

# Great British Railways delayed (but e-scooters still top government priority)

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It was announced today that in the latest round of U-turns, the government has axed plans to introduce GBR, for now.

Announced in the Queens Speech in May, the transport bill promised to “modernise rail services and improve reliability for passengers” and was due to see the creation of Great British Railways (GBR). It was also due to look at the next phase of HS2 from Crewe to Manchester, the P&O ferry dispute, and new technologies such as e-scooters and self-drive vehicles.

Significant elements of the bill have been shelved, for the time being, in order to prioritise legislation to tackle the energy crisis, however Transport Secretary Ann-Marie Trevelyan, told MPs at the Commons’ Transport Select Committee that she still hopes to be able to deliver “a narrow bill”, focusing on electric vehicle chargers, e-scooters and e-bikes.

The creation of GBR via the bill, initially announced by Trevelyan’s predecessor Grant Shapps was due to go ahead in early 2024. It would have seen the new state-owned body the control of the contracting of passenger services, as well as the maintenance of infrastructure from Network Rail.

## Timeframes

Trevelyan admitted that it was impossible to keep to the planned timeframe whilst keeping everything in the bill, so it appears that the total transformation of the UK rail sector and creation of GBR is now having to wait until the next parliamentary session, which is due to start in May 2023. Although Trevelyan would not commit to a set date for work to start on the legislation but insisted that she “only sees this as a few months’ delay”.

Department for Transport (DfT) permanent secretary Dame Bernadette Kelly told the committee: “There are key elements of structural change and the establishment of GBR which require legislation including, for example, I think the formal transfer of franchising powers from the Government – from the DfT – to another entity.

“So there clearly are some things that we can’t fully do structurally without legislation and without those powers.”

Ms Trevelyan said: “What we’re looking at, at the moment, is whether actually, across that whole piece, there are a number of parts that don’t actually require primary legislation, so how can we intelligently use the time we’ve got until we get into the second half of next year to actually start to implement those areas of transformation that we can?”

## Reactions

The industry has been waiting with bated breath for news on GBR, and it seems today’s news is disappointing for everyone involved in the transport sector. Labour MP Ben Bradshaw, who sits on the committee, said the pulling of the bill suggested that “the whole of Government is falling apart.”

The rail industry has started to react to the news. Andy Bagnall, chief executive of Rail Partners said; “It is disappointing the legislation to create Great British Railways will be delayed, but we look forward to working with the Secretary of State, Rail Minister and Great British Railways Transition Team’s leadership to progress reform in its absence.

“It is critical there is not a long hiatus and there are immediate steps that can be taken now, such as switching on revenue incentives in National Rail Contracts and feeding back to the market on passenger service contracts development, which can accelerate growth and underpin a reinvigorated public-private partnership.”

Darren Caplan, Chief Executive, RIA said: “It’s disappointing to learn that the Transport Bill is being postponed, as this means that the establishment of Great British Railways is set to be delayed. As the Government itself has said, the railway needs a clear strategic direction and GBR was to be the mechanism to deliver this.

“For the rail supply sector there is now a real concern that this delay will lead to a hiatus in work, hitting confidence and certainty in what are already difficult economic circumstances. And this adds to the lack of clarity rail suppliers are already feeling, given there is also uncertainty over long-term funding,

enhancement schemes and major rail projects too.

“Even with this delay, we urge the Government, Network Rail, other rail clients, and the rail supply sector not to wait for legislation but to work together – as GBR is rescheduled – to develop strategic plans to deliver the railway required both today and to build the infrastructure and rolling stock capacity needed for the future. This collaboration is also needed to progress long-term commitments such as decarbonising the network by 2040 and replacing outdated signalling with digitalisation in the next 15 years.”

Revised plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail are also due to be announced in a few weeks, and ministers are continuing to look at the HS2 eastern leg from Birmingham to Leeds.