

Placemaking: Rail's role in unlocking social, economic and environmental value

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Making the areas around stations safe, accessible and welcoming can do a great deal to help drive economic growth and in turn, encourage a return to the railway. Elaine Seagriff, Great British Railways Transition Team's (GBRTT) Director of Strategic Planning writes on improving the public spaces around stations and the potential this has to unlock social, economic and environmental value.

Many people are facing a difficult time at the moment. The rising cost of living, high energy prices and, in some parts of the country, an unreliable rail service. In that context, it might seem odd to be talking about placemaking – and by that I mean physical changes to the built environment in and around a station as well as activations such as market stalls, pianos or entertainment where you are creating things to see and do.

However, placemaking around stations, making the areas safe, accessible and welcoming, and generally more pleasant gateways for people arriving into a town or city, and to spend time in, can do a great deal to help drive economic growth and, in turn, encourage a return to the railway.

Anyone who has visited my home city of Glasgow in the last few years would have been struck by what a

fantastic gateway the redeveloped Queen Street station now is for both George's Square and the city centre – a place where, weather permitting, people now choose to gather. The changes we've seen in London's Kings Cross in the past decade have been equally striking.

Reading, Sheffield and Leicester all have or are improving the public spaces around stations while the area outside Leeds station is benefiting from a traffic calming project at the moment.

Big or small, placemaking benefits can be felt across the country.

The Strategic Planning team I lead at GBRTT are working to maximise rail's role in unlocking social, economic and environmental value and opportunity. In fact, it's a key component of the work we're doing to shape the long-term strategy for rail and is embedded in the strategic objectives for rail that have been set by government:

- Improved customer experience
- Financial sustainability
- Environmental sustainability
- Long-term economic growth, and
- Improved connectivity for communities to support levelling up.

By thinking beyond the 'gate line' and embracing the environment our stations are in, we have the opportunity to support the creation of centres of activity that will attract people to places, support economic growth and improve pride in place.

Looking forward, in the context of placemaking, we (GBRTT) want to help integrate railway planning with both wider planning for walking, cycling, public transport, spatial and urban planning. That's because placemaking is critical to a number of key activities:

- Making end to end journeys as easy as possible – connecting people to places and to opportunities, not just jobs but also, for example, leisure and access to healthcare, is good for the economy.
- Providing a greater sense of 'pride in place' – something we have seen through programmes such as 'Restoring Your Railway', which is supporting local communities by reintroducing former railway lines and stations.
- Increasing the catchment area for potential rail customers, by investing in stations and supporting local planners with redevelopment opportunities that are near to stations.

The railway must make cost savings and become more financially sustainable, so we need to be creative and look, with our local and regional transport partners, at what funding sources there are for financing local improvements. Land value capture, for example, where landowners, developers and property owners are charged a levy associated with the increase in the value of the land due to the investment in transport infrastructure which can be reinvested into services that benefit local communities.

Getting land use and transport planning working in parallel

Rail has a huge role to play in decarbonising the wider transport network and helping to underpin future

sustainability. To help the UK reach its 2050 target for net zero (and in Scotland by 2045) while supporting growing cities, we need large-scale modal shift to more space and carbon-efficient forms of transport.

With the UK population expected to grow by several million over the next few decades, and with a shortage of affordable housing, it's critical we get land use and transport planning working in parallel. If we do, it will create well-located homes and communities and reduce car dependency for future generations.

It was clear from the responses we had to the Call for Evidence we ran earlier this year for the long-term strategy for rail that there's both a strong desire and need for rail to integrate with both other policies and other modes of transport, and placemaking is key to that.

By better understanding regional and local spatial ambitions, beyond the station gateline, we will be able to start thinking about development differently. How might it tie in with brownfield sites in the area that are within walking distance to railway stations? Could we reduce the number of new homes that build in car dependency?

At GBRTT, we are looking at all of these questions and more, and we've been speaking to people from all sorts of organisations – industry, local and regional government, private sector businesses in the supply chain, passenger champions – to support the long-term strategy for rail which is a core part of the guiding mind required to shape the future of the railway.

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