



Briefing Note: The Truth About Britain's Railways

By Conor Walsh

When it comes to Britain's railways, the Christmas and New Year is rarely the season to be jolly. The festive season always brings stories of commuters abandoned in the cold by delayed and cancelled trains, waiting to return to their families - quickly followed by news of the annual fare rise in the New Year. This year's is set at 3.1%, well above the CPI rate of inflation.

But then, the news about the railways always seems to be bad. Acute delays on some lines, franchises bankrupted and bailed out, a shambolic recent re-timetabling, ticket prices that are both high and rising.

Yet a closer look at the data suggests that, on the whole, Britain's railways are performing surprisingly well. Indeed, there is a strong argument that they have improved by more than any other European country's since the early 1990s - even if the general perception is exactly the opposite.

The main evidence for this comes from comparing our performance against other European countries. The last major study for this, examining the 25 EU members with railway systems, was back in 2013. It found that the United Kingdom topped the indices for improvement in efficiency and satisfaction - that is, our railways had improved, on aggregate, by more than any other European country's.¹

Sadly, the exercise has not been repeated since: the last year for which comparative data are available is 2016. But using these figures, and others, it is possible to paint a very different portrait of Britain's rail system, and of its performance since privatisation - even if there is still more than ample room for improvement.

¹ [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd\(2013\)-10-part3.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd(2013)-10-part3.pdf)



Satisfaction

One of the most basic measures of how happy people are with a rail network is how many of them are using it. If more travellers are using the railways as opposed to driving or taking the bus, it is an indicator of at least *relative* satisfaction.

And sure enough, rail travel has grown relative to other means of transportation faster in the United Kingdom than in any other European country.² It went from 4.6% of all passenger kilometres in 1993 to 8.8% in 2016.³ The growth continues: this year, there has been a 2.1% increase in rail passenger kilometres.⁴

There is, of course, a more obvious way of measuring satisfaction: by asking travellers how satisfied they are.

On this score, the UK's record is again good. Between 1997 and 2012, the proportion of travellers saying they were satisfied with their rail service increased most in the United Kingdom out of all European countries.⁵ In 2013, an annual Eurobarometer survey found that the UK came behind only Finland in terms of overall satisfaction levels, well ahead of Europe's other major rail networks.⁶ Almost four out of five people surveyed (78%) gave services either a "high" or "good" rating, and satisfaction with punctuality and reliability was leagues ahead of countries such as France, Germany, Italy and Poland.

It is true that, in the intervening years, Britain has slipped back. The most recent Eurobarometer survey, published in September 2018, found that UK ranked sixth for overall satisfaction across the EU.⁷ Satisfaction with punctuality and reliability had dropped to 69%, putting us 10th in the league tables. And we scored very low in terms of happiness with availability of seats.

But the UK still came fourth in terms of satisfaction with frequency of trains (76% satisfied vs 17% dissatisfied), and did extremely well on indices such as quality of information provided; quality, cleanliness and accessibility of stations; and ease of access for those with disabilities. Again, in the overall index, the only countries

² [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd\(2013\)-10-part3.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd(2013)-10-part3.pdf) (Page 5)

³ http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=tran_hv_frmod&lang=en

⁴ http://orr.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/39342/passenger-rail-usage-2018-19-q1.pdf (Page 1)

⁵ [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd\(2013\)-10-part3.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd(2013)-10-part3.pdf) (Page 22)

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/flash/fl_382a_en.pdf

⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/flash/surveyky/2172>



ahead of us were relatively small fry - of the six largest European rail networks (Germany, France, Italy, Poland, the UK and Spain), Britain's is undeniably the most popular with its users.

It is also one of the safest. The high-profile arguments about driver-operated trains mask the fact that, with the exception of the Croydon derailment, there have been no fatalities as a result of a train accident since 2007. Measured in terms of injuries per thousand train kilometres, as of 2016 British railways were the second safest in the European Union, at 0.01% - behind only Ireland, which has a very small railway network and recorded no victims.⁸ The United Kingdom also showed the fourth fastest improvement in railway safety in the European Union between 2004 and 2010, with the metric falling from 0.03% to 0.01%.⁹

Efficiency

Another measure of how well a rail system is performing is its efficiency - that is, how good it is at turning existing infrastructure and additional investment into solid performance.

On this score, again, the UK has a surprisingly strong story to tell.

A primary measure of efficiency is the intensity with which our railway infrastructure is being used. As of 2016, the United Kingdom had the second highest ratio in the European Union of passenger kilometres to track.¹⁰ It also had the third highest ratio of passenger kilometres to train kilometres. In other words, we're making highly efficient use of our railway lines, and of our trains - even though the obvious consequence of the latter is that the trains often feel pretty crowded! Furthermore, both of these measures have been rising: between 2008 and 2016, the former grew by 24% and the latter by 15%.¹¹ In gross terms, the number of trains being run on Britain's network increased by 29% between 1997-8 and 2017-18, and the number of passenger journeys doubled.¹²

⁸ http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=tran_sf_railac&lang=en and [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd\(2013\)-10-part3.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd(2013)-10-part3.pdf) (Authors calculations, using train km figures from 2010)

⁹ [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd\(2013\)-10-part3.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd(2013)-10-part3.pdf) (Page 28)

¹⁰ http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=rail_pa_typepas&lang=en and <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=ttr00003&plugin=1> (Author's own calculations)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² http://orr.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/39892/passenger-freight-performance-2018-19-q2.pdf



This trend is echoed by the 2013 European Commission report, which found that between 1993 and 2008 the United Kingdom had the fastest growth of passenger-kilometres per line in the European Union and the fifth largest growth of passenger kilometres per train kilometre.^{13 14}

That report also found that it wasn't just the productivity of our infrastructure that grew in the period following privatisation. The productivity of railway workers grew, too. Between 1993 and 2008, the ratio of passenger kilometres to number of staff grew third fastest in the United Kingdom - more than doubling in total!¹⁵

Nor was this a case of getting more work out of a declining number of staff. Between 1993 and 2000, the UK rail workforce shrank from 128,413 to 73,474, as the industry became leaner and more efficient via privatisation. But by 2008 the total stood at 89,638.¹⁶ As of 2016, it had grown (according to a House of Commons report) to 101,500.¹⁷

Britain is also much better than other countries at getting its money's worth from the railway networks. A 2016 report by the European Commission found us to be the only country receiving a net payment from the train operating companies, rather than paying a net subsidy to them.¹⁸ As of 2017/18 the government was receiving over £200m annually from the train operators.¹⁹

Of course, there is a net subsidy to rail once you include infrastructure spending, but the evidence still suggests total subsidies are lower here than in Europe: in 2018 they were just over €7bn here but over €14bn in France.^{20 21}

Between 2000 and 2008, the efficiency of subsidies to train operating companies grew fastest in the United Kingdom compared to anywhere else in Europe - as did

¹³ Ibid (Page 38)

¹⁴ Ibid (Page 37)

¹⁵ [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd\(2013\)-10-part3.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd(2013)-10-part3.pdf) (Page 41)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/Exiting-the-European-Union/17-19/Sectoral%20Analyses/29-Rail-Report.pdf>

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/rail/market/market_monitoring_en (Figure 61)

¹⁹ http://orr.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/39871/rail-statistics-compendium-2017-18.pdf (Page 6)

²⁰ <http://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/displayreport/report/html/a830de20-83bf-408d-9c22-7f3ec23999f9>

²¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-05/france-s-once-vaunted-trains-are-macron-s-biggest-challenge-yet>



the value of such subsidies.^{22 23} And again, this has not been a case of wringing better performance out of a neglected network. Last year, private investment in the railways reached £1.3bn - the highest value recorded since the time series began in 2006/07. This included a £1bn investment in rolling stock, also the highest since the time series began.²⁴ The result of this will be that the average age of Britain's rolling stock will fall from 19.6 years to 15 years by 2021.²⁵

Of course, there is a counter-argument here: that the prices paid by rail passengers in the United Kingdom are some of the highest in the European Union, and have inflated quickly across the last few decades.²⁶

But this is an incomplete truth: the actual price of rail travel is that borne not only directly by the consumer but also by the taxpayer. In the United Kingdom, we have chosen for more of the burden to be borne by the consumer than some other countries do: as explained above, total government subsidies, including for infrastructure, are much higher in other major European countries than they are in the United Kingdom.

So it is fair to say rail travel isn't necessarily cheaper in those countries than it is here, it's just that the price is distributed differently. It also isn't obvious why it would be either more efficient or more equitable for those members of the public who don't use the railways to subsidise through their taxes those who do, to a greater extent than they already are.

Punctuality and reliability

Any survey of Britain's railways would be incomplete without addressing the issue of punctuality. It is true that this is one of the areas where the United Kingdom does not perform well: a 2016 report had us 20th of 26 across the European Union.²⁷ Well-publicised episodes such as the Southern rail fiasco have cemented an image of Britain's trains as making tardy and infrequent appearances on the platform. Analysis of figures from the Office of Rail and Road showed that 85.4% of trains are now hitting their punctuality targets, the lowest total since 2005.²⁸

²² Ibid (Page 45)

²³ Ibid (Page 46)

²⁴ http://orr.gov.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/39871/rail-statistics-compendium-2017-18.pdf (Page 6)

²⁵ http://orr.gov.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/39871/rail-statistics-compendium-2017-18.pdf (Page 9)

²⁶ Ibid (Page 29)

²⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/rail/market/market_monitoring_en (Figure 51)

²⁸ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/train-delays-are-worst-in-13-years-93hdf937m>



But again, this does not tell the whole story. Our problems with punctuality are, in some ways, a necessary corollary of the efficiency of our train system. The fact that we use our track more effectively and intensively than other rail networks, with trains that are closer to capacity and more congested track, means that there is much less slack in the system when things go wrong - as it did when the heatwave struck in the summer of 2018, or during the re-timetabling fiasco.

But it is also true that our trains are more punctual than you might imagine. In the Eurobarometer survey from 2018 cited above, commuters were satisfied with the frequency of trains by a margin of 76% to 15% (putting us fourth in Europe), and by their punctuality and reliability by 69% to 26% (putting us tenth). Of the other major networks, only the Spanish had a better punctuality rating - the French, often held up as a model, recorded figures of 47% satisfied to 49% dissatisfied. The Germans were only marginally happier, with a ratio of 49% to 43%.²⁹

It is not just about public opinion, however. In October-November 2018, 87.5% of trains in the UK arrived within five minutes of their scheduled time.³⁰ This is lower than the 90%+ recorded earlier in the decade - but substantially higher than the figure of 79.1% back in 2000/1.³¹ Since the turn of the millennium, the picture is one of significant improvement followed by a smaller slippage - and the late arrival of many of our trains is partly compensated for by their higher frequency.

Conclusion

Britain's railways are very far from perfect. Even back when privatisation was first being proposed, the Centre for Policy Studies argued that it should be done with track and train together, rather than with fragmented operating companies running their services on monopolised infrastructure.

More recently, we have taken the lead (for example via Tony Lodge's landmark 2013 report 'Rail's Second Chance')³² in making the case for on-rail competition - enabling more than one firm to run trains along major trunk lines via open-access arrangements. This has been a successful feature of the East Coast Main Line since 2000 - and at least partly responsible for the success of the temporary

²⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/flash/surveyky/2172>

³⁰ <https://www.raildeliverygroup.com/metrics.html>

³¹ [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd\(2013\)-10-part3.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/kallas/headlines/news/2013/01/doc/swd(2013)-10-part3.pdf) (Page 26)

³² <https://www.cps.org.uk/files/reports/original/130321100013-railssecondchance.pdf>



nationalisation of that line after 2009, since the public holding company continued the open-access model.³³

The Office of Rail and Road and Department for Transport appear to be increasingly sympathetic to this position, and it is to be hoped that the Williams Rail Review, to be published in 2019, will embrace the principle as part of its recommendations.³⁴

Yet the fact that so much more could be done should not blind us to what has already been done. Britain's railway network is essentially the safest in Europe. It is increasingly popular both as an alternative to car and bus, and in its own right - especially when compared to its major European counterparts. The period following privatisation has seen sustained growth in reliability; in efficiency; in value for money; in customer satisfaction; in staff efficiency; and other major performance metrics.

It is true that Britain has problems with punctuality - and, in particular, prices. But the latter especially is the result of a deliberate policy decision to make passengers pay something approaching the actual price of their journeys, rather than cross-subsidising from the general taxpayer as happens elsewhere.

Above all, the evidence above is a challenge to the supporters of rail renationalisation. It is clear that under privatisation, Britain's railways have become better. So how would renationalisation improve matters?

Yes, the status quo has many imperfections - but across the board, performance has increased since privatisation, and could increase further via the injection of further competition into the system. On the only metric for which that isn't true - namely prices - it would be perfectly possible for the government to provide a direct subsidy to the consumer to bring down the price, without changing ownership structures.

If the Government decided that would be a good use of taxpayer resources, there is nothing to stop it doing so. What isn't justified, though, is throwing out a system that has resulted in consistent improvements, and which performs well or excellently on most metrics in comparison with the rest of Europe - particularly without a detailed explanation of how renationalisation would improve matters. It is more than possible for Britain's railways to go forwards, but utterly unnecessary for them to go backwards.

³³ <https://capx.co/the-east-coast-mainline-makes-the-case-for-competition-not-nationalisation/>

³⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/williams-rail-review>



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