

Department for Transport proposals to remove wi-fi from trains in order to reduce cost

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The Department for Transport (DfT) has revealed plans to work with train operators on whether to scrap free wi-fi on trains to save money.

In a statement to Rail Business Daily, the DfT said: “Our railways are currently not financially sustainable, and it is unfair to continue asking taxpayers to foot the bill, which is why reform of all aspects of the railways is essential.

“Passenger surveys consistently show that on-train Wi-Fi is low on their list of priorities, so it is only right we work with operators to review whether the current service delivers the best possible value for money.”

In its statement the DfT says a Transport Focus report ‘Britain’s Railway: What matters to passengers’ published on 8 December 2022 showed wi-fi on trains is a lower priority than value for money on ticket prices, reliability, punctuality and personal security, among other features.

It adds that in many cases, the on-train wi-fi equipment is now in need of replacement or upgrade since the first equipment was installed in 2015 with corresponding implications for the commercial case.

In mitigation many non-inter-city journeys are of relatively short durations and the usage of the on-train wi-fi has typically been low in preference to passengers using their mobile phone directly without connecting to the on-train wi-fi.

Andy Bagnall, chief executive of Rail Partners said: “As we look to attract customers back to the railway post pandemic, we should be innovating to improve customer experience rather than removing features many passengers value and which support the wider economy.

“While there is a need to control costs, the consideration of this proposal is a symptom of the current disjointed management of industry finances where revenue and cost are looked at separately and operators are unable to innovate in response to customer needs.

“Revenue and cost considerations need to be reunited in one place as quickly as possible, and operators need to be given the freedom to attract customers back to rail, or we risk a spiral of decline on the railway.”

Simon Holmes, managing director of evo-rail, a rail telecoms company formed out of FirstGroup, says: “Today’s statement from the Department for Transport is disappointing. In an environment where we should be encouraging people back to the railways, cutting access to on-board Wi-Fi will only weaken the appeal of travelling by train, especially for commuters.

“Existing train Wi-Fi is struggling to keep up with demand, and the business case for a constant, ultrafast Wi-Fi service is clear, especially in areas with poor mobile service. Wi-Fi is no longer a luxury, but a necessity for rail passengers as journey distances increase in favour of out-of-town living.”

“This is a short-term view which will further leave the UK’s railways behind its global counterparts and struggling to deliver the modern, appealing rail service passengers expect and need.”

David Pitt, VP UK at SilverRail: “Removing or reducing WiFi on trains has the potential to damage the industry as many people value connectivity during journeys, such as relying on it to work or study during a commute or keeping up to date with real-time travel updates.

“As well as frustrating current passengers, carriers risk losing the next generation of traveller as data shows that 64% of 16 to 24 year olds are likely to switch to rail if they had access to improved on-board WiFi.

“Rail offers an extra level of convenience, and it’s this that will move the needle when it comes to greener travel, as well as provide a much needed resurgence in revenue. We need to see maximum effort on customer experience – benchmarked in legislation – and that should include connectivity. Removing WiFi from trains is a backward step following the sector’s digital innovation progression and push passengers to other means, and often less sustainable means of transportation.”

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