Policy paper - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/railways-bill/railways-bill-tickets-and-retail

Railways Bill factsheet: tickets and retail

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The government is determined that Great British Railways (GBR) will be empowered to deliver industry-wide modernisation and reform of the complex and fragmented fares landscape inherited from privatisation, and that there will be range of high-quality rail retailers (including GBR itself) under the future industry model.

What happens in the current system?

Currently, train tickets are sold by 2 main groups: train operating companies (such as Avanti and Crosscountry) and independent retailers (such as Trainline), who are entitled to commission on sales and may charge booking fees.

Tickets are sold in many ways: through each train operating company's websites and apps, through independent retailer's websites and apps, at stations through ticket offices, ticket vending machines, through call centres and on board some services.

Under the current system, 14 different train companies contracted to DfT all have their own website and app for selling tickets. While the websites and apps have different features, they aim to provide a similar service and can be confusing for passengers.

Government aims and the future of GBR

In January 2025, the government announced that GBR would sell tickets as part of the government's plans to provide a railway fit for Britain's future. This will replace the numerous websites and ticketing apps run by all of the current DfT contracted train operators, which will no longer be required.

An important step towards achieving the government's aims will be the introduction of a high-quality website and app, allowing GBR to sell tickets directly to customers online and moving away from the confusing current system with multiple train operators all running competing websites. This will give both passengers and taxpayers better value for money.

GBR will set fares for the services it operates and will receive money from ticket sales. The Railways Bill will establish GBR and give it the powers to do this.

Scope of GBR's retail functions

Responses from the recent consultation on A railway fit for Britain's future indicated that there was strong support for the establishment of a GBR online retailer,

alongside the continuation of a thriving independent retailer market. The legislation will enable GBR to retail directly to customers by delivering a user-friendly website and app. GBR will also retail at station ticket offices, ticket vending machines and onboard trains so that passengers who are unable to buy a ticket online, need additional assistance or would prefer to purchase in person can purchase a ticket with ease and travel with confidence.

Independent retailers, open access operators and devolved operators, such as Transport for Wales and Scotrail, will also be able to retail to passengers, just as they do today.

User experience

Once GBR becomes the central rail retailer, it will combine the 14 rail operator websites and apps into one. The 14 previous train operating company websites will ultimately cease functioning, reducing fragmentation, delivering savings through removing duplication, and providing a more coherent, user-friendly passenger experience. The overall approach will streamline the ticket purchasing process, which can often be confusing for passengers.

Wider industry governance

Informed by responses to the Railways Bill consultation, the government has carefully considered how the retail market will be governed in the future. This includes the retail industry management functions (which includes back office matters such as management of common systems, for example, organising the provision of railcards, licensing for independent retailers and setting commission rates). These functions are currently provided by the Rail Delivery Group, a cross-industry organisation made up of train operating company members. These functions will move into GBR in the future.

The key features of the model are as follows:

- **GBR's retailer (the part of GBR that sells tickets)** will be part of its core business, ensuring crucial join-up and efficiencies. This is a common way of running major transport operations – including railways – across Europe.
- **GBR's retail industry management function (the 'back office' part)** will be responsible for managing core operational systems, setting and managing commission payments for independent retailers, determining technical standards for all retailers and issuing 'licences'. This will also be part of the GBR group, but decision-making will be structurally separate from its operational and commercial arm, and governed by a code of practice, setting out how it will interact with market participants. Affected third parties will be able challenge any decisions or actions they consider to be non-compliant, by raising them directly with the Office of Rail and Road (ORR).

This framework will enable GBR to successfully deliver for passengers and taxpayers alike. It provides robust safeguards to ensure GBR acts impartially in overseeing the retail market, delivering a fair and open market that ensures the private sector continues to play a key role in driving growth and delivering improvements for passengers.

Code of practice

A code of practice will set out clear expectations for how GBR will interact with all market participants, and ensure separation of decision-making where relevant. GBR's licence will require it to comply with the code. The code will be owned and administered by the ORR. The production of the code will be subject to full consultation, thereby ensuring significant input from industry, regulatory and other stakeholders. The government recognises that there will be a range of interested parties in managing both its original development and any ongoing updates.
If GBR fails to comply with the code, it would be considered a breach of their licence, and result in enforcement action from ORR.

To ensure that GBR abides by the rules set out in the code of practice, affected third parties will be able to challenge any decisions or actions they consider to be non-compliant, by raising them directly with the ORR. The ORR will be required to investigate and, if it considers that GBR has not complied, it will be able to demand corrective action by issuing binding orders on GBR. This overall approach will ensure GBR acts fairly when carrying out its retail industry management functions.

Glossary of terms

Fare

The amount a passenger pays to travel by rail, from one station to another, and sometimes under certain conditions (for example, it might not be valid during peak times or on certain routes)

Office of Rail and Road (ORR)

The independent sector regulator, responsible for overseeing various aspects of transport in the UK including rail safety, economic regulation and performance, network access, highways and the Channel Tunnel.

Rail Delivery Group (RDG)

A membership organisation that works on behalf of the TOCs and other industry parties. It runs services such as shared back-office systems and licenses third-party retailers to sell tickets.

Retail

Here, the selling of rail services and products to customers – through ticket offices, ticket vending machines, websites, apps and more.

Third-party retailer (TPR) or independent retailer

An organisation that sells rail tickets and other products (for example, railcards) under licence from the RDG. Examples include Trainline, Uber and Virgin Trains Ticketing

Ticket

A physical or electronic document or record which entitles a passenger to make a journey on the national rail network between certain stations or zones.

Train operating companies (TOCs) or 'train operators'

The companies that run passenger trains. The Department for Transport (DfT) works with 14 TOCs, such as LNER, Avanti and Southeastern – all of which will become part of Great British Railways (GBR) under the Railways Bill. There are also open access TOCs (such as Lumo or Hull Trains) and devolved operators (such as Scotrail or Merseyrail). These however will not be part of GBR.