

Not for profit

The collapse of Railtrack has led the Government to look more sympathetically at Railfuture's idea of a not-for-profit body to replace it.

If the new company or trust is set up with the correct terms of reference, the future of the railways could be transformed. Railfuture is keen to see profits ploughed back into rail investment and a stronger rail industry emerging.

Millions of rail users have had a raw deal under Railtrack. The company did not inspire confidence in the schemes it attempted: Leeds First and the long-awaited West Coast main line upgrade, which was budgeted at £2.6 billion and is now estimated at £7 billion.

Many of its employees were disenchanted too.

In a series of meetings with Railtrack managers and officials, Railfuture became increasingly impatient at the lack of progress. One of its first decisions was to shelve London's CrossRail which is only now emerging from the shadows again.

After seven years in business, Railtrack failed to compile an assets register and failed to take any significant action on the many improvement schemes it listed in its own network management statements.

But ever since the company went into administration, the media commentators have been preoccupied by the interests of Railtrack shareholders.

The Railtrack employees who were shareholders do deserve special attention. It is said 10,000 of the 11,000 Railtrack workforce held shares.

Yet more than £700 million – including £88 million last month – has been paid in dividends to shareholders since Railtrack was set up. In future that money can and should be spent on improving rail services.

Even before it was put into "administration" Railtrack had pulled out of all major new-build projects.

Since then, there has also been much talk in the media about bringing back "vertical" integration to the railways.

The Rail Freight Group has warned the Government of the dangers of such a policy. Freight



ACTION: Railtrack's core responsibility was to maintain and improve the track and infrastructure. Some projects like this one at Proof House Junction, Birmingham, did happen. Many more were delayed or shelved.

Picture: Virgin Trains/Milepost 92 1/2

operators like English Welsh and Scottish Railways and Freightliner must not be held to ransom by passenger train operators. The RFG wants a national network for national operators.

Freight operators certainly need proper consideration, a fair allocation of paths and a halt to total line closures for routine maintenance.

As Europe embraces a more open access policy, it may be a retrograde step to give individual operators too much power over the tracks.

Railfuture issued a press release and a follow-up briefing paper in November urging the Government to ensure that any "new" Railtrack has clearly defined objectives to help rail users. On the

passenger side, Railfuture not only wants to see trains run safely and on time but it also wants to see:

- 1 Lower fares.
- 2 More early-morning and late-evening trains as well as services throughout the night.
- 3 Proper train services on Sundays for today's seven-day society.
- 4 More towns without a rail station being reconnected to the rail network by reopening mothballed and closed rail lines, like Cambridge-St Ives.
- 5 Progress on rebuilding missing links like Uckfield-Lewes in Sussex to provide new main lines.
- 6 Upgrading existing secondary lines like the

Coastway lines in Kent, Sussex and Hampshire to main line status.

7 More new high-speed rail lines, as in France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

8 Electrification of main lines such as the Great Western and the Midland as well as strategic "infilling".

9 A rail plan for rural areas, for example the border area of Scotland and North Norfolk.

10 Proper information for passengers, particularly at unstaffed stations and junction stations such as Clapham Junction.

Railtrack has failed to provide long-term action or planning on these issues because of the effect on its short-term profits.

At the same time, the Strategic Rail Authority has not given Railtrack sufficient advice and direction.

Railfuture calls on the Government to create the conditions whereby the SRA can set out a vision for the railways and a "new" Railtrack can deliver.



There were high hopes for the railways when this logo was issued after nationalisation in 1947. With a new Railtrack perhaps the time is right for railways to take a more central transport role again