



URBAN TRANSPORT GROUP

Submission to Public Bill Committee

Railways Bill

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Rebecca Fuller

Urban Transport Group

Wellington House
40-50 Wellington Street
Leeds – LS1 2DE
0113 251 7445
info@urbantransportgroup.org



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1. About us

- 1.1. Urban Transport Group (UTG) is the UK's network of transport authorities. Our vision is for city-regions, their towns and surrounding areas to be green, fair, healthy and prosperous places, with public transport and active travel options that provide access and opportunity for all.
- 1.2. Our members cover the largest urban areas in the UK. Together they serve over 30 million people. Our principal members are East Midlands Combined County Authority; Liverpool City Region Combined Authority; Nexus (serving Tyne and Wear); South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority; Transport for Greater Manchester; Transport for London; Transport for West Midlands; West of England Mayoral Combined Authority; West Yorkshire Combined Authority; and Transport for Wales.
- 1.3. Our wider membership includes Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority; Tees Valley Combined Authority; York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority; Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and Translink (Northern Ireland).

2. Introduction and context

- 2.1. UTG welcomes the introduction of the Railways Bill which represents a once in a generation opportunity to deliver a simple, more reliable railway that boosts economic growth and places customers at its heart.
- 2.2. In particular, we welcome the new statutory role for Mayors and Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) working in partnership with Great British Railways (GBR) to improve the UK's rail network, deliver for local communities and boost economic growth.
- 2.3. Democratically accountable Mayors and MSAs (or their nominated bodies, such as the West Midlands Rail Executive) are well placed to perform this role for the areas they serve.
- 2.4. They can ensure that rail fully integrates with local plans for the economy, housing, skills and net zero as well as with wider local transport networks that connect people to opportunity.
- 2.5. They provide a direct line to passengers, ensuring their needs and priorities are at the heart of a reformed railway. By better aligning the railway to the needs of passengers and businesses, there is the opportunity to grow its usage and generate greater returns to the public purse.
- 2.6. With bus franchising plans progressing at pace and many areas already running or specifying their own services - from trams to ferries, shared bikes to tunnels - devolved powers, funding and influence on rail are the missing piece of the puzzle that will enable delivery of fully integrated transport networks that truly serve their communities.
- 2.7. Many of the areas UTG represents already have some degree of influence over their local rail networks, such as through working in partnership with DfT to manage local rail contracts, investing in stations or - in Merseyside, London, Scotland and Wales - operating fully devolved local rail services.
- 2.8. In those places, devolved local rail services have delivered investment in state-of-the art rolling stock designed and owned by the public; enabled joined up, easy to navigate local transport networks; set new standards for quality (and seen these reflected in table-topping



levels of customer satisfaction); and aligned rail investment with wider local aspirations, unlocking housing and development.

- 2.9. Many other areas have ambitions to further influence, develop and shape their local rail networks. For more details, please see our report 'The pathway to a brighter transport future: Harnessing the opportunity of our local railways'¹.
- 2.10. We look forward to working closely with the Government and GBR to fulfil the potential of rail reform to shape a railway that truly delivers for the people and places it serves.

3. Our position in summary

- 3.1. The Government's commitment to rail reform, through the Railways Bill and the establishing of Great British Rail (GBR), combined with the proven benefits of devolution and integration, offers a once-in-a-generation chance to create a railway system that truly works for the people and places it serves.
- 3.2. However, while the Bill provides a strong foundation, it does not yet deliver the full partnership and devolution model necessary to maximise local and regional benefits. We believe that further amendments are required to realise the Government's ambition of bringing decision-making closer to local communities.
- 3.3. Our key concerns are:
 - **Insufficient statutory powers:** The new role for MSAs is defined by consultative language such as a duty for GBR to "have regard to" local plans and to "consult with" authorities. This wording is considered too weak to guarantee that local strategic priorities for transport, housing, and the economy will carry meaningful weight in GBR's final decisions, risking a continuation of centralised control.
 - **Absence of fiscal devolution:** The Bill enables MSAs to fund GBR for specific local services but contains no corresponding provisions for devolving rail-related funding to MSAs. Without financial devolution and local investment levers, authorities will lack the capacity to invest in the railway, commission services, or take on commercial risk, rendering new powers potentially ineffective.
 - **A lack of legislative definition to support devolution:** The government has published guidance on English rail devolution applications² setting out how MSAs can apply for full statutory and financial responsibility for local rail services, infrastructure and stations. The guidance is subject to revision and, crucially, the Bill itself fails to establish new, clear, statutory pathway for the committed "Right to Request" process. This creates uncertainty for authorities with ambitions for deeper control over local rail services.
 - **Structural Risks to Fairness and Transparency:** GBR's dual role as network planner and operator potentially creates an inherent conflict of interest. Without robust safeguards, GBR may be inclined to favour its own services in critical decisions on network access and funding, potentially disadvantaging devolved and local commuter services. Guaranteed regional transparency on costs, revenue, and performance are central to enabling meaningful partnership and scrutiny.

¹ UTG (2025) [The pathway to a brighter transport future: Harnessing the opportunity of our local railways](#)

² DfT (2025) [English rail devolution applications](#)



3.4. In summary, while the Bill has many merits, it risks establishing an arrangement where MSAs remain marginal to decisions that directly affect their communities. To elevate this legislation into a genuine national-local partnership, we believe it would benefit from further strengthening, to provide MSAs with a more definitive role in commissioning, clear fiscal mechanisms, a statutory path to devolution, and robust guarantees of transparency and fair treatment.

4. Recommendations for strengthening the Bill

Strengthening the Statutory Role of MSAs

4.1. The Bill's current wording is considered too weak to guarantee meaningful local influence. The reliance on terms like "consultation" and "have regard to" does not provide a sufficient statutory basis to ensure local priorities are given due weight.

Core Concerns and Recommendations

- **From Consultation to Partnership (Clause 5):** The Bill must go beyond consultation rights and establish a clear statutory Mayoral role in commissioning rail services. We recommend that MSAs become central partners (as opposed to stakeholders or consultees) in the system.
- **Local impacts (Clauses 81 and 82):** These clauses commit to GBR consulting with MSAs, TfL, Scottish and Welsh Ministers before making a decision that will 'significantly affect' the interests of the local economy or of people living in, working in or visiting the area.

The inclusion of parameters around the meaning of 'significantly affect' would be helpful to ensure certainty and consistency over when consultation will be required.

- **Enforceable Duties (Clause 66):** The Bill must place firm, enforceable duties on GBR to co-develop key functions such as timetabling, access, long-term strategy, performance and financial planning with MSAs.
- **Alignment with Local Plans (Clause 16):** In the Bill the duty to 'have regard to' Local Transport Plans (LTPs) is insufficient. The Bill should be strengthened to require GBR to align its decisions with LTPs unless a clear justification for not doing so is provided. This would also formalise the MSA role in shaping GBR's Long-Term Rail Strategy.
- **National Strategy Consultation (Clause 15):** The Bill requires the Secretary of State to consult Welsh Ministers and the Passengers' Council on the Long-Term Rail Strategy. The Bill should also include MSAs and Transport for London as statutory consultees. This would be more aligned to Schedule 2 in the Bill which commits the Secretary of State consulting with MSAs when preparing the five-year statement of objectives (see below for further comments on Schedule 2).

4.2. Without these enhancements, there is a significant risk that GBR could evolve into an overly centralised body, with MSAs remaining marginal to key decisions impacting their regions.



Establishing Fiscal Devolution

4.3. The Bill creates an imbalance by enabling MSAs to fund GBR (Clause 5) without providing any corresponding mechanism for devolving rail-related funding to MSAs. This is as a fundamental barrier to effective partnership.

Core Concerns and Recommendations

- **Funding Asymmetry (Clause 5):** The Bill allows MSAs to provide funding to GBR for local priorities, but it contains no provisions for MSAs to receive funding relating to the railway.

For MSAs to invest meaningfully, there must be devolution of local rail funding. Our members existing capital funding, such as the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements, is already allocated to other local transport projects, in line with Government guidance. It is therefore important that a new devolved funding mechanism is established to support members who may wish to move forward with rail devolution, such as commissioning additional services from GBR. This should include:

- a capacity and capability fund to support MSAs in assuming greater responsibilities.
- devolving appropriate funding settlements from within existing local railway budgets to MSAs that are on a path to rail devolution.

- **Funding objectives (Schedule 2, (2) subsection (6):** This requires the Secretary of State to consult every MSA when preparing the statement of objectives for GBR's five-year funding period. While we welcome these provisions, further assurances are required in the Bill to ensure that MSAs input will be properly accounted for in the final statement of objectives for the funding period.

We would like to see the Secretary of State setting a wider range of objectives for GBR, including supporting economic growth, housing development, and employment, recognising rail's crucial role in unlocking these. Working closely with MSAs or their nominated bodies and aligning with Local Growth Plans will be crucial in enabling the achievement of these shared priorities.

- **Funding certainty (Schedule 2):** Provisions allow the Secretary of State to vary infrastructure funding in the middle of a five-year period without consultation, undermining the certainty needed for long-term planning and investment. We would recommend that MSAs be consulted if such changes are proposed.

Furthermore, we believe there should be the alignment for funding for infrastructure (five-year settlement) and passenger services (Spending Review process) into a single, integrated five-year settlement that are aligned to MSA funding cycles. We believe that Mayors should have a voice in prioritising spend from national investment programmes (such as the Rail Network Enhancement Pipeline or its successor) to align with Local Transport Plans and Local Growth Plans.



A Clear Pathway to Deeper Devolution

4.4. The government has published guidance (subject to revision) on the process for requesting full rail devolution for Established MSAs. However, the process is not enshrined in the Bill itself.

Core Concerns and Recommendations

- **New Devolution Pathway:** We strongly advocate for a clear, statutory pathway towards full rail devolution. There should be a default assumption that GBR will support the delivery of MSA goals and any request for full devolution is approved, subject to the MSA meeting agreed criteria. This will support work between Shadow GBR partners and UTG to establish the principles of partnership working, outlining a 'menu of options' for engagement, influence, and control, ranging from strategic collaboration to local commissioning with commercial exposure, and ultimately to full service carve-out. Further details can be found in a joint practitioner's guide – 'Delivering local partnerships on England's railways'.³
- **Transparency Requirements (Clause 5, 6):** A clear pathway to devolution would need to include transparent access to essential data, such as operators' management accounts, costs, income, and performance metrics, to allow authorities to build a robust business case for devolution.

Ensuring Transparency, Fairness, and Accountability

4.5. The proposed structure of GBR as both the 'directing mind' and the main train operator raises concerns about an inherent conflict of interest that could disadvantage other operators, including those running devolved services.

Core Concerns and Recommendations

- **Guaranteed Regional Transparency (Clause 5 (3) and related to Clause 74):** The Bill should guarantee MSAs full visibility of regional rail costs, revenues, subsidy levels, and performance data, whether direct from GBR or the ORR. Without transparency, there can be no meaningful partnership, commissioning or scrutiny.
- **Fair Network Access (Clause 72):** The Bill allows the Secretary of State to change the rules on non-GBR infrastructure, facilities and services. The wording creates open-ended uncertainty (and risk) for any non-GBR funders or operators, including MSAs, and have the potential to undermine partnerships and devolved arrangements.

We accept that this provision is subject to mandatory safeguards, including affirmative parliamentary procedure and statutory consultation, which are intended to provide transparency and mitigate the risk of adverse, however certainty about the longevity of access to the network is crucial in giving MSAs and other stakeholders the confidence to invest in it. There is a risk that in allocating network capacity, GBR may favour its own long-distance, higher-yield services over local commuter services.

We accept that appeals to decisions could be made via the ORR concerning GBRs Access and Use Policy, its Infrastructure Capacity Plan, its Working Timetable, or its Charging/Performance schemes. However, the Bill should provide MSAs and Transport

³ SGBR partners / UTG (2026) [Delivering local partnerships on England's railways](#)



for London with the ability to directly challenge access decisions and ensure that locally operated services (such as Merseyrail, Tyne and Wear Metro, and South Yorkshire's tram-train) have their access rights clearly defined and protected. This would be in the spirit of partnership working with devolved bodies.

- **A Powerful Passenger Council (Clauses 36-52):** The new Passenger Council must have explicit powers and levers to hold GBR meaningfully to account on behalf of users, with its findings carrying significant weight. This could include a Statutory Duty to respond publicly and formally to investigations and reports, and to impose its chosen remedy directly on GBR.