

# The Unite the union response to the Department for Transportation's Consultation "A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"



## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. This submission is made by Unite, the UK's largest trade union with over one million members across all sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, financial services, transport, food, agriculture, construction, energy, utilities, information technology, service industries, health, local government and the not-for-profit sector. Unite also organises in the community, enabling those who are not in employment to be part of our union.
- 1.2. Of particular interest to this consultation Unite represents members in the railways sector many of whom are employed directly in the delivery of passenger and freight operations, with many more in the supply chain, building the train fleets of the future, maintaining the trains, track, and other related infrastructure. Unite also represents over 1.3 million members who are potential customers in every nation of Great Britain, commuting for work and pleasure.
- 1.3. Unite welcomes the decision to finally take the railways back into public hands following so many years of mismanagement under private ownership, where the focus was not on the service but the amount deliverable as dividends. The headline promise of the previous government was that Great British Railways (GBR) would be 'a guiding mind...responsible for running the railways safely and efficiently to **"maximise social and economic value"**'. This 'overarching' '**public interest duty**' was to be set out in the GBR Licence, alongside other core duties towards accessibility and environment, all monitored and enforced by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR). It was a headline commitment from the 2021 White Paper on GBR until the Feb 2024 Plan for Rail<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.4. The problem with having the focus on social and economic value is that ignores safety and given the previous governments fixation on business knows best, this has led to several severe injuries and deaths of rail workers. Unite believes that the ORR should be a totally independent safety and regulatory inspectorate not an auditor to ensure that every penny that is spent is accounted for achieving the best value for money.
- 1.5. This consultation appears to follow on where the previous government's plans left off with the main change that the operation of the network is to be publicly owned but without wording to the effect that the headline public interest duties, let alone their widespread support from the public. The DfT appears to be following a direction which is in direct contrast to what went before, with the new consultation stating that "*GBR will...be subject to a substantively streamlined and simplified licence*" under "*a guiding principle...focused on the minimum viable set of conditions that are required for safety, performance (i.e. reliability and cancellations), efficiency, and passenger experience.... substantially reducing the regulatory burden.*" Unite believes that there were often very good reasons why the licence was as complex as it was, with the majority of the burden being on health and safety.

## 2. Consultation Questions

Question 1 – Do you agree that GBR should be empowered to deliver through reformed incentives and a simplified and streamlined regulatory framework?

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<sup>1</sup> [Feb 2024 Plan for Rail.](#)

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

- 2.1. Unite feels that the focus for the operation of the passenger services should be the safe delivery of passengers from A to B, on well-maintained infrastructure and modern rolling stock. Unite therefore believes that a simplified and streamlined regulatory process could be welcomed if and only if the introduction of these incentives and new regulations improves the safe operation of both passenger and freight operations, in a timely manner.
- 2.2. As stated in the introduction, Unite believes that there were often very good reasons why the licence was as complex as it was, with the majority of the burden being on health and safety.
- 2.3. Sadly, time can only tell if the suggested changes to the industry will deliver the desired outcomes for certain. The implications of the reforms as laid out appear to be such that the intent is to drive down cost without reductions in safety, with potential for improvements in punctuality. If the implications result from the changes as suggested, then Unite would welcome the changes. However, Unite can only reserve judgement until after more details of the reforms are published, even though it would welcome involvement at an earlier stage than the matter being left to effected party consultations after the decisions had been made.

Question 2 – Do you agree that the Secretary of State should be responsible for issuing and modifying a simplified GBR licence enforced by the ORR, and that the ORR's duties with respect to GBR should be streamlined to reflect the new sector model?

- 2.4. Unite agrees that the Secretary of State should be responsible for issuing and modifying GBR licences, enforced by the ORR. The nature of the simplifications needs to be taken with great care so as to not result in unintended consequences.
- 2.5. That said, Unite believes that the ORR should be an independent health and safety inspectorate which is not responsible for financial reforms or budgets. As the party operating the trains GBR should be responsible to the Department for Transport on budgetary controls. Having the safety inspectors hamstrung by budgets leads to an unsafe railway as it leads to a make do and mend attitude, parking concerns over what can be afforded. Unite is not suggesting that there should be a bottomless pit of financial means but enough to ensure the job is completed correctly and up to a safe standard.

Question 3 – Do you agree that the Secretary of State should be responsible for setting a long-term strategy for GBR to align with government priorities?

- 2.6. Unite agrees that the rail industry has lacked a single vision and single purpose guide by a single guiding controller. Therefore Unite welcomes the move to make the Secretary of State responsible for setting the long-term strategy for GBR so that it align with government priorities, provided that those policies instil safety policies for passengers and staff at the heart of the operation, followed by the safe prompt delivery of passengers and freight in a sustainable manner as opposed to decisions by some future Secretary of State for some future government who could place privatisation and profits back as the main guiding principle.

Question 4 – What are your views on the proposed functions of the Passenger Watchdog?

- 2.7. Unite agrees that there is a dire need for a passenger watchdog, to oversee the operation of the railway to ensure the safe delivery of the service. For too long the ORR has been

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

attempting to enforce the safety of staff with varying degrees of success. One of the greatest problems has been the aging Victorian era infrastructure that in many respects has not caught up with the modern age.

Question 5 – Which of the approaches would best enable the establishment of the new passenger watchdog?

- 2.8. Unite feels that the best starting point would be to leave the passenger watchdog in the hands of the capable hands of the ORR, rather than reinventing the wheel in its entirety. Clearly there is a need to gather more passenger experiences and input, but it should be remembered that the majority of feedback will be on the punctuality and clearness of the stations and train services.
- 2.9. Due to the removal of guards by the last government, there is no longer someone to ensure positive passenger engagement, or passenger safety on board, or god forbid in the event of an accident. CCTV if it is working can only capture images of incidents, not engage or act as a physical deterrent. Guards were the best passenger feedback gathering instruments, as it were they who became the physical embodiment of the railway.
- 2.10. Accessibility is hit hard by these new proposals, where the government has stopped its support for key pledges to allow the Disabled Persons Transport Committee (DPTAC) to become a statutory advisor to GBR. Unite believes that there should be a condition in the licence which forces GBR to consult with disabled passengers directly and through representative organisations like DPTAC. Regulating accessibility proposals are extremely vague, with a lack of clarity on who will become the enforcing body to stop this becoming a service that is only suitable for able bodied passengers. Unite is not sure if the regulator on this area will be Transport Focus (the passenger watchdog) or the ORR.

Question 6 – Which of the options to establish the Alternative Dispute Resolution function as part of the passenger watchdog would deliver the best outcome for passengers in your view?

- 2.11. Unite feels that an Alternative Dispute Resolution function should be delivered by a third-party entity whose main role should be to resolve disagreements before there is the need for judicial actions. This body needs to be independent to deliver a fair assessment of the facts and provide a definitive resolution, ideally to the satisfaction of both party's. Compromise is by definition a resolution that nobody wants but will settle for as the best possible outcome, but clearly enforcement of the rules is the first anchor point in the delivery of a judgement. It should therefore be the case that any compromise needs only to exist where there is some grey area which neither party can agree on its meaning.
- 2.12. Unite feels that this should not be used in every case, however, as there are times when the negligence or deliberate act, requires a criminal prosecution and conviction. It is therefore hard to understand why the British Transport Police budget has been cut, at a time when passengers appear to become increasingly violent. We always hope that there will not be verbal or physical assaults on staff, and we do not need another death of someone else<sup>2</sup> to highlight that there needs to be a deterrent at stations to protect not only staff but also the travelling public. CCTV is not a deterrent.

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<sup>2</sup> The assault of customer experience assistance for MTREL, Jorge Ortega, 61, on the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> December 2024 at Ilford station by a 28-year-old, sadly resulted in Mr Ortega succumbing to his injuries in hospital on the 6<sup>th</sup> December and the perpetrator charged with murder.

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

Question 7 – Does the proposed new access framework enable GBR to be an effective directing mind that can ensure best use of network capacity?

- 2.13. Unite feels any track access framework will have to be a compromise, as it cannot deliver the desires of both public and private or the ideals of passenger and freight services. Gone are the days when a mixture of passenger and freight services were delivered by a single train, so now the controller has to decide whether to allow a long-distance freight service to have priority over any passenger service.
- 2.14. The best use of the railway requires more infrastructure to cope with the demands placed upon it. In some areas this may require new tracks or trains, in others a more logical approach to the delivery of passengers and freight to where they need to go at a time when they need to be there. While passengers will complain if a service is late arriving, they will welcome early delivery. That delivery expectation has been determined by the timetable, which has for years become more a work of fiction than fact. While freight has no published timetable, as it needs to fit in paths around passenger services, the delivery of the goods needs to be when it needs to be there in order to connect with the next leg of its journey. Failure to reach the docks in time to allow the freight to be transferred can result in weeks and even months of delay.
- 2.15. If there is to be an open access privatised passenger service to operate alongside that of the publicly owned services, then these services should not cause delays to other passenger or freight operation.
- 2.16. Unite feels that in order to maintain the safety of the service the order of priority for access to the network should be: -
- Emergency track maintenance,
  - Long distance freight operations,
  - Scheduled long distance passenger services,
  - Scheduled local passenger services,
  - Local freight deliveries
  - Unscheduled passenger operations
  - Scheduled track maintenance.
- 2.17. By doing so there should be minimal complaints and minimal disruption provided that the maximum amount of safe productivity.
- 2.18. Unite feels that if a track is being worked on, it should not be used by passenger or freight operations for the duration of the maintenance. One death or serious injury to a member of track maintenance should be one too many<sup>3</sup>, yet currently the safety of the staff is reduced to the observations of a spotter to warn crew to step out of the way if they visually observe a train approaching. This practice harks back to the Victorian era when far fewer trains were required and hence this should be replaced by the effective removal of the track path while the work is being carried out. Unite does not want to see workmen

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Lewis and Gareth Delbridge were killed while carrying out track maintenance at Margam in Wales on 3 July 2019. They were hit by a passenger train travelling from Swansea to London Paddington. Aden Ashurst was fatally injured while working on the line for in Northamptonshire on 8 April 2020. Tyler Byrne, was fatally struck by a train in Surbiton in February 2021, following failings in planning, monitoring, and supervision of the work, fatigue and the use of zero hours contracts. In another case yet another worker was hit while she was carrying out inspections on April 15, 2022, near Chalfont and Latimer station at around 9.30am on a live Metropolitan line, fortunately she survived. Unite is certain that passengers would not wish to see there safe journey home on time causing yet more deaths.

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

operating in the live lanes of a motorway and only step aside if they spot a vehicle coming. The same applies to the operation of the tracks.

- 2.19. Unite recognises that when it comes to passenger access to trains, there needs to be staffing and/or technology that allows a less able-bodied person to 'Turn Up And Go' and this should be enshrined in law. There needs to be measures in place to ensure that the vulnerable are able to travel in safety and can travel to their destination safely<sup>4</sup>.

Question 8 – What - if any- key access rules and requirements for GBR should be updated and included in legislation?

- 2.20. Legislation should provide for the safe access of track staff to repair tracks and clear /maintain the track path followed by protections for the safe delivery of long-distance freight over passenger services.
- 2.21. Unite recognises that slow moving freight provides a virtual rolling road block to faster passenger services, but speed is determined by safety. IF there was adequate track loading gauge clearance around the tracks to enable freight trains to reach higher speeds then the delivery of long-distance freight should not be a problem. Sadly, very few lines are up to W12 loading gauge clearance. Unite would like to see legislation that requires the major track paths to be delivered to W12 standard on tracks that are capable of safely allowing freight trains to move at speeds in excess of 80 mph instead of drivers of freight trains being restricted to 5 mph over tracks that are deemed unsafe for passenger operations.
- 2.22. Unite believes that on passenger access to a rail service, their right to turn up and go is preserved and enshrined to ensure that passengers can access the correct tickets, are able to board and disembark at the stations of their choosing rather than allowing so many stations to be unmanned, with no way to board or disembark due to things like platform heights, gaps between platform edge and train or the route into or out of the station being hampered by a defective lift. If the lift is not working, then there needs to be the staff on hand to help passengers access their trains or replacement transport provided from nearby, to their intended destination until the repair is complete. It is unacceptable that the less physically active are left on trains or unable to get to platforms. If there are issues with a lift, then warnings need to be provided on trains at the very least with free transport back to that stop from the next station.

Question 9 – Does the proposed role of the ORR acting as an appeals body to ensure fairness and non-discrimination provide sufficient reassurances to operators such as freight and open access wishing to access the GBR-managed network?

- 2.23. Unite believes it does provided that the private sector operations work within the limitations of the network. Unite believes that there has to be discrimination between scheduled services and ad hoc services put on just to satisfy the whims of the private sector.
- 2.24. Unite would hope that the ORR takes all matters into consideration when making decisions and does not act, as most regulators have become, more of a mouth piece for the private sector.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/get-me-home-safely-campaign>

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

Question 10 – Do you foresee any unintended consequences of the ORR retaining its existing powers with regard to other infrastructure managers which might affect the smooth passage of trains between the GBR and non-GBR network?

- 2.25. Unite welcomes the continued involvement of the ORR to ensure a smooth transition as routes are slowly absorbed into public ownership. Unite envisages only a slow deterioration of private services on routes that are due to be privatised, due to the lack of future proofing investment into personnel and infrastructure. Unite would hope that the ORR could intervene to ensure that staffing levels and training levels are maintained.

Question 11 – The government intends to include in primary legislation a power to enable amendments to the Railways (Access, Management and Licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations 2016 to ensure consistency between GBR's processes and those used by other infrastructure managers. Do you agree with this approach?

- 2.26. Unite agrees

Question 12 – Do you agree with the proposed legislative approach regarding a 5-year funding settlement for Great British Railways?

- 2.27. Unite agrees to a point in that some matters can be resolved within a 5-year funding window, others cannot. It would for example take decades to bring the network up to a W12 loading gauge, fully electrified to a standard voltage system which could handle double-decker passenger commuter and EU style shipping container services for example. This would of course include the provision to standardise the height of platforms and make stations fully accessible to the less able bodied 24/7, so they can simply turn up and go without booking helpers who may not be there when needed. Unlike continental Europe there are no routes in the UK that operating double deck passenger trains even though those routes which have been gauge cleared to that level can take these carriages.

Question 13 – Do you agree with the legislative approach set out above to retain the Secretary of State's role in securing the overall affordability of fares and continuing to safeguard certain railcard discount schemes?

- 2.28. Unite agrees but would highlight that without the income it had coming in from the steel and coal industry, the railway as a standalone entity will always lose money. Making fares affordable will therefore require running subsidies.
- 2.29. Unite has long campaigned for the ability of staff members to have the ability to commute to their place of work for free on a train. Such a move discourages them from utilising a fleet of private vehicles, filling up spaces in car parking structures. The addition of a handful of staff passengers to the network increases visibility, safety and reduces emissions while acting as a perk which can ensure that staff are retained in posts rather than migrating to other parts of the economy. Unite would argue that staff deserve a 100% discount from the cost of tickets if commuting for work in uniform.
- 2.30. Unite would also argue that there are so many discount schemes, which all provide up to a third off the price of a ticket, that few passengers will be paying the full published ticket price for a service. If you are a disabled, student there are two routes available to obtain the discount for example. Unite can understand if the provision of the discount was instilling positive discrimination but to top that off with a confusing ticket pricing system can result in split ticketing that discount services further.

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

- 2.31. While Unite welcomes assistance given to those who cannot afford to pay full fair, we question the level of the fares in the first place.

Question 14 – What, if any, safeguards are needed to ensure a thriving and competitive rail retail market while also ensuring GBR can deliver a high-quality offer to its customers?

- 2.32. Unite would argue that the only way to ensure a thriving and competitive rail retail market would be to place limits on dividends, spending and other activities to prevent the retail market being used as a cash cow.

Question 15 – The government intends that GBR's statutory duty in relation to devolved leaders should strike a balance between enhancing their role whilst also ensuring that GBR has the appropriate flexibility to direct the national network. Do you agree with this approach?

- 2.33. Unite agrees that there should be a level of regional autonomy, but emergency maintenance and long-distance services must be prioritised. Beyond these core links to the national network, the regions should be free to experiment within the limits of safety and regional budget restraints.

Question 16 – Do you agree with the proposed approach in Scotland on enabling further collaboration between track and train while preserving the devolved settlements?

Question 17 – Do you agree with the proposed approach in Wales on enabling further collaboration between track and train while preserving the devolved settlements?

- 2.34. Unite agrees. There should and needs to be collaboration between track and train to reduce conflicts and the blame game over payments of compensation for delays and disruptions. The savings made in avoiding such disputes are considerable, but this should not impact devolved settlements from central or regional budgets. The same applies to both Scotland, Wales and to any other devolved governmental region.

Question 18 – Do you agree with the government's approach of making targeted amendments to existing legislation to clarify the role of devolved leaders in relation to GBR?

- 2.35. Unite agrees

Question 19 – The government intends to create a new delegated power that would enable the Secretary of State to update, amend or revoke provisions in TDLCR and related assimilated law in Great Britain, subject to public consultation. Do you agree with this approach?

- 2.36. Unite agrees

Please provide evidence on anticipated transitional or ongoing costs or benefits for you or your business resulting from these proposals. For example, please provide evidence on the scale of transitional costs associated with familiarising with the new proposals and structure, changes to administrative burden resulting from these proposals, or any other direct impacts associated with the proposed changes.

- 2.37. As highlighted in the Introduction Unite the union is the largest multisectoral trade union in the UK, it is not a business in the conventional sense. Its members are both the passengers of the network, its customers and importantly, staff who work on the network,

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

at suppliers and on the trains, both passenger and freight. Therefore, any anticipated transitional or ongoing costs or benefits will not be faced by the union itself in any commercial aspect but faced moreover by the impacts on its members at work and while commuting to work and leisure activities, hopefully in a safe and secure manner.

- 2.38. Unite envisages that as happened in the past during the franchise system, that nearer the end of contracts for services / franchises, the private operator will not be scheduling the filling of the shoes of staff departing their employment with new apprentices and if they can be simply leaving posts vacant. Similarly, the operators will not be interested in making running repairs to equipment or scheduling replacements given they will no longer be enjoying the fruits of their investment.
- 2.39. Therefore, Unite has learnt to expect the age of this equipment to climb to a stage where it is uneconomic to repair rather than determining a long-term replacement progression that will help the supply chain plan for the future. Unite therefore calls on the government to put into place a rolling equipment replacement programme to remove the last of the pre privatisation equipment and to slowly bring the network into the 21st century living up to the title of this consultation, "A railway fit for Britain's future".

### **3. Unite observations**

- 3.1. Unite welcomes the vast majority of what it has seen to date in the development of Great British Rail. The idea is one that Unite has been calling for since before it was privatised by the John Major Government. There has to be that one guiding mind to establish and oversee activities on the tracks, from maintenance, to redevelopment and of course use by the services carrying paying passengers or freight.
- 3.2. The rail industry is not just the cargo in or on the wagons as it incorporates the supply chain or parts and equipment which requires certainty that there will be a market for their goods and work to help them retain the key skilled staff needed to keep the industry in operation. Key amongst this is a rolling train of train renewals rather than patching up old British Rail rollingstock with a new paint job and some fresh seats and calling it a new train. Modern trains should have a protective cell to give the driver a chance of survival in an accident. Too many have a crumple zone that incorporates the drivers cab with some encroaching into the passenger cabin.
- 3.3. On some passenger services the average age of the rolling stock is over 30 years old<sup>5</sup> and yet we have companies in train manufacturing laying off highly skilled workers and supply chain UK companies going bust. At the same time due to the aging designs, they are not very accessible to passengers with mobility issues, and those with buggies and luggage. Unite welcomes a commitment to make trains more accessible but ideally this should be achieved through the delivery of new trains.
- 3.4. If a driver of a freight train needs to use the toilet they need to go before they set off, when they get to their destination several hours later or use a bucket or bottle while at the controls of the train. Access to a loo is also a major area of concern which is preventing women from pursuing a career in track engineering as the only place to go is behind a bush, often after scaling down a steep embankment. There are no provisions for proper sanitary product disposal and undertaking such a task in the open is far from ideal. There are rail maintenance trains that have been developed to provide the opportunity for

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<sup>5</sup> On an ORR table depicting the average of rollingstock it stated that as of 31 March 2024 the average rollingstock age was 30.9 years at the Chiltern Railways swiftly followed by Severn operators whose trains averaged between 22.2 and 24.4 years old. See [link](#).



**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

workers to perform tasks on the tracks with access to a loo and in complete safety, but the version that was once brought to the UK was too heavy and too wide for the UK Victorian network.

- 3.5. Enhancing the network to utilise a taller and more robust track cross section similar to that used in Europe, reduces the need for as much maintenance, removes the sudden swaying of carriages caused by warped tracks, and provides a stronger platform on which heavier trains can be utilised. This move to stronger rails would reduce the volume of freight traffic as more could be fitted onto one train.
- 3.6. The biggest barrier currently is the gap between train and trackside furniture, the dimension of the arches of bridges and the size of the tunnels which in some areas prevent the carriage of rail freight completely. Take the journey prescribed traffic allocation which could be using the Channel Tunnel. When the tunnel was built 35 track paths a day in each direction were handed and ring fenced for freight.
- 3.7. From the Channel Tunnel the EU has developed connecting electrified track pathways that stretch all the way to China. The EU is also developing this great steel road to Indian markets too in an effort to reduce transport emissions from shipping and aviation. This side of the Channel Tunnel however and only a maximum of 5 track paths a day can be used to move freight up the HS1 high speed line as far as Barking. Apart from this path specially adapted carriages have to be used to navigate the freight over the myriad of obstacles from the nearest main line rail freight depot in Wembley to the tunnel the UK has to rely on just the line from Barking or shipping by sea or air.
- 3.8. Network Rail had a £10 million plan to increase the space around the traditional lines to W9a loading gauge<sup>6</sup> but what is needed is a minimum of W10 gauge but W12 would be better. The difference between the two is only about 17.5 cm plus a further 25 cm to ensure the container does not sway and hit something!<sup>7</sup> The Network Rail plans stopped short of making the space wide enough to allow European freight trains to venture as far as Wembley. Instead, only wagons that lowered each container so that it sat in a valley between the front and rear wheels can move the containers to and from France. Once in France every container has to be moved onto an EU standard wagon if it is to leave France and enter one of its neighbours.
- 3.9. The Committee on Climate Change is calling for more freight to use the tracks but given the current price uncertainty over the cost of electricity, many rail freight operators reverted back to using diesels under the overhead cables. The CCC noted, however, that there is limited capacity on the existing tracks despite the obligation

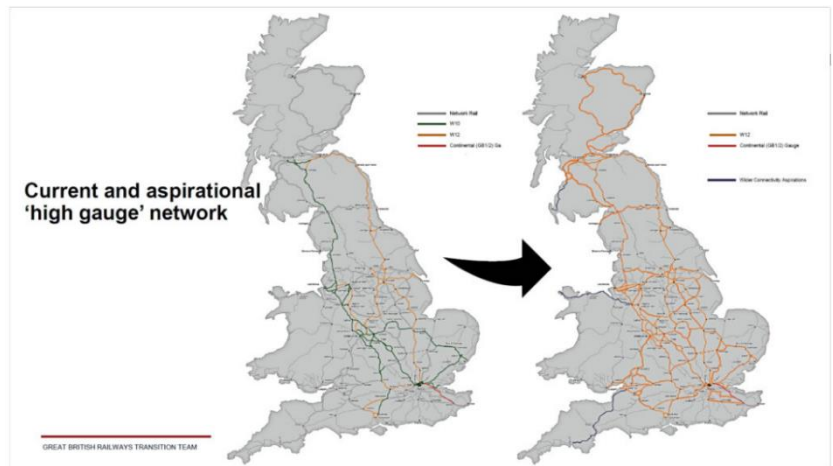


Figure 1 taken from the Great British Railways Transition Team as replicated on the [Rail Engineer website](#)

<sup>6</sup> Networks financial case for gauge enhancement can be found [here](#)

<sup>7</sup> W10 can take most containers but because the track may be already buckled it would cause the trains to sway, often violently. Therefore, for a standard wagon that has a bed 1 metre above the tracks, freight trains can only negotiate these sections at reduced speeds or by using wagons with a stiffer suspension.

by GBR to increase the volume of freight.

- 3.10. The Major ports of Southampton, The London Gateway, Felixstowe, Liverpool etc are on a network of specially gap enhanced W12 routes which can allow the shipment of containers the length of England into Southern Scotland but the W12 gauge cleared tracks, do not allow freight trains to enter Wales, travel to the West Country, or exit the country via the tunnel. As GBR has the obligation to increase rail freight, a quick and substantive win would be to finally bridge the gap and allow the UK network to carry EU scale freight trains, hauling shipping containers to enter and more importantly leave filled with UK exports.
- 3.11. At a seminar on Railway Gauging organised by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers in March 2023, Dr David Johnson, founder and Technical Director of D/Gauge, observed that *"You are unlikely to be able to run 9'6" x 2600mm containers on modern, track-friendly suspensions with 1000 mm standard deck height within W12 gauge. In short, W12 is out of date and planning to use that going forward will actually fuel the demand for absolute gauging on the next generation of wagons/load combinations."*<sup>8</sup>. Unite is therefore heartened to see that the Great British Rail Transition team is looking into this but cautions that action needs to be taken if the network is to be fit for a green transformation into one capable of carrying the freight of the future and echo's the question is W12 going far enough.
- 3.12. Trains no longer have lines into factories and city centre hubs, so they require there to be both freight terminals at ports and inland rail freight terminals where goods can be transferred from rail to road and back again. Unite therefore believes that any prospective development of freight terminals or the land on which it sits should be prevented. If Trafford Park is redeveloped there will be the need to establish a new logistics terminal that is fit for purpose, ideally sited not far from the motorway network, offering more for the rail freight company and any drivers using the hub. Unite believes that intermodal freight transport has many sustainable advantages not least of which include the ability to move more freight with the dwindling number of UK lorry drivers.
- 3.13. The UK rail network is a patchwork of differently designed networks that were never meant to work together and using Heath Robinson style engineering this plethora of bits and pieces of track have been patched here and filled in there to suit the specific needs of a route causing the minimum amount of local disruption. The result a very expensive network to run and operate. Rather than adding more duct tape and wishes that it will do, it may be time to properly integrate the network so that a single standard can be applied.
- 3.14. When HS2 was built they had two problems with two low bridges. One in Birmingham and the other on the run into London Euston. The obvious options are to close the road and install a couple of higher bridges, close the neighbouring train lines and dig under the bridges, moving any wires or pipes in the process to allow the trains to fit underneath the existing bridge or have a specialist bespoke train built to fit underneath the bridges. To save on long term costs the solution would have been to build the new bridges or lower the tracks but this would have caused disruption, so HS2 spent 40% more than they needed to, on having an existing off the shelf design adapted to create a high-speed train fleet built that would fit. On Thameslink instead of replacing the track so it could take more weight, all new trains have to be built with an eye to being lighter. These are very typical British solutions to issues impacting the rail network.

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<sup>8</sup> See [link](#)

**The Unite the union response to the Department of Transportation's Consultation  
"A Railway Fit for Britain's Future"**

- 3.15. "As of 31 March 2024, there were 15,107 railway vehicles registered in operation for all passenger train operators. Of these, 71% were electric, 19% were diesel, 7% were bi-mode and 3% were locomotive hauled" according to the ORR<sup>9</sup>. Ideally Unite would like to see diesel trains go the way of the dinosaur. For the past seven years Unite has been collecting the details of workers<sup>10</sup> who have had to work in an environment which is contaminated with carcinogenic Diesel Engine Exhaust Emissions (DEEE). The reason for this was a cluster of workers at a train maintenance shed in Leeds where the fumes were so thick that you could not see down the length of the engine.
- 3.16. Unite hopes that long before that last diesel locomotive, or diesel-multiple-unit, leaves the tracks for good, that the workforce, will be given the opportunity, to obtain the skills needed to work on their replacements. This is in direct contrast to what happened at Gemini Rail Services in Springburn, where workers were simply told of its closure in December 2018<sup>11</sup>. If it is not possible to retain staff, then Unite would hope that their vital skills will not be lost to the general employment market and instead some just transition plan is worked out months and indeed years in advance so that nobody is left behind.

#### **4. Conclusion**

- 4.1. Unite is delighted to welcome a move toward greater national ownership of operations and a closer relationship between the management of the tracks and services carrying freight and passengers.
- 4.2. The network has been left to the markets to run, building up ten's of billions in ultimately government debt. Unite hopes that this experimental venture into a capitalist, "*market knows best*" approach, is never followed by any incoming government. Clearly the market only knows how best to extract money and run a company into the ground in debt while leaving the repayment of that debt to the tax paying public, while making shareholders richer.
- 4.3. There are many challenges ahead, for GBR, the majority of which caused by underinvestment and poor planning. Unite hopes given the mindset is to operate the network, not for profit but to serve the needs of the public and business, that the network can start to see the Victorian network, being brought into the modern era.

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<sup>9</sup> [Click here for the reference link](#)

<sup>10</sup> Not just from the rail industry

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-46545455>