RAILWAYS BILL

Second Reading Briefing – December 2025

Campaign for Better Transport is the UK's leading organisation advocating for sustainable, integrated transport across all modes in England and Wales. We work closely with government departments, regional and local authorities, the transport industry, and elected politicians from all parties. Our research and advocacy work has informed government transport policies since 1973, including protection and expansion of the rail network.

The Railways Bill represents a significant opportunity to create a simpler, more accountable and better-integrated rail system. Establishing Great British Railways (GBR) as a single directing mind for tracks, trains, fares and timetables is a positive step. However, for the reforms to succeed, the Bill needs clearer duties, stronger safeguards and a firmer long-term framework. Greater clarity is also needed on the many other processes and documents that will follow passage of the Bill and will, in combination, determine how and how successfully GBR will act in the interests of passengers, freight operators and the wider economy and society. As the Bill moves through Second Reading, we encourage MPs to focus on the following priority areas:

1. Growing Ridership and Improving the Passenger Experience

Passenger growth: Clause 17 requires the Secretary of State to set and publish a target "to increase the use of the railway network" for freight and for GBR to have regard to this target. Clause 18 also includes a duty to "promote the interests of users and potential users", but this is a weaker duty in relation to growing passenger demand than the one applying to freight. There is also no equivalent duty on the Secretary of State to the one in Clause 17 to set and publish a target to increase passenger use of the network. Without a stronger duty to promote passenger use of the network and for the Secretary of State to set a passenger growth target, there is a risk that GBR may prioritise efficiency over attracting new users and supporting vital mode shift to rail.

- **MPs should call for:** A statutory duty to promote passenger use of the railways, with a corresponding duty on the Secretary of State to set clear targets for increased ridership, consistent with the approach to freight and in line with the commitment to mode shift targets in the rail policy document *Getting Britain Moving*.[1]

Fares and ticketing reform: We welcome the fact that affordability is recognised as one of the Secretary of State's six objectives for a reformed railway, which has been reflected in the first fares freeze in 30 years, as we have long called for. We also welcome the commitment to ensuring the availability of a "range of high-quality rail retailers (including GBR itself) under the future industry model."[2] These commitments should be the first step towards the root-and-branch reform needed of fare structures, how fares are set and how 'affordability' is defined. GBR will set fares on the railway, subject to "parameters and guardrails" defined by the Secretary of State, who "will continue to have oversight of the overall affordability of the railway in the interests of passengers and taxpayers"[3].

- **MPs should call for:** Clarification of what factors must be considered by the Secretary of State in setting the "parameters and guardrails" for setting and regulating fares, including how passenger

affordability will be taken into account, alongside a clear timetable for fares and ticketing reform, including ensuring a level playing field for independent rail retailers alongside GBR.

Station design and accessibility: Under Clause 46, the Passengers' Council can set minimum standards for station services, and Clause 47 allows it to require improvement plans where standards are not met.[4] However, these powers do not ensure a consistent, high-quality approach to station design, including architecture, accessibility, layout, and local context. Without oversight of station design, such as was covered previously by the Design Panel of the British Railways Board, station design has been neglected, at the expense of passenger experience, durability and accessibility.

- **MPs should call for:** An amendment to Clause 46 to state that minimum standards for stations must include design quality, accessibility, durability and community engagement, and, to discharge this duty, the Secretary of State must establish a Station Design Council.

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2. Network Capacity, Access and Rail Freight

Network capacity: GBR's strategic and funding framework and its internal management processes should include incentives to expand the rail network to accommodate future growth. Our research on Left Behind Neighbourhoods makes clear the negative impact of lost rail connectivity on many communities.[5] The Elizabeth Line and the Northumberland Line's successes are clear evidence of the need for and benefit of new and reopened lines to connect more communities.

- **MPs should call for:** A provision that GBR should retain the benefits of revenue growth to reinvest and a requirement for GBR's Long-Term Rail Strategy to include a Network Expansion Plan covering better use of existing paths, an increased extent of the network, new and upgraded stations, and alignment with local transport and growth plans.

Access: The Access and Use Policy gives greater control for GBR over network access. As Clause 69 of the Bill states, at present there would be amendments to the Railways Act 1993 which weaken the powers of the Office of Rail and Road (ORR). This arrangement would risk concentrating too much decision-making power with the directing mind, without sufficient independent scrutiny from an independent regulatory body. This risks unintentionally limiting full use of network capacity, including through open access, which experience suggests can benefit passengers through competition, innovation and through reaching new markets.

- **MPs should call for:** A statutory duty of fairness and non-discrimination in access decisions, alongside strengthened powers for the ORR to intervene.

Rail freight: We welcome the duty to promote the use of rail freight alongside a requirement for the Secretary of State to set a rail freight growth target (or targets), but under the proposed timetabling and capacity allocation reforms there is a risk that strategic freight paths may be diluted, as rail freight, like open access and devolved rail, will not be part of GBR.

- **MPs should call for:** Stronger statutory protections for freight to ensure GBR provides fair, transparent, and consistent network access for freight operators, with a strong right of appeal to an independent regulator, guaranteeing capacity for growth and private investment

3. Funding Stability and Devolution

Funding stability: The Department for Transport's own supporting material for the Railways Bill makes clear that the funding provided through the current ORR-led five-yearly Periodic Review process "is intentionally hard to change, providing certainty for industry and resulting in value for money overall due to the greater efficiencies from being able to confidently plan spending over longer periods of time".[6] Yet contrary to this logic, Schedule 2 gives the Secretary of State and the other railway funders the ability to cut budgets mid-period with minimal safeguards, undermining long-term investment and supply-chain confidence.

- **MPs should call for:** Statutory limits on mid-period funding reductions, which should be permitted only in exceptional circumstances and subject to transparent criteria and external scrutiny and approval by the ORR.

Devolution: The Bill rightly strengthens the role of devolved authorities, introducing the right of "established" Mayoral Strategic Authorities to request "full rail devolution", as well as creating a statutory role for Mayoral Combined Authorities. However effective devolution needs clear processes, access to data, meaningful control over local rail services, and integration with wider transport networks. As drafted, the Bill provides limited detail on the procedure for requesting devolved powers, the criteria for approval, how funding would transfer, or the rights of appeal if a request is rejected.

- **MPs should call for:** Clear statutory guidance on how the Right to Request full rail devolution will operate, including timelines, evaluation criteria, funding arrangements, data-sharing requirements, and dispute or appeal mechanisms, ensuring local leaders have the tools they need to integrate rail with buses, trams and local transport plans.

We remain available to support your team through the legislative process, and can assist with speeches, questions and amendments as required.

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[1] *Getting Britain Moving: Labour's Plans to Fix Britain's Railways (2024)*
[2] *Railways Bill factsheet: tickets and retail*
[3] *Railways Bill factsheet: fares*
[4] *Railways Bill, Clauses 46–47: powers of the Passengers' Council to set standards and require improvement plans for station services. (2025)*
[5] *Connecting communities: improving transport to get 'left behind' neighbourhoods back on track (Campaign for Better Transport, 2021)*
[6] *Railways Bill factsheet: how the government plans to fund GBR (2025)*