

Letter to the Transport Secretary

Dear Grant

I enjoyed hearing your enthusiastic presentation of railway reform. I agree fully with the aims you have set for the new railway. It must indeed be passenger focussed, concentrating on the basics of punctuality, comfort, cleanliness and great service. I also agree that you need to harness more private capital and ideas, and allow more competitive challenge to ensure innovation and rising service standards.

Your example of extra cost and wasted effort concerning attribution of blame for delays was well made. 400 people in the train operating companies and Network Rail arguing over who had caused a delay and who should therefore compensate is not ideal. It also illustrates the need to remodel the railways under leadership who wish to reduce these kinds of costs. The danger will be that the train companies will still keep people ready to dispute their responsibility for delay, as presumably their new contracts to run the services will contain penalty clauses for poor punctuality, whilst Great British Railways may keep the transferred staff from Network Rail and still engage on the other side arguing that it was not their fault. Simpler contracts with more objective data to quantify risk and blame would obviously help but will not eliminate all disputes with contractors.

As Great British Railways take over responsibility for timetables, there is a need to ensure they wish to challenge past patterns in a pro passenger way. Various Councils and local communities will be lobbying for faster and more direct routes, and for more frequent services. There needs to be a fair way of evaluating these bids, assessing value for money and likely demand levels. There also needs to be a good review method to examine line capacity. Network Rail tended to a cautious approach on line capacity, with a reluctance to expand it to accommodate new services. There are various ways of increasing the capacity, including the faster roll out of digital signalling which allows more use of the lines safely, and more by pass track sections to allow more fast trains to dodge the stopping trains on the same line. Faced with demands for more and different services there may well need to be decisions taken to expand some line capacity to allow competitive challenge. How will such decisions be taken?

It will also be important at this time of massive change in work patterns and travel needs for the railway to adapt to the new train travel demands, not to defend out of date service provision geared to five day a week commuting. Budgets need to allow changes to services and timetables, to permit improved capacity where needed, but to avoid subsidy for little used services which once commanded a decent number of passengers.

As they take over responsibility for service standards there will need to be decisions about how companies are rewarded for service innovation and good quality. How much can they expect to make by way of return from innovation? When and how will good new developments be rolled out across the network

through other companies? Will there be any innovation franchise payment or one off contribution to the development costs for the innovator?

As they take over responsibility for routes will there be easy methods by which communities and rival companies can offer to provide a more frequent or more direct or faster service to a named town or area than the current Railway offers? If so, how will this be assimilated and used? The Hull Trains service is a good example of a challenger company delivering a better service for Hull passengers, but it was all too rare under Network Rail when potential service providers often faced a variety of obstacles which defended incumbents.

One of the areas where Network Rail often blocked progress was in property. The large Rail estate is suitable for joint ventures and development attached to the rail lines. The large central City stations have now received attention with several undergoing extensive mixed use redevelopment, but the large bulk of stations, sidings and yards on the network have not. Worst still Network Rail can be a problem for others seeking developments on their land nearby, as in my constituency where Network Rail wanted a substantial payment from the Council for wanting to place a bridge across the railway line to cut risks at the level crossing and to allow more housebuilding in the area.

None of this is easy. It will require a good constitution and objectives for Great British Railways, the choice of flexible and imaginative leadership and strategic Ministerial supervision to carry it off.

Yours etc

[My Question during the Statement on Britain's Railways, 20 May 2021](#)

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham (Con)): I welcome the use of private sector capital, ideas and management skill in the new railway, and I welcome the forthcoming attack on late trains, hard seats and dirty carriages.

Will Great British Railways ensure that it is genuinely open to bids and offers for new routes, improved timetables, property developments on railway land and improved service quality? Local partnerships and private sector competitors can bring these about as long as they are not thwarted from the centre, as they often were by Network Rail.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Grant Shapps): Yes.

Better railways?

The proposed reorganisation of the railways has at its centre a wholly admirable concentration on the passenger. We are told there will be a new accent on

- 1, Punctuality.
2. Cleanliness.
3. More comfortable seats – also a campaign of mine given the way GWR substituted less comfortable seats for more comfortable ones when it switched from the 125s to the new Hitachi sets.
4. Good wi fi availability

The aim is to allow the reconnection of places where closure of lines and stations by the former nationalised industry left places without service, and to encourage service quality improvements in areas like catering.

The issue is can the new structure deliver these straightforward and desirable requirements? Great British Rail, a public sector body, will have ultimate control of trains and track, timetables and service levels. They can use and harness a wide range of local community groups, local government partnerships and private sector companies to bid to provide and manage services.

I asked for some assurance that Great British Railways will have the powers and the will to innovate and accept challenges to the status quo. We do not want them delivering existing timetables and clinging to them when it would be possible to change them for the better. We do not want them delivering current levels and standards of catering or wifi or other on board services when we want new and better.

The government made several good arguments about the way rail travel shrank badly under nationalisation, with high fares, line and station closures, poor catering and poor punctuality. The Secretary of State reminded us how the privatised railway doubled passenger miles travelled after years of decline. Now we want something better that can adapt to part week commuting, new patterns of leisure travel and a more tempting offer to displace the car.

Mayor making

It was a pleasure to be able to attend a civic service and ceremony in person after a year of lockdown. On Sunday I joined others at St Paul's to wish the Mayor of Wokingham well in his second year in office. Numbers were very limited, so it was a hybrid event with well wishers also following the service on Zoom.

Social care

The cry has gone up from the Opposition parties that the government should reform social care. Labour in office promised to do so but found it too difficult and abandoned the idea. Mrs May in office made proposals which proved to be very unpopular and was unable to find a compromise reform which the Opposition parties liked. It turned out there are as many variants of social care reform as there are political parties. I have never personally pledged to campaign for social care financial reform, and have always been cautious about the subject having studied various plans and seen the degree of disagreement there is about both the objectives and the shape of reform.

Today I am inviting those interested to write in with their thoughts again on this vexed topic. I am particularly interested in what people think the aim of reform should be, as well as in the more normal question of who pays for the care people need?

I have championed changes to social care to improve the service for those who need it. This seems to be the forgotten issue amongst many reform plans. The government does need to set out again clear rules governing the relative responsibilities of care homes and the NHS. Care homes whether private or public sector need to work closely with GPs and the local hospitals to ensure elderly residents have good access to free NHS care as they are entitled to. The NHS should not send patients back to a care home prematurely as some did during the pandemic with bad consequences for the patients and other residents at the Care home. GPs might like to offer – as some do -surgery times at established Care Homes to cover the residents needs as well as making on line consultations and prescription renewal accessible. The local hospital needs good links and understanding with Care Home Managers. There is a temptation by Care Homes to send residents to the local hospital on a precautionary basis where better understanding and contact might allow the resident to stay with GP supervision in the Care Home.

I also wish to see decent standards of accommodation and catering. Where someone is supported by taxpayer money for the living costs in a Care Home the budget should be sufficiently generous to provide a decent standard and good pay for the Care workers. The sums involved may well need to vary around

the country as property cost is an important part of total cost and property costs are very variable. A property based supplement to amounts should reflect objective property cost figures by area.

It is also important for Homes to have good programmes of activities for residents for those who wish to join in with them in public rooms or on outings. There must be quality of life as well as security and protection.

It has been a longstanding policy of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties when in government that whilst all healthcare is free living costs are not free for those who have private income or surplus capital. Surplus capital includes the value of their own former home if they no longer need it as they are on their own or are going to live out their remaining days in a Care home with their partner. I accepted this policy when my own parents had to go into a care home. I helped them choose a good one and helped them sell their flat to pay the bills. Some now argue that there should be a higher permitted amount of capital that people can pass on to the beneficiaries of their wills. I think most accept that a rich person on a large pension or with substantial wealth should continue to pay their living costs in old age. If the state does opt for a higher permitted capital amount then there will be the need for extra taxes on the rest of us to pay for this alteration to allow the inheritance. Should this line be redrawn?