



Building railways fit for the 21st century

A liberal alternative to nationalisation

Transport Spokeperson's Paper
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

1.1.1 Britain's railways were once the envy of the world but are no longer providing the quality of service that they should. This is partly because, since they have been privatised, passenger growth has exceeded expectations: when privatised they were on their knees; passenger use had been declining for years and they cost the government more than they brought in. Since 1995, passenger journeys have more than doubled from 735 million per year to 1.71 billion per year, however satisfaction is now at its lowest level in ten years. Currently competition is not working as intended: fewer and fewer companies are bidding for new franchises as the costs have ballooned; government subsidies have increased since they were privatised; and, rolling stock and stations are often out-dated and inaccessible.

1.1.2 The railways have not evolved with the times – they are more micromanaged by central government now than in the days of nationalised British Rail. In May 2018, a catalogue of errors when introducing new timetables on both the GTR Thameslink and Northern franchises led to weeks of disruption, which significantly dented public trust. The inquiry into the failure concluded that no one took charge in the weeks and months before the timetable change.

1.1.3 The Government's own review into the railways, the Williams Review, also identified that:

"Great Britain's rail network is near or above capacity in some areas, meaning that the network is not always able to offer passengers the experience they expect, and that even minor disruptions can have significant impacts."

1.2 The Solution

1.2.1 If we are to improve the railways, we need to change how they are run. The Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn have offered nothing but the easy soundbite of nationalisation as a seemingly simple fix-all for the many problems faced by commuters and other passengers. Nationalisation will not work: the railways are already, to a large degree, nationalised, and further nationalisation will not make them cheaper, more punctual or less micro-managed. It would be a costly distraction from fixing the real issues and would mean they are forced to compete with other government priorities for funding. This is not a fight that they are likely to win and would lead to more underinvestment. The "business as usual" approach that the Conservative Government applies to our privatised rail system is not delivering a reliable service and we reject their approach as well.

1.2.2 It is vital that there is a plan for long-term rail infrastructure investment to replace the current stop-start approach and ensure that our railways are fit for the future. Instead of fixating on the issue of ownership, our railways need a rapid and significant change to put passengers at their heart – with focus on the quality of service. Liberal Democrats want a new way of running and managing the railways that helps keep costs down both for government and passengers, while encouraging investment and reducing the need for government to micromanage the day-to-day running of the railways.

1.2.3 We will do this by ensuring that the rail system is properly linked in to democratically elected local and regional government to ensure that communities have a greater say in the public transport that serves them. We would also support mutual ownership and allow consortiums of local transport authorities to bid for franchises.

1.3 The Future

1.3.1 Our railways are vital for our future as a country. As we tackle climate change, improve air quality and cut congestion we need the railways to play their part. We need more passengers to use the railways, to move more freight by rail and to ensure the railways are reliable for all.

1.3.2 We also need to make our railways greener, moving away from dirty diesel trains to electric or alternative fuel trains. This means a large electrification programme and developing and integrating new technology, including batteries and regenerative braking. If we do not replace diesel on our railways, they will become more environmentally damaging than cars, once electric vehicles are commonplace.

1.3.3 Two-thirds of rail travel is on operators in London and South East England and 55% of all those who use the railways are commuting to work or education. We must create a “commuter railway” across the country, ensuring that there is a step-change, so everyone has the option to leave the car at home.

1.3.4 At the same time, as the need to limit air travel becomes clear, we must also create a railway that connects our most beautiful and popular tourist spots and our big cities and major economic hubs. We need to improve the efficiency of our long-distance connections in parts of the country, and build the large infrastructure projects such as HS2, Crossrail, Crossrail 2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail (HS3), while ensuring greater public scrutiny to secure value for money for taxpayers, leading to public support.

2. Building a commuter railway

2.1.1 If our growing cities are to be successful and environmentally sustainable, they will have to rely on a growing, modern rail network. Debates on the rail industry usually concentrate on the more eye-catching long-distance services but more people use commuter routes and they travel far more often than long-distance passengers. Statistics show they are the least satisfied among rail users: this is no surprise as existing commuter services are overcrowded and in recent years they have suffered some of the worst disruption. Additionally, season ticket holders get particularly poor value for money. Outside London commuter train services are underdeveloped or non-existent, forcing many to rely on the car, leading to congestion and dangerously high levels of emissions in many towns and cities.

2.1.2 We will initiate a new approach to commuting, with large-scale investment in existing commuter lines. Around new and reopened lines, we would ensure that planning regulations encourage new housing developments near railways to facilitate the building or reopening of stations. We accept the argument that improved east-west connections across England – both in the north through Northern Powerhouse rail (HS3) and the south through the Oxford-to-Cambridge connection – will be at least as important as HS2 in unlocking the country’s economic power. Where traditional heavy rail is not a viable option, we will encourage the development of light rail and trams. Alongside this there must be a new approach to rolling stock, to bring it up to 21st century expectations. We will invest in longer trains, more frequent services and increasing capacity at stations, as well as incentivising companies to run longer trains where this is already possible.

2.1.3 Alongside these improvements we will require train operating companies to work with Government to modernise and simplify fares, including the provision of part-time season tickets and smart ticketing. Integration of timetables, including across different transport modes, will be a priority. These initiatives will be simpler as a result of devolution of rail services; it will clearly be in the interest of local councils who opt to take a role in the provision of rail services to encourage commuters to switch from car to rail.

2.1.4 Stations must become transport hubs, encouraging people to move away from using the car. Buses should meet commuter trains to transport people home. There must also be suitable cycling infrastructure and cycle lanes to the station to encourage more people to use alternatives to cars for their commute.

2.1.5 New lines should be opened, and lines upgraded specifically for opening the railway to commuters. Potential new or upgraded lines that we would consider in government are included in Appendix 1.

3. Creating a Railway Agency

3.1.1 Following the timetable chaos in May 2018, it was concluded that no one took charge during the lead up and fallout of the implementation of the new timetables. Meanwhile, the Department for Transport (DfT) excessively micromanages other parts of the network. We would remove day-to-day government intervention, which is ineffective and inconsistent. Running railways is an expert job and should be done by people experienced in the industry working to the priorities set by the government, in the context of a long-term strategic plan and with a guarantee of long-term funding. The Railway Agency must put passengers at the heart of the rail network –improving outcomes for them and ensuring that all parts of the railway share that goal.

3.1.2 To ensure expert oversight of the railways, the Liberal Democrats would set up a new Railway Agency. It would be an amalgamation of several current bodies, including the railway elements of the Office for Road and Rail (ORR), to ensure that work is not duplicated. The Agency would include representatives from Network Rail, the Rail Delivery Group (the railway companies' trade body), representatives from the Local Government Association and passenger representatives, to ensure that their concerns are understood. This body should oversee the day-to-day operations of the railway, including deployment of rolling stock.

3.1.3 It is vital that this body is transparent and accountable. This means that it must be open to Freedom of Information requests and it should hold regular meetings in public so that the body's work can be reported on effectively. Although, there must be a provision that items of commercial confidentiality or involving sensitive personnel issues may be discussed in private, applying the process observed for confidential issues in local government.

3.1.4 The Railway Agency would be responsible for planning new investments in the railways and would be able to present the case for new lines or upgrades to DfT and would be accountable for achieving targets which were feasible and for which resources are available. This Railway Agency would also be responsible for revising the fares structure.

4. Fairer Fares

4.1 Our approach

4.1.1 The current fares system for the railways is outdated and does not reflect the needs of passengers in the 21st century. It also does not embrace advances in technology and modern working practices. Instead fares need to be made less complicated and we must ensure that the system automatically delivers the cheapest available ticket.

4.1.2 For commuters, long gone is the concept of working Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm at the same location. For many companies, employees are expected to, and indeed want to, work from home at least

one day a week. Many more people choose to work part time and there is an increasing move for people to work condensed hours or annualised hours, in order to improve work-life balance.

4.1.3 Instead, the current rail fares system is based on peak fares for traditional working hours, leading to a huge crush on peak trains and for trains just after the morning rush hour. For those passengers who travel occasionally by rail to visit friends or go on holiday, fares for longer distances are very expensive, and need to be purchased well in advance to get the cheapest tickets. Travelling in groups is often significantly more expensive by train than by car, with no meaningful group discount.

4.1.4 Different franchises have pushed the various train companies to come up with their own modern ticketing which means there is no joined up system of smart ticketing. This again makes things confusing for passengers. London is the exception where technology has been embraced first with Oyster cards and now with contactless cards used on all modes of transport within the London boundary.

4.1.5 In the Rail Delivery Group's recent work on reforming fares, they carried out a major customer survey with nearly 20,000 responses from across the country. The key message from passengers was that they wanted value for money and greater transparency over the price they pay. Fairer pricing, simplicity, flexibility and an assurance that they have rights protected and compensation if something goes wrong.

4.1.6 We are supportive of the plans set out in the Rail Delivery Group's 'Easier fares for all' as a first step to reforming the rail fares system in the interests of passengers.

4.1.7 Our plans for rail fares reflect these views and are based around the needs of modern passengers. Both for commuters and for longer distance leisure passengers.

4.2 Fares must be simplified

4.2.1 Instead of a variety of different fares available at ticket machines depending on the time of day for commuter routes, technology must be embraced where possible. Travelcards and contactless cards must automatically charge passengers the cheapest fares appropriate for their journey, with discounts being based on people commuting regularly doing the same or similar journeys.

4.3 Season Tickets

4.3.1 While season tickets should continue, they must be adapted for part-time commuters too; like the London fare zones there should be a weekly, monthly and annual cap, based on the number of days you will travel. This ensures part time workers or those who work from home a day or more a week, don't lose out on season ticket discounts, while those who travel regularly do not pay more than necessary.

4.3.2 The availability of "Carnets" or books of tickets must be more widespread as a simple way to make tickets more flexible – integrated with mobile phones or smartcards.

4.4 Early bird fares

4.4.1 With the new season ticket technology, this should be used to spread out the morning peak. Reduced fares should be available for passengers travelling on early trains outside the morning peak, helping to spread out the morning rush hour.

4.5 Compensation

4.5.1 One frustration many passengers have is delays and cancellations on the railways. If your train is delayed by more than 15 minutes or cancelled, it is only right that passengers receive compensation. We would ensure Delay Repay is rolled out to all train operators to ensure that the passenger is put at the heart of the railway system.

4.5.2 Where possible this should be automatic, particularly where contactless cards or smartcards are used, ensuring that companies do not hold on to money rightfully owed to passengers and to make companies think twice about cancelling services.

4.5.3 Liberal Democrats would have an ambition to move towards a system where shorter commuter journeys of less an hour also take into account the percentage of the journey that is delayed, given that a 15-minute delay on a 20-minute service will in effect double a journey.

4.5.4 In cases where a train is replaced by a rail replacement service, we would require that there is a discount of one third – before any additional compensation is paid for the resulting delays.

4.5.5 The option to donate compensation to charity should be included, modelled on LNER's current system that offers passengers the option of donating compensation to a mental health charity.

5. Reforming franchising

5.1.1 Franchising is currently broken, the number of companies bidding for franchises is falling and recently the DfT effectively banned one of the biggest players, Stagecoach, from bidding on three separate franchises due to their refusal to take a greater share of pension liabilities. Three separate franchises on the East Coast mainline have collapsed, leaving the government to step in and operate the line itself.

5.1.2 Where franchises are working well, Liberal Democrats support their continuation: tinkering with the system must only be done where it clearly benefits passengers. The needless and expensive re-tendering of franchises that are well-run must be ended. Instead, rolling contracts should be used for franchises that are performing well – not just giving good value for money for the taxpayer but meeting new performance measures such as levels of delays and cancellations, as well as passengers' satisfaction, quality of services and infrastructure upgrades.

5.1.3 The process by which companies bid to run the railways must also be opened-up. The barriers to entry for public sector companies, as well as local authorities, not-for-profit companies and mutuals must be removed to ensure a large variety of companies can run our railways.

5.1.4 In places where franchising isn't working, other options must be considered – the concession model, which is used for London Overground and GTR Thameslink is one such option. These concession contracts must include incentives to collect fares and improve services, like those outlined above for other franchises.

5.1.5 Private companies have a role to play in reinvigorating routes that have declined in recent years using outcomes-based contracts. The outcomes should be set by local authorities or regional rail boards, like Transport for the North. This could give old abandoned lines a new lease of life.

5.1.6 Train Operators and Network Rail need to work seamlessly in "alliances" where, for example, major engineering work is planned to minimise levels of disruption, ensure the availability of alternative

routes and effectively manage alternative services. The management of train and track should be brought closer together. Barriers between functions of staff employed by operators and Network Rail need to be broken down so that no artificial divisions are erected between groups of staff. The fragmented decision making and perverse incentives that sometimes occur must be ended, with both the TOCs and Network Rail putting passengers at the forefront of their thinking.

5.1.7 During the timetable chaos in May 2018, smaller parts of the larger franchises were abandoned – for example, both the Cumbrian Coast Line and the Lakes Line in Cumbria. Trains on the Lakes Line were cancelled for several weeks, depriving passengers of a service into one of the UK's biggest tourist destinations. In areas like this, micro-franchises managed by the local authority must be considered, as well as better connections for long-distance services from major cities to tourist destinations.

5.1.8 Open Access Operators (OAO) have in some places provided better value for money for passengers, however – due to the lack of track access fees – their introduction on the east coast mainline may have also contributed to the collapse of franchises. In the future OAOs must pay full track access fees reflective of the value of the routes they're proposing to be considered, they must not be allowed to cherry pick the best routes and instead must provide new options for passengers, and must be incentivised to run longer trains to ensure that the lines are used more efficiently.

6. Accessibility and Safety

6.1.1 Our railways currently do not deliver the same level of service for passengers with mobility and sensory impairments. Those who need assistance to get on and off the train do not enjoy the luxury of taking a spontaneous journey, but instead must phone ahead at least 24 hours before they travel. Often – despite booking – no one is on hand to help people embark or disembark, leaving many relying on their fellow passengers for assistance. People with visual or hearing impairments can often struggle with poorly designed trains or stations that do not cater for their needs. Similarly, people can find themselves abandoned at empty stations by cancelled services or when there is no assistance available after the last train. We welcome the recent Government announcement of an improved strategy and plans for higher standards, but significantly more is required.

6.1.2 Liberal Democrats would ensure that all major stations with step-free access are staffed from first to last train to ensure that there is always assistance on hand for those passengers who need it. In smaller stations where this could be prohibitively expensive there should be guards on trains to ensure that help is available. This already happens on TfL's London Overground and the wider network should aspire to this standard. All rail staff should be trained to use ramps to ensure that wheelchair users are not left on the train or platform while waiting for staff members who can assist.

6.1.3 New developments near stations should include planning conditions to upgrade the accessibility for stations to ensure that new developments are open to all for example ensuring that ramps and lifts are included. Local authorities should be provided with increased capital funding to improve the accessibility of railway stations.

6.1.4 New trains must be designed with those with visual and hearing impairments in mind, with automated announcements and doors to the trains being clearly visible. Text information through digital displays should be available in every carriage and should ideally be visible from every seat.

7. Freight

7.1.1 The railways are not just vital for passengers, but if we're to reduce congestion and emissions produced by lorries on our roads, we must make improvements to encourage more freight traffic onto our railways.

7.1.2 It is also important that freight and passenger services are both well managed to avoid situations in which faster passenger services are held up by freight services. This means continuing to support High Speed 2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail (HS3), which aim to increase capacity for new passenger services allowing more freight services elsewhere. It also means improving signalling, including digital signalling, and facilities to ensure that both can use the railway effectively, as well as exploring the possibility of new flyovers allowing one train to bypass the other.

7.1.3 When major developments are proposed near suitable railway lines, transport of materials and spoil should use rail where possible – this could be a condition of planning permission.

8. Funding Improvements

8.1.1 We will invest in major infrastructure improvements, funded partly by public sector borrowing. By involving local authorities more closely in rail services and projects we will open-up new sources of funding. We would use the planning system to encourage and enable local authorities to recoup much more of the increase in private property values which follows when major station improvements are implemented. DfT funding will be reprioritised to concentrate on transport schemes which enable decarbonisation of transport and reduction in emissions – particularly focusing on moving commuters onto the railway.

8.1.2 Big infrastructure projects such as Crossrail, Crossrail 2, Northern Powerhouse Rail (HS3) and HS2 are vital but must have greater scrutiny given the ongoing problems with Crossrail. They must be subject to Freedom of Information and regular meetings must be held in public. They must be obliged to report to relevant committees of local authorities, regional assemblies and parliament.

8.1.3 Recent events have emphasised the problems in managing the railway. First, it should be realised that the layout of most of our railways has its origins in the nineteenth century. The system is very intensively used and slight aberrations cause major delays across the system. Serious investment is needed to provide the level of service that passengers and freight operators expect.

8.1.4 Digital signalling, which is one way to increase capacity, has been installed on some London Underground lines and trialled in Mid Wales. We believe that this should be rolled-out across the rail network, while new railway lines are being constructed with electric trains and digital signalling in mind to prevent costly upgrades being needed later. All new upgrades to the railways must be carried out with the benefit of passengers at their heart.

8.1.5 Some of the money to fund the future upgrades of the railways must come from the trunk road programme used to plan and build new roads. These roads will result in more cars on the road, worst congestion and increase air pollution. As an example, the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway should be cancelled and the funds diverted to improving rail.

9. A Greener Railway

9.1.1 With the threat of climate change and the air pollution crisis our railways must become greener. If the railways do not improve there is a danger that within twenty years with the proliferation of electric cars and buses, rail will become a less clean option.

9.1.2 The rail electrification programme must be expanded and a move away from the current obsession with hybrid electro-diesel – these trains are heavier, require more maintenance and are more expensive. Instead we should focus on developing new technologies, such as batteries and hydrogen as alternatives to diesel. New trains must be designed with efficiency in mind, using new technologies such as regenerative braking as well as being as light as possible. The possibility of electric rail freight must also be explored to add increased incentive to move freight from road to rail.

9.1.3 When new train lines are built, they should be electric-train-capable, to avoid costly upgrades later – unless compelling reasons can be provided as to why this shouldn't be the case. Stations must be designed to encourage efficiency with up-hill approaches and down-hill departures from platforms to reduce the need for excessive braking, acceleration and energy use.

9.1.4 Stations should be fitted with renewable generation such as solar panels and wind turbines where possible and empty space alongside railway lines should also be fitted with renewable generation.

10. Devolution

10.1.1 The railways, like much in the United Kingdom, are too centralised – local authorities have little say in how their local railways are run, leading to disconnection between the services that passengers need or want and the services that are provided to them.

10.1.2 Local authorities must have a role in running the railways where they want that power, whether this goes to individual local authorities, groups or an agency such as Transport for the North – built around the successes of TfL in London. These agencies cannot be created without any meaningful powers, as Transport for the North currently operates, they must be given the powers and funding needed to transform rail services in the north of England. Local authorities must also be represented on the Railway Agency, potentially through the Local Government Association.

10.1.3 Combined authorities must also be considered where councils wish to pool resources, again with significant improvements in democratic accountability.

10.1.4 Democratic accountability for these services is important, as is the case in London where the Mayor of London and the London Assembly are accountable for the running of TfL. However, even in London there is room for improvement: it is vital that passengers who fall within TfL's operating area, but with no ability to vote in London elections have some mechanism to hold TfL to account.

10.1.5 Local authorities must be able to take a much bigger role in encouraging commuters to shift to using rail: working with train operators and network rail to provide public transport infrastructure such as secure cycling parking and better cycling routes to stations. This can be achieved through the greater role local authorities will play in setting outcomes for new services or developing concession models within specific areas. This should be combined with changes in planning procedure to encourage private investment in public transport when major developments are considered.

10.1.6 This will also allow accessibility improvements to be made, with local authorities given responsibility to decide where accessibility should be improved to benefit the most passengers in a cost-effective way.

11. Long-distance journeys and tourism

11.1.1 Because most rail journeys are used by people commuting to work, we believe that there should be a greater focus in rail policy on ensuring that the railway works for commuters. However, there is also an important role for rail in allowing people to travel longer distances around the UK – whether for business trips, visiting relatives or tourism. As we seek to tackle climate change, we must ensure that rail is an attractive and viable alternative to air travel.

11.1.2 This means that we want long-distance services to be reliable; we want passengers to be confident that they will be able to get a seat and comfortably store their luggage; we want catering of a good standard at a reasonable cost.

11.1.3 The changes proposed to the fare structure should improve the situation on long-distance services: currently some peak services have relatively few passengers while the services either side are overcrowded. On long journeys, for passengers without a seat reservation, this can mean standing for unacceptably long periods. For disabled passengers – especially wheelchair users – it can mean difficulty in getting from their seating area to the toilet.

11.1.4 To tackle this overcrowding on long-distance services, there must be regulation of the overall level of revenue that can be raised while allowing some scope for managing demand on individual services. This would enable fares to be adjusted to make journeys more comfortable and to improve the customer experience. We would also use technology on booking sites which enables people to see how many seats have been reserved on a service before they book. Combined with our overall approach to fares, this would dramatically improve the customer experience of long-distance services.

11.1.5 In addition, we would expand the BritRail scheme that is currently available to foreign tourists so that it is available to UK citizens for up to one month per year. The pass would include 'Rail-Bus' validity, enabling people to explore beyond the rail network as well as free or discounted access to heritage steam railways.

Appendices

These appendices include examples of upgrades to the railway network to improve experience for passengers.

Appendix 1 - Stations and Commuter routes for upgrade

The following are suggested as examples.

- Southport to Preston via Burscough Junction.
- Skipton to Colne.
- Upgrade the Middlesbrough to Whitby line.
- Continue with the Borders Railway development between Edinburgh and Carlisle.
- Bristol area to Bath and Westbury.
- Newbury to Castle Cary would benefit from electrification as an important freight route.
- Lewes to Uckfield as a second route from Croydon to Brighton.
- Electrification and upgrades to Windermere.
- Oakhampton to Exeter and Plymouth. Plymouth to Tavistock as steps to opening a through route from Exeter to Plymouth.
- Bishops Lydeard to Taunton – possible to restore year-round services to Minehead.
- Keswick to Penrith – reopen to Lake District in order to relieve current road traffic.
- Heathrow Southern – privately financed scheme providing a good service for commuters south west of London to Heathrow and Old Oak Common.
- Western Heathrow Line – both improve public transport to Heathrow, regardless of whether a third runway is built.
- Commuter services into Newcastle from Northumberland.
- Castlefield curve - Manchester Piccadilly to Oxford Road.
- Robin Hood line Nottingham extended to Ollerton.
- Skelmersdale to Liverpool – reopening Skelmersdale station.
- Portishead to Bristol – Connecting the commuter town to Bristol.
- Cowley to Oxford – Connecting Oxford suburb to the centre of Oxford.
- Walsall to Wolverhampton.
- Review Arundel East Curve to create another easier connection from Three Bridges and Brighton.

Appendix 2 - Long distance lines for improvement

East Coast Main Line

- Hertford Loop Line can be modernised and brought up to standard as a diversionary route from London to Stevenage.
- Quadruple the line between Huntingdon and Peterborough.
- Bi-directional signalling between Doncaster and Stoke Summit.

Other areas

- Eliminate the flat crossing at Newark.
- Upgrade Newark to Lincoln as a diversionary route from the East Coast Main Line including re-signalling at Swinderby.
- Electrify Leeds to Hambleton Junction to diversify routes into Leeds.
- Upgrade the Leam Valley line from Darlington to Newcastle.

Appendix 3 - Freight lines for improvement

This can be done in several ways:

- Improve the route between Felixstowe and Nuneaton to divert the growing volume of container traffic away from London and to cater for vastly increasing traffic to the North.
- Electrify the Midland Main line and the East-West Rail line (currently under construction) between Oxford and Cambridge as it is built to capture freight flows from Southampton to the North.
- Make sure a path for a container train each hour is safeguarded on the East West Trans Pennine route via Diggle.
- Electrify freight railway to reduce carbon emissions, which will encourage the private sector to buy electric locomotives.

Membership of the Spokesperson's Group

Note: Membership of this group should not be taken to mean that every member necessarily agrees with every statement or every proposal in this paper.

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