

Passengers facing second-class mobile connectivity on UK rail network

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Passengers will continue to experience inadequate mobile services on the UK's railways due to slow government progress in fixing gaps in connectivity.

The National Infrastructure Commission warns that progress on mobile connectivity on rail has stalled since the government accepted the findings of the Commission's 2016 Connected Future report. It is calling for clear ministerial leadership in response to avoid further delays.

Mobile services are essential to everyday life and business productivity, yet the current rate of progress on rail connectivity is, the Commission believes, insufficient to ensure that even basic mobile services – voice calls and 4G data – will be reliably available throughout the UK's network within the next five years.

In its new report on the progress of its recommendations – [Connected Future: Getting back on track](#) – the Commission found that a lack of leadership from government, frequent ministerial changes, and split departmental responsibilities have halted any initial momentum in steps to improve passengers' access to mobile services. As a result, the gap between an increasingly connected society and a disconnected railway could become even more stark.

In contrast, road users have benefitted from 'clear, continuous progress' on connectivity, with UK motorways now offering near universal coverage for voice and data calls and good progress elsewhere across the roads network.

National Infrastructure Commission Chair Sir John Armitt said: "We're all used to having mobile access on the move but for many passengers, loss of coverage while on the train occurs with frustrating regularity. In too many areas our rail infrastructure seems stuck in the digital dark ages.

"As coverage improves elsewhere, people will find it increasingly frustrating that it doesn't extend to the railway. It would be like finding that the railway only accepts cheques for payment and not debit cards or contactless.

"Government has dropped the ball on this issue and passengers will expect it to get a firm grip and find a solution. It must set out clear plans for delivering railway connectivity and giving passengers the reassurance they need."

Plugging gaps in rail connectivity

In its original 2016 [Connected Future](#) report, the National Infrastructure Commission recommended rail passengers should be able to access 'high capacity wireless connectivity', with the necessary trackside infrastructure for an open and accessible telecommunications network being in place by 2025 at the latest, to take advantage of emerging 5G technologies.

While there have been range of trials across the network – such as trials of 5G technology on South Western Railway and a testing programme operated by Network Rail – these have been piecemeal.

The Commission's research found no evidence of an overall plan exists for rail connectivity. Combined with the cancellation or deprioritisation of a number of other programmes, the research suggests rail will fall further behind road in terms of progress towards seamless mobile connectivity.

With few technical barriers to delivering rail connectivity, it found the lack of progress is largely down to difficulties accessing Network Rail land, commercial barriers created by the costs of installation and associated potential risks, and a failure of leadership.

Momentum developed in government in 2017 to improve mobile connectivity has been lost due to multiple ministerial changes and no clear leadership for the project across the two departments responsible: DCMS and the Department for Transport.

In response, the Commission identifies four areas in which government must improve progress on rail mobile connectivity:

- **Leadership and action** – appointment of a ministerial lead and publication by the Department of Transport of a clear plan of action by December 2020
- **Access to trackside land** – Network Rail must put in place by December 2020 arrangements for third party access to trackside land for the purposes of delivering the trackside connectivity network
- **Commercial barriers** – government should set out plans for a competitive process for delivering connectivity improvements on specific routes, building on lessons from the active trials currently taking place. These processes should begin no later than June 2021
- **Filling evidence gaps** – Ofcom should regularly report on the extent and quality of mobile coverage on the railways, to ensure progress is tracked and to build consumer awareness.

Maintaining momentum on digital roads

The Commission's original recommendations on roads – endorsed by government – stated that the necessary infrastructure for an open and accessible mobile telecommunications and backhaul network that is fit for the future, must be in place by 2025 at the latest.

While progress on digital connectivity on UK roads is good, the Commission is calling for Ofcom to publish more consistent tracking of mobile coverage data for roads and in-car coverage, which disaggregates the data for motorways, A roads and B roads, and have this in place for Ofcom's 2020 Connected Nations report.

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