

What will the future railway look like?

60% of the passenger use of the railway was commuter traffic into our main cities and towns prior to the pandemic.

Today commuter traffic is massively down. There are many businesses talking of adopting a new model even after the pandemic has gone, with more working from home and flexible working.

The railway needs to research and assess these trends. It will need new fare offers, as we have discussed before, to encourage part time office goers to use the train, allowing them flexibility over when they travel. It might, for example, be necessary to offer a system of rebates or free tickets when people reach certain totals of tickets purchased for the same journeys.

The railway has a leisure business. This often relies on heavily discounted tickets. If the base load of commuters are going to spread their journeys out over different times of day there may not be the same amount of empty capacity to offer. What is a realistic target for leisure travel? What kind of financial contribution should it make to cover costs?

There is business travel. Currently this is down by a huge amount, as people hold their meetings, customer contacts, exhibitions and conferences on line. How much will return to physical meetings, and how much of the train travel will return?

Trying to determine how much train travel there will be in 2021 and 2022 is difficult, but becoming a necessary task. The government has nationalised the losses and taken control of the whole railway. We now need from it a vision of what a modern railway looks like and who it will serve. It is going to take some brilliant marketing, new fares structures and compelling offers to fill the trains again.