

Great British Railways: The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail

Implications and opportunities for community rail

The Department for Transport has published the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail, signalling the beginning of significant reforms for the rail industry. The [white paper can be accessed here](#).

We have been reviewing the paper to digest the potential impacts on community rail, and we are very pleased to see the movement mentioned explicitly on numerous occasions, highlighting the pivotal role you, with our support, can play in making our railways more inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to local needs and opportunities.

The white paper is a high-level and aspirational strategic document, so we will need to continue to analyse and develop the details, and to fully understand the implications and opportunities for community rail. Community Rail Network will continue to partake in discussions on this and keep its members up to date. However, in the meantime, we see the paper as a very positive development, particularly the government's commitment to engage with communities and to "empower the community rail movement to strengthen rail's social and economic impact."

This briefing provides an unofficial summary for our Community Rail Network members of the references to community rail and community engagement within the white paper, but should be read alongside the white paper itself and further government briefings and updates.

'How the railways will change for the better' – this shared vision is summarised in ten outcomes. Two outcomes with particular relevance to community rail are:

- **Greater control for local people and places** - railways will be more responsive to the needs of local communities and customers. Empowered, locally-led teams will support levelling up and be accountable to the people and places they serve;
- **Cleaner, greener railways** - Britain's railways can and will spearhead the nation's ambition to become a world leader in clean, green transport. Decarbonisation, greater biodiversity, and improvements in air quality in towns and cities will ensure rail is the backbone of a cleaner, greener public transport network.

Chapter 3 – 'Integrating the railways'

The majority of references to community rail appear in this chapter of the paper, which talks of creating locally responsive railways that can respond more effectively to the changing needs of local communities.

This section highlights and recognises the fact that around 9,000 people volunteer with community rail groups across Britain, as outlined in Community Rail Network's ['Value of Community Rail'](#) report.

It also outlines a direct commitment to supporting community rail, stating:

"Community rail partnerships will be empowered to strengthen rail's social and economic impact."



The chapter goes on to emphasise how community rail already:

- plays an important role in a thriving rail network across the country;
- strengthens initiatives with local understanding;
- improves rail's social impact;
- engages partners such as schools and local businesses.

As the new public body, Great British Railways will run and plan the rail network, bringing the whole system under single, national leadership. This body will be organised operationally into five regional divisions, responsive and accountable for the whole system in their areas, including budgets. They will bring decision-making closer to the people and places that the railways serve, via local teams well-placed to improve co-operation with local communities and local leaders. A pilot of integrated local teams is to be undertaken as a priority.

The regional divisions will be committed to close working with local partners, including community rail, alongside local government, to advise on opportunities for rail development, and ensure that railways are inclusive, accessible, sustainable, and responsive to local needs and views.

Distinct roles highlighted for community rail include:

- helping to maximise recovery from the pandemic by reinvigorating rail travel for leisure and tourism, particularly in our protected landscapes;
- advising on how to make stations accessible, welcoming, and inclusive, and working with the rail industry to improve facilities at stations and on trains;
- helping to ensure rail is well integrated with other transport services and active travel connections locally, including to support connectivity in rural areas;
- providing social connections and bring people together to tackle loneliness;
- supporting the reuse of disused rail buildings for services such as training, community hubs, social enterprise, and education.

Dedicated station management teams will be created locally within regional divisions of Great British Railways to manage stations, land, and assets. These teams will improve accountability and long-term decision-making over how stations and the estate are maintained and improved for passengers and communities. Initially, station teams will focus on building an understanding of the condition and potential of stations, before developing masterplans for renewal where needed. This will include identifying ways to improve accessibility, create new commercial space and improve connections with walking, cycling and other transport, as well as supporting sustainable travel in rural areas.

Under the section, a 'new offer for towns, cities, regions and nations', community rail partnerships are mentioned, and it states that "local businesses and communities (will be) encouraged to invest in and manage stations", providing "greater joint working on local lines."

The chapter also cites a community rail example (Leeds-Morecambe Community Rail Partnership spearheading Britain's first dementia-friendly railway) as best practice and commits to developing such projects to roll out more widely, supported through the new Passenger Service Contracts with train operators, which will replace the current franchising system.

Chapter 4 – Replacing franchising

Under the new system of Passenger Service Contracts, Great British Railways will specify the timetables, branding, most fares, and other aspects of the service and agree a fee with the competitively procured passenger service operator to provide the service to this specification.

National Rail Contracts, set to last for two years, will succeed the emergency agreements and act as stepping stones towards the new Passenger Service Contracts.

Community rail is mentioned under the heading ‘the geographic and financial size of Passenger Service Contracts will reflect local markets and needs.’ The paper states that Great British Railways will reduce barriers to entry for new and innovative bidders where this offers value for money. It goes on to say that this could include, for example, operators with innovative ideas for improving connectivity with other transport services, or community rail partnerships potentially seeking more control over the operation of individual lines.

Also applicable to community rail is the requirement for operators to support the integration objectives for bus travel and cycling set out in the government's recent bus and cycling strategies.

Chapter 5 – A new deal for passengers

This section states that design standards for stations will be updated by an expert working group, which will include community rail partners, to bring new ideas and make best practice standard. This will include setting out how to:

- make stations more accessible and inclusive;
- integrate them more effectively with wider developments and transport services so people can access rail and other services more easily.

There is reference to stations playing a bigger role in their local communities by providing opportunities for new, innovative services for passengers and residents, potentially including services such as education, training and health and wellbeing.

With regarding to ticketing, the paper states that the Great British Railways website and app will increasingly become a portal for all public transport services, showing bus and light rail information and selling integrated tickets across different services to support easy journeys.

Chapter 7 - Accelerating innovation and modernisation

The paper states that a comprehensive environment plan for the rail network will be published in 2022 and will form a key part of Great British Railways’ 30-year strategy.

Should you wish to discuss any of the above further, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Community Rail Network [team](#).