

Written evidence submitted by Transport North East (RRB0021)

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the above call for evidence. Transport North East provides strategy, planning, and delivery services on behalf of the North East Joint Transport Committee (NEJTC) with an overarching vision of moving to a green, healthy, dynamic, and thriving North East.

The Committee brings together the region's two Combined Authorities (North of Tyne Combined Authority covering Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland, and the North East Combined Authority covering Durham, Gateshead, Sunderland, and South Tyneside) which have transport powers for the region. From 2nd May 2024, these two authorities will be superseded by the new North East Combined Authority, led by an elected North East Mayor.

The Draft Rail Reform Bill

We welcome the Draft Bill's central aim of integrating franchising authority and infrastructure management functions within one public sector body, Great British Railways (GBR). This will remove the perverse incentives within the current fragmented industry structure, reduce political micro-management, and promote unified accountability, simplifying the industry for all its customers.

We are however concerned by the lack of focus on rail partnerships - arrangements first outlined in the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail that are intended to allow for greater local influence over rail services. The Committee will also be aware that Government mandated the Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) to begin negotiating these partnerships with mayoral combined authorities, including the North East.

Both the North East devolution deal agreed in December 2022 and the deeper devolution deal published in March 2024 include rail partnerships, with the latter referencing the creation of a 'North East Rail Board' to govern any future partnership. Our view is that it would be therefore helpful and sensible for the rail reform agenda to mirror the commitments made to the North East and others.

While we expect the Bill would create a significantly better environment for rail devolution agreements to flourish compared to the high levels of central Government micromanagement inherent to the current structure, there is unfortunately little in the legislation or the Government's recent rail reform

consultation response to clarify the intended regional structure of GBR or provide further details on the intended scope of rail partnership agreements.

We are also concerned by the finding of the recent National Audit Office report *Rail reform: the rail transformation programme*, that DfT has moved GBRTT's role away from preparing for the set-up of Great British Railways. We are keen to understand what this means for combined authorities currently in dialogue with GBRTT over their rail partnership agreements.

Our view on the way forward

For GBR's regional units to truly deliver at a local level we believe they will need to work closely with Combined Authorities through rail partnerships that allow for meaningful influence over the specification of local rail services, enhanced accountability measures, better integration of transport modes, and oversight of the rail capital programme.

The way the Metro system delivers close coordination for the benefit of passengers in Tyne & Wear provides a good example of what can be achieved. We believe similar benefits could be attained through a rail partnership that allows the North East Rail Board to exercise meaningful influence over the current Northern Trains network in the North East. This network is very self-contained, allowing for better reflection of local needs, with lower impacts from operations elsewhere.

Research commissioned by Nexus also found that every year, Metro, and local rail contributes around £11.80 per passenger journey to the local economy in the North East. This value captures the benefits accruing to individuals, businesses, and wider society from more efficient travel, greater productivity through better business connectivity, and social and environmental impacts. Improved coordination across the rail and Metro networks, leveraging specialist knowledge and detailed insights at the local level, would allow us to increase and expand on these benefits.

For long-distance services, we recognise the situation is far more complex. Nonetheless, we believe a model should be developed in which transport authorities along the line of route can directly influence the specification of the railway in line with their economic growth plans. Our recent experience of the December 2024 East Coast Main Line timetable change exercise served to underline the often-opaque industry processes around timetabling. Our

elected members have significant concerns about this timetable, but strongly feel that they were only included in the process after the key decisions had already been taken. In our view, train and infrastructure operators should be accountable to local and combined authorities within an appropriate governance framework.

Our view is that these approaches will allow local, regional, and inter-city networks to be developed and managed in such a way that the railway puts the needs of communities and their economies at its heart. We also recognise that the scale of accountability, responsibility, and influence the North East is seeking will take time to deliver, and there are several challenges that will need to be addressed in conjunction with GBR, DfT and our neighbouring local and combined authorities. However, we expect that the principles of a rail partnership established at this early stage will guide the expansion of the North East Rail Board's scope over time.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to engage further on the points made in this response. We would also welcome the opportunity to contribute when the Committee commences its oral evidence sessions.

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