railfuture

Ten questions on TfL's bid to run Great Northern Services to/from Moorgate

Railfuture would like to see the most cost effective, efficient and reliable train operator running the current Great Northern services serving Moorgate. These are the services to Welwyn Garden City and to Stevenage via Hertford North. Colloquially they are often referred to as the 'GN Inners'. Transport for London has submitted a bit to operate these services, to take over from Govia Thameslink Railway – which itself will be nationalised in May 2026.

Neil Middleton, Railfuture Vice Chair and Hertfordshire resident said:

"Railfuture would like to see the most cost effective, efficient and reliable train operator running services serving Moorgate. We want to see improvements to the service – for reliability, for delivering 4 trains per hour and for station staffing. The question is 'Who is best placed to deliver these at the lowest cost to the taxpayer and ticket buyer – Great British Railways or Transport for London?'.

"We've heard that TfL has promised investment and service frequency increases and fare reductions for some passengers – we welcome all these, but it isn't clear who is funding these improvements – and what is going to happen if costs are higher than expected or revenue lower? - is TfL confirming that it will underwrite these risks, or will it say "We've not been given extra money for that"? I heard that when it came to funding the Croxley link in Watford, the TfL answer was no we won't.

"TfL has a good track record of improving rail services – however the current integration between the GN Inners, GN services to Cambridge and Kings Lynn by the current operator must be a money saver, offers flexibility in disruption – and keeps the number of users on the East Coast Main Line down. All too often we say the Railway in Britain fails at its interfaces – Part A doesn't talk to Part B and then it all goes wrong.

"The key question is where are the greater synergies aligned – with the operator of the GN 'Outers' and Thameslink (to Peterborough, Cambridge and Kings Lynn) or with Transport for London?"

We have 10 questions that we think need a clear, public answer:

Financial risk taking & governance

1. Will TfL and London council tax payers be taking on the financial risk for service costs and revenue for stations in Hertfordshire? For instance, if money needs to be spent on repairing Hertford North station who is going to pay for it? (The question applies both to the annual budget, and what happens if the budget isn't achieved, or costs over run).
2. How will the residents of Hertfordshire be able to hold TfL accountable? We're not aware of any mechanism to do this.
3. What incentives is TfL offering to Hertfordshire's residents? Will fares for Hertfordshire residents actually reduce? (inside London, GN Inners are already on TfL's fare structure & prices).
4. We have aspirations for the GN Inners – more station staffing, improved reliability and 4 trains per hour. Will TfL deliver these, all of which cost money? – and why can't GBR also deliver these improvements if funded with the same amount of extra money?

Handling disruption

5. How will disruption be handled? For stations such as Hatfield, Potters Bar and Welwyn, GTR have full responsibility for looking after passengers on all services that call at these stations.
6. Will TfL have a strong enough voice during disruption? GTR is the dominant operator (measured on number of trains). Will TfL have the same influence? Are they planning on basing staff in the York Railway Operating Centre (which looks after services from Kings Cross and Moorgate)? How will "Blame the other side" be avoided? GBR is about reducing barriers and contracts – a TfL operation can easily create them.

Stations

7. Who is going to operate the stations on the East Coast Mainline served by GN Inners and GN Outers? And, for that matter, stations in Hertfordshire served only by GN Inners – eg Watton-at-Stone. And what about future improvements at stations in Hertfordshire – will TfL be paying for these? Or will there be complexity (and probable delay and cost) because GBR will be paying?

Integration and interfaces

8. The GN Inner and GN outer services are fully integrated for many aspects – drivers and a single maintenance depot are key aspects. Splitting the service will cause inefficiencies – who is paying for these costs? (or where are the compensating savings?).
9. The GN Inners uses recently delivered rolling stock from Siemens (very similar to that used on Thameslink). It is quite different to the Bombardier / Alstom stock used elsewhere on the Overground (and the Elizabeth Line). Even the signalling system is different (next generation ECTS). Are any promised synergies realistic?

Capacity

10. A key driver for wanting this change is to increase the service to meet the needs of the new town envisaged for Crews Hill. Has there been any form of study to work out if there is capacity at Moorgate and between Moorgate and Alexandra Palace – and are there enough trains – can TfL actually deliver any promises it makes in this area?

Railfuture is the UK's leading independent organisation campaigning for better rail services for both passengers and freight.

Railfuture's website can be found at: www.railfuture.org.uk

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