

# The challenges to overcome to attract passengers back onto the railways

September 29, 2020



Britain's railways faces one of its biggest threats in decades. Fare income from passengers is vital, but with the COVID-19 pandemic numbers using the railways is well down, with no signs of them rising to pre-virus levels any time soon.

This Saturday (October 3), Railfuture will be hosting a webinar to discuss what needs to be done to attract passengers back to rail. The free event, taking place from 11am until 12.30pm, can be viewed at [www.railfuture.org.uk/webinar](http://www.railfuture.org.uk/webinar).

Among those due to take part includes:

- Charlene Wallace, Director for National Passenger and Customer Experience at Network Rail.
- Jacqueline Starr, Chief Operating Officer from the Rail Delivery Group.
- Ali Chegini, Director of Systems and Health at RSSB.
- Peter Sargant, Head of Rail Development at the West Midlands Rail Executive.
- Linda McCord, Senior Stakeholder Manager at Transport Focus.

Ahead of the webinar, Ralph Hilsdon, of Railfuture's Thames Valley branch, has written an article about the challenges facing the industry and why a rejuvenated rail network is crucial in order to improve our environment.

"I've not travelled by train since the pandemic started.

Being of a certain age, COVID-19 has changed my life, I've been nervous to eat out, socialise and to travel by public transport seems an unnecessary risk to take. But I am a realist, I know we can't go on like this forever both for our sanity and the economy at large, so what is needed is to get me out and about again. If we don't, many services including railways risk being lost forever.

#### Confidence

Our trust in the authorities charged with looking after us has taken a bashing, and it's not improving but if I look at our local businesses and some larger organisations like the National Trust and the Royal Horticultural Society, they've reacted quickly, putting measures into place and getting people back through their doors. Business may still be down but there is recovery.

Railways got off to bad start in this pandemic, with reports of chronic overcrowding, infrequent services and no masks or social distancing. Stay at home messaging and the success of home working added to the problem.

#### Getting us back on trains

Even if we have a vaccine soon, we're not going to see a bounce back to our old ways. Having got used to home working and home shopping, many will continue to do so, the trend was already underway, Covid-19 just accelerated it.

Safety is crucial, I believe the rail operators can learn from the airlines. Mask wearing must be vigorously policed, both at stations and on trains. Operators need to be much more vocal about what they are doing to sanitise the system and to control distancing. Pricing and real time information on potential crowding can be used to encourage use at less busy times.

There will be less five day a week commuting, the season ticket is facing obsolescence. New app based ticketing giving flexibility with incentives for regular travel should be quick to deliver. We need to learn from innovative countries – in Helsinki for instance, their app gives unrestricted travel on trains, trams, buses and metro for a bought time.

To encourage the recovery of leisure travel, there need to be incentives. I'm getting emails from airlines promoting short breaks but am yet to see one from a rail operator.

#### The Risk – Use It or Lose It

If we stop using public transport, stop eating out or visiting town centres and tourist centres, they will die. Clearly the government and its bodies need to up their game, but so do businesses and us the public, by

supporting organisations that are investing in keeping us safe.

If you care about your train services and what losing them would mean for you and your community post COVID-19, attend the 'Attracting passengers back to Rail' free webinar on 3rd October 2020. It's organised by Railfuture, which is Britain's leading and longest-established national independent voluntary organisation, campaigning for a bigger and better railway."

*Ralph Hilsdon, of Railfuture's Thames Valley branch,*

The Attracting Passengers Back to Rail webinar takes place on Saturday, October 3, from 11am to 12.30pm. Visit [www.railfuture.org.uk/webinar](http://www.railfuture.org.uk/webinar)

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