to wider business targets and towards carbon net zero.

It highlighted further that the data was often fragmented from within the industry and the business travel community expects us to talk with one clear voice and outlined that different organisations are running at a different pace in their carbon net zero ambitions and reporting commitments – therefore one size doesn't fit all.

As a result, we're now moving forward with the next phase of this exciting project which will be rolled out later this year. We will continue to provide confidence that the investment the rail industry is making will further support business travellers to make the right, sustainable choices, across multiple booking channels.

Jac Starr, chief executive officer at the Rail Delivery Group (RDG)