

# **PUPILS 2 PARLIAMENT**

## **Response to the Department for Transport consultation on**

### **A RAILWAY FIT FOR BRITAIN'S FUTURE**

**Children's views gathered and submitted on their behalf by  
Dr Roger Morgan OBE, for Pupils 2 Parliament**

#### **The idea of a single Great British Rail**

The children, without adult leading in any direction, discussed the concept of Great British Rail as a single unified 'directing mind'.

The children were overall in favour of different and competing companies running trains, rather than all being run by a national railway. Their key reasons for this preference were to give choice to passengers ("it's diverse having a choice of different railways") and having the benefit of different and alternative approaches to rail travel ("different companies have expertise on different areas. We could lose that if we just have GBR").

There was a proposal for a mixed model, combining a smaller number of independent train companies to keep these advantages, alongside and competing with a national carrier. "We should have countrywide railways as well as competing ones to give choice. We should also try to reduce the number of railway companies." The reasoning behind reduction in the number of companies was that "having lots of companies can lead to arguments and disputes".

Those in favour of the concept of a single 'directing mind' Great British Rail argued that there is "more of a chance of miscommunication between lots of companies, so we should stick to just one company running things to make it safer".

In a vote on the question 'does a single national organisation sound a better way to run the railways than separate companies running on national tracks?', the majority of the children (15 out of 23) voted 'no'. Only 5 children voted in support of bringing the railways together under a single body.

### **Role of the Secretary of State in setting plans for Great British Rail**

The majority of the children we consulted (16 out of 23) voted no to the question 'should the Secretary of State set plans for GBR to do what the Government wants?'

The children's reasoning was that plans for the future of the railways would be better coming from a number of different rail operating companies bringing different views and experiences, than being ultimately made by one person (the Secretary of State) in charge of railway planning.

### **Delivery with a regulator**

We independently consulted 23 primary school pupils aged 9 to 11 for this consultation response.

They voted unanimously that there should be an effective regulator to make sure that Great British Railways keeps to the agreed plan for running the railways.

### **Small independent companies alongside Great British Rail**

We told the children (from the consultation document) that a small number of current independent railways would probably continue to operate outside Great British Rail.

The children proposed that the relevant legislation should clarify exactly what would be the position of any future development of small independent railway services. Would any new developments of this sort be allowed?

One child wished to put the following question to the Department for Transport: "if a private person or company builds a train, would it have to become a part of GBR, or could it stay private and still use GBR's tracks?" Another wished to ask "what would be the nature of the partnership if this

all happened?”. And another wanted the Department to consider the financial arrangements: “what would happen with the income for these private trains. How would it be split?”

The children's main concern, from the history of private railways, was that there might be minor variations in track width between the GBR network and different track layers working for non-GBR companies.

### **The proposed passenger Watchdog**

Children discussed the proposal for a passenger watchdog, alongside considering the role of a rail regulator or inspectorate.

The children were sceptical of the value and power of a passenger watchdog. The only function of the watchdog proposed in the consultation document that was endorsed by a majority of the pupils consulted was to monitor the accessibility of rail travel for disabled people.

None of the other functions was supported by half or more of the pupils we consulted. Their main reason was that they thought the functions proposed for a passenger watchdog should instead be carried out by a railway inspectorate or regulator, with full enforcement powers. They saw powerful inspectors as more likely to ensure safe and effective rail travel for passengers than a passenger watchdog. In short, as passengers, they strongly preferred regulation to advocacy.

The children considered that “inspectors are more important to check everything is working properly” and “they can make sure that nothing is wrong and everything is safe”.

Those who argued the other way were concerned that inspectors could be off-putting for passengers, and that “we should only have watchdogs because they’d look out for passengers more and not make them feel overwhelmed”. Seeing uniformed inspectors could worry passengers that something is wrong – although this was countered by a proposal from the group that inspectors could be plain-clothed rather than uniformed.

Some saw the role of a watchdog as more to support passengers than to ensure safe running of railways in meeting passenger needs.

**We asked the children to vote on the question ‘to make railways good for people to travel on, is it more important to have a**

**passenger watchdog or an inspectorate to check how the railways are running?’ 20 children voted on this question, and the result was overwhelmingly (by 19 votes to one) in favour of an inspectorate rather than a passenger watchdog.**

### **Resolution of complaints by a passenger watchdog**

We asked the children consulted whether or not they agreed that the passenger watchdog should have a function in resolving passenger complaints about the railway.

On a vote, only approximately a quarter (6 children) thought this function should be carried out by a passenger watchdog.

The children strongly preferred unresolved complaints to be investigated by a powerful inspectorate of railways.

### **The future of railways**

Without any prompting or suggestion, the children themselves questioned the future of railways as such. There was a strong view in favour of replacing railways with electric cars and other flexible electric passenger vehicles, such as electric driverless vehicle convoys on roads - although maintaining the existing rail network exclusively for freight traffic, especially in inaccessible areas.

There was also a concern that increased railway use may risk dangerous overcrowding of the rail network, and then “more trains can just lead to more accidents”.

Arguments in favour of maintaining the railways for passenger use included continued need and demand for trains, and the risk of increasing road use leading to overcrowding of the road network: “trains are better because they avoid traffic”. There were also concerns about the safety risk of people failing to hear the approach of silent electric road convoys, and about the costs and potential safety risks of moving to a driverless road based electric system.

One pupil advocated bringing canals back into use (with appropriate water-safety measures) to take some of the load off the railways.

Whatever happens to the structure of the national rail system, the children wished to see trains run more on time – as one child put it: “so, you know trains are always late ...” They advocated a continuing system of fines for late trains.

They also wished trains to be less crowded at busy times: “trains can become too crowded and that can affect mental health”.

Finally, the children wanted to see trains become more eco-friendly for the future.

Roger Morgan  
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