

Transport Select Committee inquiry – Railways Bill – evidence from Community Rail Network

Community Rail Network is a not-for-profit organisation working across Britain to support, champion and represent community rail: a growing, thriving grassroots movement that works to engage communities with their railways, helping people derive greater value from their local railways and stations. This growing movement now includes 76 community rail partnerships (CRPs), c. 1,300 ‘station friends’ volunteer groups, and other community-based and community-led groups, projects and organisations, working with the rail industry, to:

- Enhance the railways’ contribution to local sustainable development and community wellbeing, including by maximising access to and use of the railways;
- Ensure the community has a voice and plays a part in the development and improvement of our railways, so this meets community needs and aspirations and delivers maximum benefit;
- Communicate the development and importance of our railways to communities, enhancing understanding and pride, and promoting rail as a key part of sustainable, healthy travel.

Find out more about our work, and our members, at communityrail.org.uk

Summary

As Community Rail Network, we are excited about the ongoing progress to set up Great British Railways (GBR), bring passenger services under public control, and create a truly inclusive rail network that serves all our communities well, now and for generations to come.

Our grassroots movement is rich with insight and experience on how we can make our railways into a ‘public good’ that is responsive to local needs, including:

- Breaking down barriers to rail use and building local trust, confidence and pride in rail;
- Putting the railways at the heart of a joined-up, accessible and sustainable transport system;
- Using rail to widen access to opportunity, bolster economic development, and create more empowered, prosperous, resilient communities.

We are working to engage DfT, Shadow GBR, DFTO and other industry leaders and policy-makers to feed into the design and set-up of GBR, to ensure community voices are heard, and to ensure the role of the community rail movement is protected and developed.

We do not seek to propose any revisions to the wording of the Bill, but instead offer evidence on where its commitments provide support around some of the specific themes identified by the committee, and advice on how the design and set-up of GBR needs to take shape to achieve the desired outcomes.

A. Improving rail travel for passengers – provision for improving accessibility

It is critical that GBR is geared at meeting not only the needs of current passengers, but those of potential future passengers, including the many who are excluded from or hindered in using rail. This is critical to breaking down barriers and opening up rail travel – and therefore access to opportunity – and enabling modal shift onto rail to rapidly accelerate transport decarbonisation. This in turn creates greater social, economic and environmental value from the rail network.

This involves GBR being collaborative and responsive, and being set up to work effectively with local communities. This includes processes and standards for meaningful community engagement, listening and responding, and supporting locally-led initiatives connected to rail, alongside and intertwined with work to collaborate with elected local leaders and devolved authorities to align with local plans. It also requires a cultural shift, towards a people-centred, socially-minded rail sector, open to working with communities as partners.

We are therefore pleased to see significant priority and emphasis given to accessibility and inclusion within the Bill, including the requirements for GBR to:

- Consider the needs of disabled passengers in all decisions;
- Meet minimum accessibility standards in its licence;
- Engage with accessibility stakeholders.

We note that these commitments are recognised in various conditions of the Bill, including: a function to promote the interests and needs of disabled passengers (p10, 2a); a commitment to discounted fares for those facing barriers to rail use (p18, 34, 1&2); the new Passengers' Council having regard to the interests and needs of disabled people (p19, 36a); and mandatory standards on access to railway and station services for disabled people (p 24, 46, 2a).

However, we advise that accessibility should be understood in its widest sense – in terms of allowing everyone and anyone to make full use of rail travel and the opportunities this affords without impediment – as well as specific, focused attention on groups that are currently widely excluded from rail, including the disabled community, those on low incomes, and other marginalised groups. We also recommend that GBR's design and set-up recognises and allows for the importance of proactively, meaningfully involving communities to continually draw on diverse lived experience and community voices, in the endeavour to make the railways accessible and inclusive.

Taken as it stands, without the operational detail of GBR having been worked out yet, we believe it is likely that the Bill can have a positive impact on accessibility via the following means – although with each point the benefits can be greatly enhanced if the principles we have highlighted are thoroughly embedded:

- Improved physical access: clear obligations for infrastructure planning and compliance monitoring will lead to better station facilities and train access for disabled passengers;
- Fairer pricing: mandatory discounted fares remove financial barriers for young people, the elderly, disabled people, or those facing other barriers to rail use;
- Enhanced accountability: independent oversight and published performance data will ensure accessibility remains a priority;
- Passenger voice: a stronger Passengers' Council will give disabled passengers a formal channel to influence service standards.

In all these cases, a strong approach to local engagement will build on these basics, and deliver far greater value, for example:

- Locally-led projects can draw on local knowledge and lived experience to enhance accessibility and inclusion at stations and an inclusive culture among rail staff, while building travel confidence among marginalised groups and local people;
- Local engagement can develop confidence with ticketing and awareness of how to access cheaper fares;

- Local engagement can feed in community views and voices, and feed back to the community on changes, increasing transparency and trust;
- Communities need and want to make their voices heard at a local level, and the railways need to be able to draw on local knowledge, for example in how to improve accessible connections with other modes of transport.

Community rail, and its strong, well-established network for involving communities with rail, can support and facilitate this step change. The movement already works closely with railway partners, especially train operators, to deliver community-led projects, but also provides routes into rail for community voices, ideas and opportunities, connecting rail with diverse community stakeholders, and reminding the rail industry of the difference it makes to people's lives.¹ A key part of this is making railways and stations more accessible and inclusive, drawing on diverse lived experience. Community rail has a unique, invaluable role to play here, using its place within local communities and trusted relationships with local charities and inclusion groups.

To maintain the added value that community rail brings in this regard, and realise the opportunities to create a more community-orientated, inclusive railway, it is crucial that the industry's support for and collaboration with community rail is continued under GBR, and strengthened in terms of its coherence and focus.

Putting accessibility and inclusion at the forefront of rail industry thinking, and supporting this through the local engagement typified by community rail, will ensure our railways play a growing, powerful role at the heart of our communities into the future. As such, the community rail movement stands ready to support the development of the accessibility-related functions in the Bill and the accompanying Accessibility Roadmap for Rail, ensuring they are based on lived experience and local insights, and empower communities to deliver locally-led projects.

However, the work of community rail partnerships and groups needs to be recognised and safeguarded via the structure and operations of GBR, building on the support the movement currently receives from industry partners such as individual train operators. Only then can the movement be empowered to help deliver on the aspirations to ensure that rail accessibility improvements are meaningful, locally relevant and sustainable for all.

B. Devolution – local decision-making

We are supportive of the statutory role for devolved governments and Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSA's) in governing, managing, planning and developing the rail network, as outlined in the Bill. The intention to bring decision-making closer to local communities complements the ethos of community rail of putting railways and stations at the heart of community life and giving communities a voice on the development of transport.

However, devolution alone does not ensure good quality local engagement. The structures that GBR establishes with regional and local authorities will need to be conducive to understanding and addressing localised needs, via meaningful community engagement and empowering local communities to develop community-led solutions. Creating a place in those structures for

¹ Strong evidence of community rail's impact, across all key pillars of the Department for Transport's [Community Rail Development Strategy](#), can be found in our [reports](#), especially on the '[value of community rail](#)', and its significant return on investment.

community rail, a movement deep-rooted in the communities it serves with a vast network of local connections and knowledge, will help to realise the benefits.

We see a lot of scope for working with city regions and devolved authorities to develop and expand community rail activity, and are working hard to develop relationships with mayoral and combined authorities to get across how our members can contribute and feed in. However, given our existing close partnership working with the rail industry, this needs to be reflected and embedded within GBR too.

We agree with the principle behind individual bespoke devolution agreements for different areas and regions. However, much of the focus appears to be on MSA's when it is vital that other tiers of local government are given suitable attention too. In small towns and rural areas, which are mostly outside the City Regions, there is much to be done to integrate rail with other sustainable modes of transport, widen access to rail, and unlock tremendous economic potential. Again, local engagement and alignment is critical.

Our understanding is that while the Bill will enable statutory powers, those powers will not be prescriptive and will cater for different levels of involvement and stages of development. GBR's regionalised structure, via its local business units, should encourage and enable effective working relationships with local partners, and alignment with their priorities, e.g. GBR business plans complementing local transport plans. We are pleased to see this referenced directly in the Bill (p9, 16, 3a).

We also welcome the commitment in the Bill stating that GBR must consult with MSA's and other tiers of local authority on any major rail decisions affecting that authority area (pages 47/48, 81, 1, 2). This should help to strike an effective balance between national leadership and local responsiveness, ensuring statutory consultation and contracting powers empower local authorities to address community-specific needs. However, again, this should be reinforced and joined up with effective localised engagement and listening.

If implemented effectively, these devolved powers should help to ensure that local priorities are embedded in national planning. Potential impacts could include:

- Greater local control: authorities can tailor rail services to meet regional needs, improving relevance and responsiveness;
- Better integration: coordinated planning between rail and other sustainable transport modes will make journeys smoother and reduce travel times;
- Targeted investment: local funding and influence allow for station upgrades and service improvements where they matter most;
- Stronger voice for passengers: local authorities can advocate for accessibility, affordability, and reliability on behalf of their communities.

We also welcome the detail in the Bill stating that when exercising its statutory functions, GBR must do so in the manner best calculated to be in the public interest (page 10, 2e). In defining public interest, the Bill does so as the social and economic benefits derived from railway services, and the effect the provision of railway services has on the environment (page 10, 3a, 3b). This chimes with the community rail movement's vision of supporting communities to access, use and derive maximum social, economic and environmental value from their local railways and stations.

We are keen to understand more on how devolved statutory powers will support the translation of GBR objectives into local objectives, not just in transport, but in other key policy areas such as decarbonisation, health and wellbeing, employment, housing and regeneration. Our evidence shows that the community rail movement delivers significant value and a high return on investment across a wide range of policy areas (see our [‘value of community rail’](#) report, esp. pages 3-4). Accordingly, we encourage community rail partnerships and station groups to engage with local authorities and a broad array of community partners, to align their work with wider objectives.

Given the positive role community rail can play in identifying and meeting local wants and needs, we propose that it is considered as a vital stakeholder alongside devolved statutory bodies and consultees, and engaged with meaningfully and early on in any relevant policy planning and development, not as an afterthought. We recommend, for example, that it would be beneficial for GBR to stipulate that MSA’s and other levels of devolved authority should have a strategy for working with community rail partnerships and groups in their specific areas, and a designated lead for those organisations to directly contact and feed into.