

“Government has to step back from the railway”

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The man tasked with working out how to improve railways in the UK says the current franchising model has had its day.

Keith Williams says what worked in the 25 years after privatisation is now holding the sector back. He has also called for a greater distance between government and the running of the day-to-day railway.

“The government will have to step back from the railway,” he said.

“But creating greater distance from government, must also bring the railway closer to passengers. What comes next must be anchored in the regions and communities – and nearer to the people – the railway serves.

“I want to see the creation of a thorough modern, 21st century service provider. A railway that is run in the public’s interest, delivering for passengers, supporting local economies, embracing innovation and new business models to improve journey experience and reduce costs.”

The independent chair of the Rail Review gave the update at a Northern Powerhouse Partnership event. Since the review was launched 10 months ago, there's been hundreds of meetings with everyone from passengers and train operators through to businesses and politicians having their say.

He said: "The industry is complex and getting to our final destination may take some time, but passengers must see and feel tangible changes quickly if we are to turn around declining satisfaction and trust.

"Change will need tough decisions to be taken and require collaboration and partnership working across the sector, but the prize will be big."

Five key focus areas for reform

Mr Williams says it has to be a railway which is run in the public's interest, delivering for passengers, supporting local economies, embracing innovation and new business models to improve journey experience and reduce costs.

He's stressed the need to change both the design and culture of the railway so it prioritises customers – passengers and freight. For regions there must be greater opportunities to influence and inform decisions about services and upgrades.

One area not being considered is giving Network Rail control over the trains. Mr Williams says this is no judgement on them, but that you do not create a customer-focused railway by putting engineers in charge.

To achieve this vision, the five areas highlighted are:

- A new passenger offer, focused on customer service excellent and driven by performance measures.
- Simplified fares and ticketing.
- A new industry structure, reducing fragmentation, better aligning track and train.
- A new commercial model.
- Greater flexibility so the sector can respond to changing travel patterns and long-term incentives for creativity and innovation.

Putting passengers first

Mr Williams says when he started the review, he promised to put passengers first. With that in mind he's drawn up several needs which are drawn heavily on the work done by Transport Focus, ORR, Which?, Campaign for Better Transport, among others.

The core passenger offer includes:

- Reliability and punctuality.
- Safety and security.
- Value for money.
- Consistency and transparency.

He has also outlined several further needs which go beyond the basics, but are important in maintaining high levels of satisfaction.

These are:

- Accountability and leadership.
- Accurate information and communication before, during and after journeys.
- Proper compensation and redress.

In response to the speech by Mr Williams on the Rail Review, Jacqueline Starr, chief operating officer at the Rail Delivery Group, which represents train operators and Network Rail, said: “Businesses, communities and passengers across the country have told us that they want easier fares, increased accountability and a system which allows rail companies to focus more fully of delivering for customers.

“While we await the detail, it’s very encouraging to see these areas being prioritised by the review team. Our proposals for a single independent organising body would ensure everyone is working towards the same customer-centric goals and changes to fares regulations would reduce overcrowding on some of the busiest services and create an easier to use, better value fares system for all.”

The review’s findings and recommendations will be published in a government white paper in Autumn 2019. Reform is due to begin in 2020.