

There have been proposals by various groups to renationalise both the infrastructure and the operational aspect of the railways nationally and locally. In many ways this attempt to return all transport decision making to London is not only short-sighted, but likely to work against any local interest. What the South West of England needs is a devolved railway and public transport administration with sub-regional transport authorities covering Devon and Cornwall, and the Greater Bristol and Bath travel to work area. Like MerseyRail, Transport for Greater Manchester and Centro (West Midlands PTA), the local transport authorities need to be able to specify rail services, set timetables and rolling-stock capacity, specify Network Rail works to track and stations for local services, design and build interchanges and car parks, lease rolling stock (jointly with the DfT), set franchise specifications including fares, staffing levels on local stations and trains. This is also the model which the Welsh and Scottish Governments operate.

In due course it is to be hoped that the South West will set up a series of Combined Authorities to manage and budget many aspects of local planning, governance and operation. This is already the case (or soon will be) with the Northern and West Midlands Regions who will subsume the transport authorities referred to above.

Handing back all control of our local networks to the DfT makes absolutely no sense whatever either in terms of local responsiveness, or responsibility. What the South West needs is both local and locally answerable planning and operation of its rail networks. Neither part is good enough on its own and a Combined Authority with responsibility for delivery of local rail and bus services is without question the goal we should have in our sights from the outset.

As we have seen with Transport for London, the ownership of the contractor delivering the specified services is not an issue of any real significance. What matters is not whether First Group is running and staffing the trains or whether that is done by a publicly owned body called WestRail, but who is specifying the standards, service levels, fares, rolling stock and staffing.

Unlike Manchester where massive investment is going into both Piccadilly and Victoria stations, it was not until a recent Leaders Board meeting for the Bristol/Bath City Region that the proper significance of Temple Meads station as a regional transport focus and interchange was realised and funds allocated by the four Greater Bristol councils. As pointed out in recent articles in the Western Daily Press, Bristol Post and Western Morning News, this region is starting from a much lower base than comparable regions in the south east, the north and the midlands. Temple Meads in particular has not had the kind of investment which similarly sized stations elsewhere have enjoyed. In terms of commerce, passenger facilities and intermodal interchange options Temple Meads has a long way to go.

With rail fares rising by 2.5% from 2nd January 2015, West Country commuters are struggling to pay higher fares on a very fragmented national rail network. The rail network is one of the most complicated in Europe in terms of structures where the Government sets all the standards but the train operating companies deliver the services under contracts. This means that in the South West of England, Network Rail is responsible for the tracks, signalling and stations being wholly owned as a Government agency and the private train operators deliver the service in the form of South West Trains (owned by Stagecoach) between London Waterloo, Salisbury, Bristol, Yeovil, Exeter, Bournemouth and Weymouth with rolling stock leased from leasing companies wholly owned by a number of international banks.

The other main train operating company is First Great Western where the Government is reletting a four year contract from March 2015 to allow the Great Western Main line between London, Reading, Swindon, Bath Spa, Bristol Temple Meads, Bristol Parkway and Newport, Cardiff and Swansea to be upgraded. This Government scheme, whilst very much welcomed, involves electrified Intercity Express trains, built in Japan by Hitachi, and electrification of the main line, but only as far as Bristol in the South West. This is costing the taxpayer £7.5 billion but what is being spent in the rest of the South West region compared with the North? Local railways around Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle are being devolved to a new railway executive whose decisions will be made locally with proposals from the Government for new rolling stock and devolved budgets. Whilst train fares in the North are also rising, more of the money is being kept for station improvements, station interchanges like Manchester Victoria and a new build of local trains and expanded electrification or railway lines around Manchester and Liverpool.

The £4 billion which the DfT spends annually on the rail network includes a subsidy to Network Rail as well as franchise payments (operational subsidy) to First Great Western, South West Trains and Cross Country Trains. Network Rail also has an accumulated debt of £38 billion which is causing constraint on further investment. Whilst other regions and in particular InterCity and the South East of England have been major beneficiaries from the investment which has helped to build up this debt, the South West has so far only benefited from the IEP with little investment in our local train fleet and no local electrification of the line from Bristol to Taunton, Exeter, Plymouth and Penzance. Local electrification for the Bristol-Severn Beach line and routes to Henbury and Portishead is only at feasibility study stage.

With taxpayers paying 40% of the railways' costs and 60% coming from passenger fares, only 3 pence in every pound goes to the Train Operating Companies: Stagecoach (South West Trains), Deutsche Bahn (Cross Country Trains) and First Group (First Great Western). The remaining 97% goes to the train leasing companies (international banks) known as ROSCOs and Network Rail. Passengers in the South West are demanding a fare share of national rail funding.

Why can't services be delivered locally, as is happening in the North with its new railway executive, and in Wales where the Welsh Government runs the services? We need to set up a transport boards within regional Combined Authorities to manage and devolve the Greater Bristol Metro Project (MetroWest), the Devon Metro, to reopen the line between Exeter and Plymouth via Oakhampton and Tavistock, to provide disabled access to stations such as Lawrence Hill and Stapleton Road, Patchway, Pilning and Nailsea and Backwell, to provide booking offices at stations like Avonmouth (currently threatened with demolition) and to restore train services between Taunton and Minehead.

There are many future options which need to be included in the new West of England Transport Plan and Spatial Plan. These include protection of the rail routes to Thornbury (via Tytherington), between Frome and Radstock, from Frome to Shepton Mallet and Wells, from Barnstaple to Bideford and the sites of several stations which could be reopened as the local Metros develop.

*David Redgewell, Martin Cinnamond, Ian Beckey, South West Transport Network, Rail Futures (Severnside)*