

Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail to reform Britain's railways and launch new era for passengers

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A quarter-century of fragmentation on the railways will end as they come under single, accountable national leadership, as the Government unveils a new plan for rail which prioritises passengers and freight.

A new public body, Great British Railways, will integrate the railways, owning the infrastructure, collecting fare revenue, running and planning the network, and setting most fares and timetables.

Network Rail, the current infrastructure owner, will be absorbed into the public body to bring about single, unified and accountable leadership for the national network.

Great British Railways will simplify the current mass of confusing tickets with new flexible season tickets, and a significant roll-out of more convenient Pay As You Go, contactless and digital ticketing on smartphones. A new Great British Railways website will sell tickets and a single compensation system for operators in England will provide a simple system for passengers to access information and apply for refunds.

There will remain a substantial, and often greater role, for the private sector. Great British Railways will contract private partners to operate most trains to the timetables and fares it specifies, with a model similar to that used by Transport for London in its successful Overground and Docklands Light Railway services.

The new Passenger Service Contracts will include strong incentives for operators to run high-quality services and increase passenger numbers. They will not be one-size-fits-all: as demand recovers, operators on some routes, particularly long-distance, will have more commercial freedom. Affordable walk-on fares and season ticket prices will be protected.

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail, published today, sets out the path towards a truly passenger-focused railway, underpinned by new contracts that prioritise punctual and reliable services, the rapid delivery of a ticketing revolution, with new flexible and convenient tickets, and long-term proposals to build a modern, greener and accessible network.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said: “I am a great believer in rail, but for too long passengers have not had the level of service they deserve.

“By creating Great British Railways, and investing in the future of the network, this government will deliver a rail system the country can be proud of.”

Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary, said: “Our railways were born and built to serve this country, to forge stronger connections between our communities and provide people with an affordable, reliable and rapid service. Years of fragmentation, confusion and over-complication has seen that vision fade, and passengers failed. That complicated and broken system ends today.

“The pandemic has seen the Government take unprecedented steps to protect services and jobs. It’s now time to kickstart reforms that give the railways solid and stable foundations for the future, unleashing the competitive, innovative and expert abilities of the private sector, and ensuring passengers come first.

“Great British Railways marks a new era in the history of our railways. It will become a single familiar brand with a bold new vision for passengers – of punctual services, simpler tickets and a modern and green railway that meets the needs of the nation.”

The Williams-Shapps plan also announces a comprehensive and costed environment plan will be delivered by 2022 to help achieve Net Zero, the first national accessibility audit to ensure the railway works for everyone, and the first 30-year strategy for the railways, sets our key investment and strategic decisions to support economic growth, levelling up and the environment.

Keith Williams, Chair of the Williams Review, said: “Our Plan is built around the passenger, with new contracts which prioritise excellent performance and better services, better value fares, and creating clear leadership and real accountability when things go wrong.

“Our railway history – rich with Victorian pioneers and engineers, steam and coal, industry and ingenuity – demands a bright future. This plan is the path forward, reforming our railways to ensure they work for

everyone in this country.”

COVID-19 has caused deep, structural challenges to the railway, with use still far below pre-pandemic levels. The government says this strategy re-emphasises its commitment to growing, not shrinking, the rail network, with tens of billions of pounds invested in more electrification, new and reopened lines and a rail revolution.

Great British Railways will drive significant efficiencies in the railways’ inflated costs, reducing complexity and duplication, increasing flexibility, changing working practices and making it easier and cheaper to invest. Reform is the only way to protect services and jobs in the long term.

In the short and medium term, the government will work closely with the sector on measures to encourage passengers back to rail. To reflect changes in the traditional commute and working life, the Government has today announced that a [new national flexi season ticket](#) will be on sale this summer, with potential savings of hundreds of pounds a year for 2 and 3 day-a-week commuters. Tickets will be on sale on 21 June, ready for use on 28 June.

The new Passenger Service Contracts will also help to build a more financially stable industry. By removing barriers to new market entrants, including by no longer basing competitions on complex and uncertain revenue forecasts, private operators will be challenged to provide a competitive and customer-focused offer, delivering greater value-for-money for the taxpayer.

Local communities will work closely with GBR on designing services, with local leaders given greater control over local ticketing, timetables and stations. The new model will encourage innovative bidders, such as community rail partnerships who want to bid for the GBR contract to operate their local branch lines.

The journey to this new passenger-focused model has begun today. New National Rail Contracts will be announced this year. These contracts will be in operation for two years and act as a bridge to reform.

[Click here to read the 10 outcomes laid out in the White Paper.](#)

[Click here to read the industry reaction to the plan.](#)

Photo credit: Department for Transport