

Written evidence submitted by We Own It (RWB0030)

We Own It is a voice of public services users. We, alongside our over 120,000 supporters from across the United Kingdom, campaign for public services that deliver for the people who use and rely on them, rather than private shareholder interests. In rail, this has seen us campaign over the past decade for public ownership of the railway.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide evidence to your process of scrutinising the government's new Railways Bill. It is crucial for passengers that our voices are heard and that the bill delivers on the hopes and expectations of passengers.

But this has not happened. The government mishandled and lost thousands of responses to the consultation and therefore did not perform its legal duty to conscientiously consider all responses.

In April, We Own It mobilised 6131 people to respond to the government's "A railway fit for Britain's future" consultation, outlining key reforms that the Railways Bill needs to include.

The government's recent response [1] to the consultation showed that they lost 6120 of these responses, which means they did not conscientiously consider them, as is their duty under Gunning principles. Following engagement with the Department, the figures have been corrected, and their response has been re-laid, but this does not change the fact that the public's responses were not properly considered and did not inform either the consultation response or the bill.

The number of lost responses matters. The government itself recognises that volume matters in their response to the consultation, which means we have a legitimate expectation that numbers would be taken into account. The consultation response lists the number of responses from different groups, and the number of people advancing specific views in the consultation is often mentioned. The term "most respondents..." appeared at least 6 times in the document, along with other terms like "most responses", "most supported" "most said".

The Transport Committee has an opportunity to make sure that the Railways Bill is responsive to the views expressed by passengers.

We call on you to hold the government accountable for this disastrous failure and give passengers an opportunity to be heard in this process.

As passengers and the public, we believe these reforms are needed to ensure that our railway delivers:

1. End private open access and competition law in the railway:

A successful publicly owned railway requires an integrated financial framework and a clear prioritising of socioeconomic outcomes. The end of 30 years of privatisation is a recognition that rail is a natural monopoly and that a coordinated approach is needed. That is why many experts and campaigners are demanding an end to both competition law in the railway and private open access. Retaining private open access retains the fragmentation that was inherent to privatisation and will impede GBR's effort to create a timetable that is completely aligned with the most efficient and effective operation of the railway. Retaining private open access would wreck the finances, operation and timetabling of the public railway. The rationale given for continuing with private open access is also faulty since those services can be provided under GBR - publicly owned railway managers can and must be encouraged and enabled to take risks and innovate to open up and improve services for the benefit of passengers. Furthermore, the government's response to the consultation said that "GBR will remain subject to competition law", and the legislation includes a duty for the ORR to promote competition instead of being a public interest regulator. This will undermine efforts to achieve a railway that works together for the benefit of passengers. **We call on the government to end competition law and private open access in our railway.**

2. Give passengers a real voice in the railway

The Passengers' Council, being proposed by the government in the Railways Bill, gives passengers no role in the key areas of fares, timetabling, routes and safety, and there is no way for passengers themselves to hold their watchdog accountable. This cannot accurately be described as creating a "new passenger-focused culture". Our supporters proposed turning Transport Focus into a democratically accountable body akin to a union for passengers, so that

passengers could vote for representatives, and these representatives should sit on the board of Great British Railways. Without this kind of change in governance, we have no faith in the new watchdog being proposed. **The Railways Bill should be amended to ensure passenger membership in the council as well as a role at the board level in Great British Railways.**

3. Create Great British Trains to end the private rolling stock ripoff

The government's consultation response makes it clear that it is committed to ongoing private sector financing of new rolling stock into the future. It argues against "nationalising rolling stock companies and their assets", which our supporters did not call for. This shows that they did not conscientiously consider responses from our supporters. Instead, we argued that Great British Trains could be created so that, over time, the government could commission new publicly owned rolling stock, phasing out dependence on private companies. However, this will not happen if there is an ideological insistence on involving the private sector and a refusal to recognise the huge profits leaking out of the system. **We call for the establishment of Great British Trains and a programme to gradually phase out private rolling stock in our railway in the long term.**

4. Cut passenger fares

The government has not proposed a duty or policy to reduce fares or to increase passenger numbers. We called for more investment in the railway, both to increase capacity and to reduce fares, recognising that, for example, Switzerland, which consistently appears at the top of railway rankings, invests around four times more than Britain. Research shows that for every pound invested in the railway, £2.50 in economic activity is generated. The government should have a plan to reinvest the money saved from public ownership directly into reducing fares and improving services. If passengers and the public do not see rail fare reductions, they will believe public ownership has failed. **We call for a plan to reduce passenger fares.**

Public ownership of the railway is backed by 3 out of 4 people in the UK. It was a hugely popular policy at the 2024 election - people did not vote for and do not want a continuation of the status quo.

This new legislation is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to run our railway for passengers, not profit.

Our recent report, written by a range of rail experts and campaigners, can be found at <https://weownit.org.uk/why-public-ownership/reports/passengers-vision-for-the-railways-bill>

Signed by:

Cat Hobbs - Director, We Own It

And 11,617 We Own It supporters

November 2025

References:

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future-government-response>