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‘Network Rail will be abolished’ vows Labour

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Labour has blamed Network Rail, the debt-laden quango, for helping to create Britain’s “broken rail system” and said it would be “abolished” if the party wins the general election this week.

Louise Haigh, who has been shadow transport secretary since 2021, said Network Rail, which runs the tracks and stations, will not play a leading role in the new state body Great British Railways (GBR) as previously envisaged.

Labour wants to avoid GBR duplicating “the culture of Network Rail”, which has led to debts ballooning to £60 billion.

“Labour’s plans will deliver a culture change that ... will ensure that expert professional leaders and staff will have the freedom to determine how to best deliver on the objectives set by ministers,” she added.

Haigh, 36, said decision-making on the railways would be “on a whole-industry basis, rather than being driven by what is best for individual organisations”.

She added: “Network Rail has had to contend with maintaining aged infrastructure across a deeply fragmented rail system, where incentives are not properly aligned. Network Rail will be abolished.”

The quango was formed in 2002 from the ashes of Railtrack, the former FTSE 100 owner of tracks, stations and other infrastructure, which collapsed into administration following the lethal Hatfield train crash in October 2000.

Over the following years,

its debt burden ballooned amid spiralling costs to maintain and upgrade the train network. Andrew Haines’s salary of £590,000 as chief executive makes him one of Britain’s best-paid public servants. Haines leads the Great British Railways

Transition Team, set up to lay the foundations of GBR, which will require a new rail bill to be passed. Many in the industry had thought he would become boss of GBR, but Haigh’s criticism of Network Rail throws that into doubt.

Labour intends to nationalise train operators, replace paper season tickets with digital alternatives, and introduce automatic compensation to passengers hit by disruption. Haigh is also pledging a “best-price guarantee”, meaning customers will pay the lowest fare on offer for their journey. But there are doubts about the feasibility of many of its plans. Senior industry figures are sceptical whether policies such as reforming fares, of which there are 55 million types, can be delivered.

Network Rail declined to comment.

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