Policy paper - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/railways-bill/railways-bill-devolved-and-local-government

Railways Bill factsheet: devolved and local government

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At present, the government works alongside mayoral strategic authorities (MSAs) (such as the Greater London Authority) and the devolved governments (Scotland and Wales) to provide a railway that works for the whole of Britain. This mixture of collaboration and local leadership is a critical component of a successful railway for the future. The government is therefore committed to safeguarding existing devolution arrangements in the rail sector and establishing Great British Railways (GBR) as an effective partner to devolved and local government. As the directing mind, GBR will ultimately be required to make trade-offs, balancing national and local interests in its decision-making.

The Railways Bill will:

- maintain current devolved powers and responsibilities
- create a new statutory role for devolved governments and mayoral strategic authorities ensuring that national and local strategies are factored into GBR decision-making
- facilitate greater collaboration between the UK and devolved ministers on rail issues and between GBR and devolved operators and agencies
- enable partnerships between GBR and mayoral strategic authorities
- provide the legal provisions for further devolution in England, where the new English rail devolution request guidance has been followed – the Rail Right to Request is a new formal process that allows established mayoral strategic authorities (established MSAs) to ask for devolved control over local rail services, stations or infrastructure

This factsheet provides further detail on these 5 elements of the Railways Bill's approach to devolution.

What are the current devolved responsibilities?

The table below sets out the parts of the railway sector which are devolved to mayoral strategic authorities or devolved governments.

Authority	Current responsibilities
Scottish Government	The Scottish Government has full responsibility for Scotland-only services and some cross-border services such as ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper services. The Scottish Government also funds railway infrastructure (such as tracks and stations) in Scotland, which is then provided by Network Rail in the same way as in most of England and Wales.
Welsh Government	The Welsh Government is responsible for the Wales and Borders rail services, which include routes such as Cardiff to Holyhead, Swansea to Shrewsbury, and services across the South Wales Valleys. The Welsh Government owns the Core Valley Lines infrastructure (tracks and stations), while other infrastructure is owned by Network Rail and funded by the Secretary of State for Transport in Westminster.
Greater London	Transport for London contracts and manages the London Overground and Elizabeth Line services and is responsible for the East London Line and Crossrail Central Operation Section infrastructure.
Liverpool City Region	Merseytravel contracts and manages ‘Merseyrail Electrics’ train services.

What will the Railways Bill do?

Create a new statutory role for devolved governments and mayoral strategic authorities

The government recognises the critical role of devolution in driving economic growth and ensuring that all nations and regions of the UK reach their full potential. The Railways Bill will enshrine a statutory role for devolved governments and mayoral strategic authorities, ensuring that national and local strategies are factored into Great British Railways’ decision-making.

The statutory role will ensure that decisions GBR makes about rail services are made closer to the communities they affect, improving integration with local transport networks and amongst the nations (England, Wales and Scotland) and making the railway more responsive to local and regional needs. It also provides a legal basis for partnerships, further devolution and greater collaboration.

The statutory role is not a single clause, but a set of legal duties and mechanisms spread throughout the bill. It includes the following duties and responsibilities.

Regard to local plans

GBR must have regard to the transport plans and strategies of devolved governments and MSAs. This means that it will take those plans and strategies into account when taking decisions: everything from service planning, to station upgrades and better integration of rail with other modes of transport. This ensures local priorities are embedded in national delivery, helping rail better serve communities.

Example: a mayoral strategic authority's rail strategy calling for improved station access in a certain area must be considered in GBR's infrastructure planning.

Consultation requirement

GBR will be legally required to consult devolved governments and MSAs before making certain decisions that will significantly affect the interests of the economy or people living in, working in or visiting a particular area.

Example: a proposed reduction in service frequency must be discussed with affected authorities before decisions are made.

Co-operation

GBR can enter into voluntary arrangements with devolved and local authorities – including MSAs and Transport for London (TfL) – to support coordination on rail matters.

In the case of MSAs, the bill includes a statutory duty for both GBR and the authority to share information that is reasonably required for the exercise of their respective functions, where lawful to do so. The Secretary of State for Transport and GBR can also require MSAs to give them advice about railways and railway services in their area.

The bill requires the Secretary of State to publish a memorandum of understanding with each of the Scottish and Welsh ministers setting out how they intend to cooperate and share information.

Example: sharing data on passenger flows or infrastructure plans to support local service design.

Flexible Implementation

While the statutory role provides a legal foundation, the specific mechanisms for collaboration (for example, partnerships and devolution agreements) will be developed outside of legislation to allow adaptability as GBR and the devolved landscape evolve. The intention is for GBR to work with national and local leaders in

the way that best works for them: with tailored and responsive approaches for each devolved nation and region.

The legislation also enables GBR's operational relationship with devolved governments and operators to evolve over time, for example through delegation of devolved rail functions to GBR, subsidiaries of GBR or jointly owned companies. The bill includes clear safeguards such as clear accountability to Scottish and Welsh ministers and the need to consult the Secretary of State.

How has the government collaborated with Scotland and Wales?

The government has been working closely with the Scottish and Welsh governments to prepare the Railways Bill and to develop the framework of further reforms outlined in this factsheet. All 3 governments support these reforms and will continue to work together to deliver enduring benefits for passengers and freight across Great Britain. Critically, the bill will enable further collaboration between Great British Railways (GBR) and both Transport for Wales and Transport Scotland. This collaboration will:

- **Facilitate track and train integration**, allowing GBR, Transport for Wales or Transport Scotland to manage the railway infrastructure (tracks, stations) and train services across Great Britain either jointly or in partnership. This will allow them to improve services, coordination and integration across England, Scotland and Wales.
- **Improve outcomes for passengers and freight customers** through a flexible strategy across Great Britain. For example, better coordination of timetables – such as aligning departure and arrival times between regional and intercity services – can reduce connection times and improve reliability. This enables passengers to make faster, more predictable journeys and allows freight operators to plan more efficient routes. By reducing duplication and gaps in service, operators can optimise the use of rolling stock and infrastructure, which lowers operational costs. These efficiencies help deliver better value for money for taxpayers by making the rail network more productive and financially sustainable.
- **Empower GBR and devolved operators** to shape rail services in a collaborative manner to address the transport needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

Alongside the bill, the Secretary of State for Transport will also enter into new ministerial agreements with Scottish and Welsh ministers and collaborate on a design of GBR that is bespoke in Scotland, and Wales and Borders.

Collaborative ministerial agreements

Statutory memoranda of understanding between the UK government and each of the devolved governments will outline how they will work together with common purpose to ensure that the whole of Great Britain benefits from the establishment of GBR. They will set out how the governments intend to collaborate on strategic and financial issues, including setting the strategic direction for their delivery bodies, while respecting what is devolved and what is reserved. The UK government is working at pace in conjunction with both devolved governments to establish the principles that will govern the arrangements and will aim to publish the ministerial agreements in spring 2026.

An integrated railway in Scotland

The UK and Scottish governments have agreed in principle for GBR to enter into arrangements with the Scottish Government to deliver infrastructure and passenger services functions in an integrated and joined up way, accountable to Scottish ministers. This approach will ensure a better and more reliable experience for passengers and bring economic benefits to Scotland.

GBR and Transport for Wales Partnership

The UK and Welsh governments have agreed in principle that GBR and Transport for Wales will form an enduring partnership. This will facilitate jointly-agreed delivery of railway services by both GBR and Transport for Wales that reflect the needs of the communities they will serve. A key component of that is the creation of a dedicated business unit for the Wales and Borders area in GBR that can partner with Transport for Wales. The business unit will deliver against a business plan that reflects the partnership's priorities and considers local needs, whilst working across GBR to ensure no adverse wider network impacts.

What about partnerships with mayoral authorities?

The Railways Bill aims to bring the railway closer to the communities it serves by enabling tailored partnerships between Great British Railways (GBR) and mayoral strategic authorities (MSAs) underpinned by statutory roles. These partnerships are intended to:

- empower local leaders to shape rail outcomes, responding to local priorities
- improve passenger outcomes including joint working on accessibility, station enhancements, and ensuring rail is better integrated with other modes of transport
- provide a flexible framework for collaboration that reflects the diversity of local contexts and ambitions

This will be achieved by:

- The mayoral partnerships framework that supports closer collaboration on local rail priorities – such as service planning, station improvements, and better integration with other transport modes. These partnerships will reflect the ambition and capacity of each MSA. For example, MSAs may want to:
    - Partner directly with GBR or through their bodies to coordinate fare structures for local rail services.
    - Support multi-modal integration through network-wide planning aligned with their local transport plans.
- A statutory role for devolved leaders, set out above, underpins this framework. While the statutory role sets out the minimum requirements for engagement, mayoral partnerships go further – enabling MSAs to co-design and, where appropriate, commission services with GBR.
- Empowered local GBR business units which will act as a single point of contact for all levels of local government in England on local railway matters.
- Flexible, locally tailored partnerships between GBR and MSAs will vary based on local ambition, capacity and available funding. Key activity is likely to include coordination on timetabling, fares, branding and passenger information to help ensure rail is better integrated with other modes of transport. Investments in stations to support housing and commercial opportunities will also help improve public spaces, making stations more welcoming and better linked to the places around them.

DfT is working with mayors now to explore ways to make progress before GBR is formally set up, helping prepare for future partnerships.

What is the English rail devolution request guidance process?

Supporting its wider devolution agenda, the government committed (in the English Devolution White Paper) to establishing a right to request full rail devolution and to publish guidance during the passage of the Railways Bill. This guidance will formalise the process for mayoral strategic authorities to follow when requesting full devolution of rail services, infrastructure and control of stations where this would support a more integrated network. Decisions will be made by the Secretary of State for Transport.

Objectives of English rail devolution request guidance

The objectives are to:

- define a transparent process for mayoral strategic authorities to follow when requesting further rail devolution

- to ensure consistency in decisions by the Secretary of State for Transport by adhering to the assessment criteria and timescales set out in the guidance
- to provide structure and support to mayoral strategic authorities in their business case development by setting out clear assessment criteria and areas for consideration
- to ensure alignment with broader government missions such as kickstarting economic growth

The intention is that GBR will play a vital role in collaborating with mayoral strategic authorities in establishing GBR mayoral partnerships arrangements, which may meet many of the mayoral strategic authorities' rail ambitions. Where ambitions are not met, mayoral strategic authorities may choose to apply for full statutory and financial responsibility for local rail services (full rail devolution). GBR will provide advice to both mayoral strategic authorities and the Secretary of State for Transport on the wider rail impacts of English rail devolution requests.

Eligibility and application process

Mayoral strategic authorities must have established status to be eligible to apply for statutory and financial responsibility of local rail services (full devolution) via the English rail devolution request process, whereas all mayoral strategic authorities can apply specifically for more control over stations, (in line with the commitment outlined in the English Devolution White Paper).

A pathway exists for mayoral tier authorities to progress to the established tier, as detailed in the English Devolution White Paper.

Mayoral strategic authorities will submit a business case allowing the Department for Transport and the Secretary of State for Transport to conduct an assessment.

Mayoral strategic authorities will need to demonstrate how the proposal:

- impacts passengers, freight services, remaining services, net subsidy and GBR's ability to act as directing mind
- aligns with Long-Term Rail Strategy (LTRS), local growth plans and Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)
- delivers competent client capacity, and clear and complete costings

Glossary of terms

Devolution

The transfer of powers or responsibilities from Great British Railways to the devolved nations, mayoral strategic authorities or local authorities. In the rail sector, this

enables these bodies to manage specific train services or infrastructure in line with their priorities.

Devolved governments

The governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have powers over a range of policy areas, including transport and other services. For the purposes of this Factsheet series covering the Railways Bill and rail reform, we mean the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales only because the railway in Northern Ireland is entirely separate and devolved.

Established MSAs (EMSAs)

MSAs identified in the December 2024 English Devolution White Paper as eligible to receive Integrated Settlements – a single, flexible funding pot that replaces multiple separate grants giving areas more control to invest in local priorities like transport, housing, and public services. This reflects a more advanced stage of devolution.

Mayoral strategic authorities (MSAs)

Combined authorities led by elected mayors (for example, Greater Manchester, West Midlands, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, North East) with powers over transport and other local services. Greater London is an MSA, but does not have a combined authority governance model.

Partnerships

Arrangements between Great British Railways (GBR) and MSAs or operators of devolved services to jointly manage or influence rail services, including planning, delivery, and accountability.