

Transport Planning Society

Executive Summary

This response is from the Transport Planning Society, the independent professional body for transport planners (see below).

While we appreciate that the Williams Review is primarily concerned with the structure and organisation of the rail industry, we also consider that as a starting point, the Review should recognise the wider and vital role of rail in the economy, environment and wellbeing of Great Britain. Options emerging from the study should be checked to ensure that they strengthen this role, and the interaction between the rail sector and other facets of life.

In particular, we urge a greater involvement in rail planning by regional and local planning bodies, as well as closer liaison between rail and other transport modes. In that way, rail can be better used to serve the needs of regional and local communities, provide more seamless journeys, and realise its full potential.

Transport Planning Society

The Transport Planning Society is an independent institutional body in the UK, established to facilitate, develop and promote best practice in transport planning and to provide a focus for dialogue between practitioners and others interested in the field. It is supported by four long established professional institutions – Institution of Civil Engineers, the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT), The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport, the Royal Town Planning Institute - all of whom have an interest in transport planning as well as their own core activities.

The Transport Planning Society administers its own Professional Development Scheme for transport planners, leading to award of the Transport Planning Professional (TPP) qualification which is the only professional qualification uniquely aimed at transport planners (awarded jointly with CIHT). The Society has 1400 individual members and 35 corporate members who provide transport planning services in the UK and elsewhere. Many of our members are active in planning in the rail sector.

Although our individual members may have views on a range of detailed issues, as a Society we would like to respond on the wider role of railways. Our response has been drafted by the Policy Group within the Transport Planning Society Board, all of whom were elected by the membership as a whole. The Policy Group is in constant dialogue with other members of the Society and we seek members' opinions on a wide range of transport issues through our annual Members' Survey. The views expressed here may be taken as representative of those held generally by our membership.

Wider role of Rail

While we appreciate that the Williams Review is primarily concerned with the structure and organisation of the rail industry, we also consider that as a starting point, the Review should embrace the wider relationships between the railway industry and other facets of life. The Evidence Paper "The Role of the railway in Great Britain" touches on this in Chapter 5 but, in our view, does not state the full importance of the issue or provide a basis for incorporating such considerations into the Review.

The railway has a vital role to play in the economy, environment and wellbeing of this country. It would be helpful to identify and articulate this, and then ensure that emerging options for structure and organisation are checked to ensure that they will strengthen this role and the wider benefits that rail offers.

Value for Money for the Taxpayer

A key issue for the Review will be the extent of support to be given to the railway by the taxpayer. Chapter 5 of "The Role of the railway in Great Britain" summarises the key benefits accruing to the country from its rail system and we urge the Review to consider not only the direct cost to the taxpayer but the benefits that the taxpayer accrues from such investment. They are substantial.

Every individual benefits from the presence and operation of the rail system whether it be through reduced congestion on the roads, improved supply chain efficiency or a more healthy environment. Those using the rail system gain even greater benefits through enhanced mobility and accessibility for which it is reasonable to make a direct charge. But the benefits to every taxpayer are significant and should be recognized.

Rail support for other Government policies

The rail sector gives support to many other government policies even if this is not explicitly stated or recognized. For example, rail has a role to play in supporting government environmental and health policies (eg by offering a less polluting mode of powered transport than road, and access to healthcare), economic growth (eg by offering access to jobs, facilitating business travel and the efficiency of the logistics industry), and social equality (eg by enhancing mobility and accessibility to services).

In framing future rail policy and investment strategy, we recommend that the role of rail in supporting other government policies is explicitly recognized and that this role is incorporated into any objectives set for the future of the rail sector.

Rail and Other Transport Modes

A specific issue is the interaction between rail and other transport modes, as well as with land-use planning. For example, investment in the rail network may reduce the need for investment in competing modes. Improved integration between rail and other transport systems in both operational and ticketing terms would help provide more seamless journeys. Where rail investment facilitates development in sustainable locations (more sustainable than would otherwise be the case) that is also a benefit.

For example, we consider that the TOC's might be encouraged and contracted to operate quality bus services to connect with their networks. To give one example, Greater Anglia could operate a quality bus service between Cambridge North station and St Ives via the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway. Subject to good operational connections and through rail ticketing, this would effectively extend the rail network at low cost and offer many towns off the rail network the benefits of being firmly connected to it. Many of the TOC's are already bus operators so the skills are already largely there.

Access to rail

Good accessibility to rail for all in terms of information, ease of transaction with the TOC and access in a physical sense are vital if rail is to maximize its attractiveness to passengers.

Ticketing

The complexity of ticketing arrangements, often varying by TOC, is a challenge to many passengers but especially those new to rail. Making a simple single or return journey with one familiar operator is relatively straightforward (split ticketing options excepted) but journeys involving one or more operators, or with an unfamiliar operator, require research. The NRES website is helpful but often requires skill and network knowledge to unearth the best option. Staff at station ticket offices do their best, although the availability of such staff and ticket offices is declining. From a ticketing perspective, we believe that rail is losing its coherence as a national network.

While we appreciate that the TOC's are incentivised to optimize revenue, we endorse the RDG's view that there should be a separate body managing inter-operator fares and ticketing, preferably with a simplified and uniform fare structure throughout the country. A common nationwide definition of peak and off-peak travel times for such tickets is but one example.

Stations

Stations embrace the physical interchange between rail and other modes and have a vital role to play. Good accessibility on the non-rail side by all modes including walking and cycling is essential. Once at the station, the passenger should find a welcoming environment and the facilities needed to make the journey a comfortable one. Some stations readily achieve this (St Pancras International being a prime example) but others fail miserably.

Disabled people face particular challenges with not enough detailed information available about the access available at individual stations, whether such access facilities (eg lifts) are operational on a given day, and variability and inconsistency about the access on offer, between TOC's and between stations.

We are concerned that station management is left to the TOC's. While attracting passengers and attracting revenue is in their interests, we feel that the station as a place is more important than that, and that local authorities should be jointly and proactively involved in managing and improving stations within their area. That should ensure a station that meets the needs of the local community and one that is better functionally integrated into the surrounding area, and not separate from it.

Environmental benefits of Rail

We have noted a number of potential areas for improvement. To the extent that such improvements attract passengers from less environmentally friendly modes, there will be reductions in emissions and improvements in air quality.

Regional and Local liaison

We regard enhanced liaison and coordination between the rail industry and other major transport providers, Sub-national Transport Bodies and local government (traffic, highways, planning) as vital in determining rail investment strategy especially at a local or regional level. This would enable local transport strategy to fully embrace the opportunities offered by rail and in return, enable local bodies to help shape local rail strategy to the benefit of all parties. In our view, these are all important issues that the Review should take into account.

We would like to see more powers and resources for specifying and funding local rail services devolved to regional and local bodies. This would facilitate improved integration between rail, other local transport modes and other local objectives.

Wider Outcomes

We regard the "Wider society" objective (in the "Call for Evidence") as hugely important but feel, from other material, that it is at risk of being submerged by the attention being paid to "Passengers" and "Taxpayers" objectives. The difficulty is that the benefits mentioned (social, environmental and economic) do not have an immediate fiscal value to the rail industry alone, but widespread fiscal benefits will accrue elsewhere (eg savings in the provision of competing transport, NHS costs if health is improved, government tax income if there is economic growth). We appreciate the challenge of quantifying these outcomes but we urge that they be given strong recognition.

The assessment criteria (in the "Call for Evidence") are summarised under Passengers, Affordability and The fundamentals. The wider impacts of the railway have disappeared and this reinforces our concern that while they are recognized as one of the three high level objectives for a successful railway, they will not be counted in assessing the proposals emanating from the Review. We believe this is an omission that should be rectified.

Societal Benefits of Rail Investment

While internal structural changes and reorganization of the rail system are needed to rectify many obvious failings, it would be a mistake to lose sight of the wider role of rail, and the further potential of rail to improve other facets of life. The case for investment in rail is not just based on a need to operate trains. It is based on huge benefits to society in so many other ways. We urge the Review to fully acknowledge this and ensure that the future structure of the rail industry is not only internally efficient and effective, but also outward looking and able to embrace and enhance the wider role of rail.