

# Playing our part in the Great British Railways

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It is the biggest change to the railways in 25 years, ending the fragmentation of the past and bringing the network under a single national leadership.

Great British Railways will own the infrastructure, receive the fare revenue, run and plan the network and set more fares and timetables.

Network Rail will be absorbed into this new organisation, as will many functions from the Rail Delivery Group, Department for Transport and others.

Like many, I am still digesting the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail White Paper – which at over 100 pages is something to be done over time and over several cups of coffee.

On the face of it though I am heartened by both Keith Williams and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps' commitment to the railway and my initial reaction is one of optimism for the future.

The foreword to the White Paper says: "The government profoundly believes in the future of the railways. Without them, our cities could not function, critical freight connections would be cut off, carbon emissions and pollution would rise, and mobility would fall."

The government has spent around £12 billion to keep services going during the pandemic, and continues to press ahead with HS2, improvements across the north of England, the new Oxford-Cambridge line and the reversal of some of the Beeching closures.

It is a strong start, but start it is. For the UK's railways to remain amongst the safest in the world, we have to make sure infrastructure and maintenance continues apace and we embrace the latest technology and innovation.

We also can't forget the important role the railways have to play when it comes to clean, green transport – it is essential decarbonisation, greater biodiversity and improvements in air quality remain at the top of the agenda moving forward. Plans need to be long-term, to allow for funding to be in place, and for the whole industry to be able to smooth boom and bust.

Both Williams and Shapps have spoken about radical change, saying the railways lack a guiding focus on customers, coherent leadership and strategic direction, and that the current systems are too fragmented, too complicated and too expensive to run.

I welcome the change, many of which are already being accelerated from the coronavirus pandemic. Collaboration has been key for the last 14 months, with organisations working more closely. There has been far more openness in the rail sector and I hope this will be built on further under the Great British Railways brand.

The White Paper speaks of innovation being difficult. Whilst it can be a difficult industry to get into, and in the past there have been too many hurdles to get some incredible products and services embedded in the sector, I think we are already seeing major change.

We have some incredible initiatives and organisations such as the Rail Innovation Group, that are providing the platform and contacts to break into the industry. As an organisation, we showcase some of these fantastic products and services through our railbusinessdaily email and website and our magazine RailDirector.

We all have a role to play in making the rail industry seen as an open industry and the go-to industry for the latest technology and ideas – building on our heritage and the Victorian pioneers that created the railways in the UK.

New ways of working with the private sector are essential and I am pleased with the commitment to create new opportunities for innovators, suppliers and funders through streamlined contracts and more contestability.

There is no denying that tough times are ahead when it comes to building back better from the coronavirus pandemic. We need to work together to encourage people back onto the railways and at the same time make sure passengers are met with a first-class experience – from buying the train tickets, through to the actual journey.

I welcome flexible season tickets and the simplifying of the current confusing mass of tickets. Many

organisations will adopt flexible working and, in the immediate future, I can't see passenger numbers being anywhere near to where they were pre-pandemic. This needs to be considered when it comes to flexible season tickets.

Over the last few days, I have read with great interest both the report and the comments from dozens and dozens of industry experts and I do share the same sentiments of many comments I have read, who welcome the report and believe there could be huge potential if implemented well and collaboratively.

As Andy Bagnall from the Rail Delivery Group says, reforms featuring in the White Paper have long been called for, but getting the detail right is crucial in fulfilling the potential to improve journeys, offer independent oversight and clear accountability, creating a new set of fares which are simpler and more value for money.

Like Maggie Simpson, the Director General of the Rail Freight Group, I also welcome the creation of new opportunities for freight. The last year has highlighted the importance of moving large quantities of goods by freight and the importance of doing so to decarbonise.

As well as looking at the reaction, as CEO of BusinessDailyGroup, I've looked closely at the detail to make sure we align ourselves with Great British Railways and serve the wider industry to the best of our abilities. I think in many ways we are already there, working with dozens and dozens of well-established organisations in the rail industry, through to the new arrivals looking to break into the sector.

We continue to provide a vast range of rail business services and profile-raising opportunities for railway industry-related organisations and professionals.

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail has been described as one to end a quarter-century of fragmentation on the railways. As an organisation we are playing a part in doing just that – bringing together the industry and showcasing its offering. Our daily newsletter, magazine RailDirector and the soon to be released new offering InsideTrack, are both engaging and educating the industry.

Our advisors are helping to unlock the business development support, our specialist recruitment arm is playing a vital role in filling employment gaps, and work is well underway on our new community offering which will provide industry insight reports, events, tender opportunities and safety updates.

As Williams and Shapps make reference to in the White Paper, it was 1825 that the UK invented the railways – a system that spread its iron web across the earth, transforming everywhere it touched. As we fast approach the bicentenary, we as an organisation want to play our part in the industry's future – promoting the products, services and its people – for decades to come.