

What use will you make of the railway?

I have been in discussions with the rail industry and Ministers over the future of the railway.

In order to define a post Covid role and to regain lost market share the railway needs to understand what many people think about railways. When people are considering how to carry out a journey they will consider the time it takes, the cost it incurs, and wider issues of convenience and comfort. They are interested in their door to door journey, not just the part of the journey they could do by train.

The pre Covid railway depended on commuters for a lot of its passenger revenue. Off peak leisure travel was often on heavily discounted tickets, and often with trains that were not full. As many office based businesses examine hybrid working with more done at home on digital systems and less in the office both the numbers using the trains and the fares they are prepared to pay are likely to come down substantially. People will want flexible season tickets that allow a wide choice over days and times of travel. Correct pricing probably by a system of rising discounts as people travel more will also be more popular if the part time commuter can also have some journeys off peak, which could also help the railway company when planning capacity provision.

At the core of the new railway should be freight. Most people in the country would like to see more freight on the trains and fewer large foreign trucks on the motorways. To make this practical there needs to be keener pricing and better service from rail. Time was when the large industrial estates were crossed by branch lines linking them to the main rail network, with single waggon marshalling to allow use by smaller factories as well as by the trainload users. Today most industrial parks boast good motorway or trunk road access instead. In its later years before privatisation BR was not interested in single waggon traffic but majored on oil, cement, aggregates, bricks, cars and the other large scale trainload customers. The rail industry needs to put in more access to industrial parks, more marshalling yards and state of the art freight control and surveillance systems. Sealed freight containers on trains could assist with streamlining border checks and controls.

The railways have a disadvantage in not in many cases being able to do door to door, so they need easy transfer of containers from rail waggon to truck tractor unit for end delivery. They should have big advantages on fuel and driver costs with low friction transit and far bigger loads per driver. These advantages increase the longer the total journey distance.

There remains the issue of what social and leisure use will people want to make of the railway? Should that be subsidised and if so by how much? Can the railway do more by way of specials to events to take congestion and parking strain away from Concerts, football and the rest? What use do you want to make of the railway?