

GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

THE RAIL INTERVIEW

“Like the oil tanker changing direction, it doesn’t happen fast. We are fundamentally and irreversibly changing our railway”

Steve White, South Eastern Railway MD

On June 9 last year, [Southeastern](#) and [Network Rail’s Kent](#) route merged under a single management team, with a combined 6,700 staff. Can passengers notice any difference yet? Kicking off a [Great British Railways](#) special report, PAUL CLIFTON questions the leaders

“This new integrated, collaborative approach across the South East sets the path for how [Great British Railways](#) will operate.”

That’s what *RAIL* was told last June. The clear message: the new team at South Eastern were creating a template for other parts of the network to follow.

First, South Western Railway and Greater Anglia. This year, West Midlands Railway and London Northwestern Railway were taken over by [DFE Operator Ltd \(DFTO\)](#) on February 1, with [Chiltern Railways](#), [Govia Thameslink Railway](#) and [Great Western Railway](#) to follow.

The team in [Kent](#) believe that clear, open communication with both public and staff forms an essential part of leadership.

A week into the new arrangement, Managing Director [Steve White](#) set out his stall in this magazine.

Now it’s time for an update.

South Eastern Railway - the preferred title for the [Southeastern](#) services and their infrastructure provider - remains a mere contractual arrangement. It is not a legal entity. No accountabilities have been transferred and all staff are still employed by either the train operator or [Network Rail](#).

Each remains responsible for its own finances. When you purchase a ticket, you buy it from [Southeastern](#) Railway - one of 400,000 journeys a day on 1,600 services.

[Southeastern](#) has been in the public sector since 2021, making this transition easier than in other parts

of the UK. In practical terms, the collaboration started in 2023. What has been achieved? What can a passenger notice that would not have happened without this change?

To a casual observer, nothing much. The same trains run pretty much the same services with pretty much the same performance. We need to look beneath the surface. Change is clearly under way.

“We have a person in the [Southeastern](#) safety team whose job is to reduce accidents at the platform-train interface - the point where passengers get on and off the train,” says White.

“He knew some particular locations where the stepping distance is quite high. He found the person in [Network Rail](#) who was planning track renewals at those locations.

“He asked whether the track could be moved by changing the height or cant to reduce the stepping distance. It could. So the last three track renewals have all improved the passenger train interface, making the railway safer.

“Now, I didn’t even know that was happening. They just found each other, decided there was a mutual benefit, and got on with it.

“When we say that culturally we want to put passengers first, this stuff is happening. Not top-down, but bottom-up. They found people who could get things done more easily, better, faster than could be done previously.”

We meet in [Steve White’s](#) office right beside the Thames, a short walk from [London Bridge](#). Not that you could tell

through the window - it overlooks only the next office block.

There are two generic pot plants, two computer screens, two family photos on the desk, and a single filing cabinet. To call it spartan would be an understatement.

But there is a five-litre tin of [Network SouthEast](#) ‘livery paint’.

White walks over to pick up the obviously-empty tin: “We loved [Railway 200](#). [Angel Trains](#), bless them, agreed to paint a [Networker](#) in the old livery. And the joke is that this is a tin of stripey paint - that inside is red, white and blue. The train is out every day bringing joy and pleasure to people.”

David Davidson joins. He’s the [Network Rail](#) counterpoint to [Steve White’s](#) train operator, as Chief Operating Officer in the merged management team.

He’s responsible for infrastructure maintenance and engineering, signalling and control. But he also has vehicle fleet engineering, and he’s in charge of all the drivers and signallers, now in one department. How is that going?

“I have more things to worry about, but it is easier. I’m accountable for more, but it is simpler to make changes.

“We had a problem with the traction motors on our high-speed trains. They were clogged up with leaves. We wanted to jet wash them.

“The supply chain company with the PPF needed for that task couldn’t provide it. But the maintenance depot across the road had what we needed. The problem was fixed in an hour.



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“I was sitting on a train the other day, trying to look out of the window. It was so dirty, I could barely see out. And I suddenly thought: that’s me. I’m responsible for the windows being clean.”

David Davidson, Chief Operating Officer, South Eastern Railway

Before, it might have been three months.

“My fleet engineering team worry about infrastructure failures now.

“Before, a tree would fall on the track, and the fleet team would spend ages working out how to get as much money out of **Network Rail** as possible. Now, the emotion and aggression has been taken out of that. A lot of energy has been saved.

“Trees obscuring signals are always an issue. We got a couple of drivers to sit down with the track team, the people who cut the trees down. They looked at forward-facing TV images. The drivers could point out the ones that had to be cut, and the ones that could be ignored. They spent a week on a computer screen going round the network. They worked together to solve a problem.

“Another example,” says Davidson, sipping his glass of water and warming to the theme: “We had a really dry summer, and we were worried about Soil Moisture Deficit. So we asked drivers to tell us about any areas that didn’t feel right.

“If you drive over the same bit of rail every day and it starts to feel a little different, you know. We had hundreds of drivers doing that.

“A month into my new role, I went to a driver briefing. One of them said he’d been driving for 30 years, and this was the first time he’d ever done feedback.

“He’d reported an issue, the track team had been out, and came back to tell him that they would tamp it the following week, and after that it should feel better.

“We had really strong performance on Soil Moisture Deficit last summer. We had expected to see blanket speed restrictions over large areas. What we actually had was three short speed restrictions in small areas.”

South Eastern’s performance figures were already good. Just 2% of trains were being cancelled. Customer satisfaction last June stood at 86%. That put this complex network of 15 routes in the top quartile of railway operators.

During the autumn, it reduced the number of station stops that were more than three minutes late by a quarter, compared with the year before. Partly

by timetable tweaks for autumn leaf fall, making some journeys a few minutes longer. Customer satisfaction briefly hit 90% in October, before slipping back to 87%.

“We had a lot of barbecues last summer,” says White, as a somewhat out-of-context explanation.

“At Orpington, we have a train crew depot and we have a delivery unit. At Ashford, we have a fleet depot, a train crew depot and a delivery unit. So we had barbecues just to let these people meet each other.

“I have to say, these **Network Rail** people came into this with great enthusiasm. Their curiosity to understand how much a ticket cost, how many people travelled on which route, what customers really want - it has been fantastic. They have embraced local solutions from local partnerships that simply didn’t exist a year ago.

“I was delayed yesterday. A signal fault. Now that there is a single accountable leadership team, every problem is ours. [Rail Minister] Lord Hendo describes it as one person to blame, and he tends to name me, whether it is for timetable or performance or cleanliness.”

Davidson chips in: “I was sitting on a train the other day, trying to look out of the window. It was so dirty, I could barely see out. And I suddenly thought: that’s me. I’m responsible for the windows being clean - it’s my problem to make them better.”

All this could be a roundabout way of demonstrating that the operational improvements resulting from the increased collaboration have yet to show themselves in ways that passengers can notice.

“There are a thousand ways to make the railway better,” White defends.

“You don’t just arrive at an integrated railway. Like the oil tanker changing direction, it doesn’t happen fast. We are fundamentally and irreversibly changing our railway.

“Drivers telling us which trees to cut down is a really positive thing. But it is

A Class 707 train stands at London Bridge with 'City Beam' branding. These trains were introduced by Southeastern in September 2021. A Class 377 can be seen in the adjacent platform.



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today's problem, and does not instantly make the service more punctual."

"To some extent, we can attribute some of the performance gain to integration," Davidson interjects.

"Some will be down to getting better track access, and what the drivers are saying about Soil Moisture Deficit definitely helped."

White adds: "Integration helps you go further and faster, but it's not a panacea. It gives us another gear. It gives us momentum that we didn't have before."

Because South Eastern Railway is going first, the eyes of the [Department for Transport](#) and HM Treasury are on [Kent](#). It's a pointer to what can be expected elsewhere between now and the next General Election.

So, to what extent will success be measured by how much money the railway does not spend, by how far the staff headcount is reduced, by how much the net subsidy can be reduced without crippling performance for passengers? Cutting costs is one of the key government objectives for this process.

"That's a great question," White acknowledges, before deftly not quite answering it.

"We will measure success in a number of ways: a safer railway, a better railway, and a lower-cost railway. We need to do all three.

"Classically, the railway is weakest at the interfaces: the passenger-train interface where the railway hands over to the train operator or vice versa. Interfaces are easier to manage in an integrated railway.

"We want to take cost out. We can remove some duplication. We can remove some friction. We can avoid spending money that's not necessary."

Davidson steps in with a more practical response: "We had this basic issue with sidings, that [Network Rail](#) did not take very seriously, with poor lighting.

"We sat down with the infrastructure team and the driver team. We wrote a standard, which included not stepping over conductor rails, flat walkways, and better lighting. And instead of lighting poles, we could use LED beads, at a tenth of the cost.

"Control now know where most of the revenue comes from. They know how many people are travelling. When they have to start recovering the service, or thinning it out, they understand which trains to shift.

"In the past, they chose which trains were easiest to shift operationally, rather than the ones which were best for passengers. We have a focus now on the services that are highest revenue and highest growth. We have a focus on money. And if more people travel, we make more money."



In June last year, [Southeastern Railway](#) and [Network Rail's Kent](#) route merged under a single management team, with a combined 6,700 staff. Here, junction renewal work is being carried out at [Lewisham](#).

In [RAIL's](#) interview last June, White promised that he was going to cut out £50 million of subsidy to [Southeastern](#) in the first year, saving money for taxpayers. Has that happened?

"Er...no." White gives a long theatrical pause for impact. "It's about £65m!"

"Some of that is not to do with integration. We have in-sourced maintenance of the Hitachi fleet. We took over 80 people and we now do it ourselves. But some of that has come from removing friction."

[Great British Railways](#) is unlikely to become a reality until late 2027. Until then, [Network Rail](#) and [Southeastern](#) will retain separate accounting, and separate terms and conditions for staff. The 'South Eastern' is not a truly merged organisation in any legal sense. Does that constrain what the top team are trying to achieve?

"We are in a better place than we were before June 9 2025," says White.

"There are levers that we could not pull before. We can live with some of the things that we don't have.

"We do have a joint profit and loss account. We take the accounts of [Network Rail Kent](#) and the accounts of [Southeastern](#) and we merge them into a virtual account. And we sit down every four weeks to look at it. It shows us which lines are generating most revenue, and it shows us which are more expensive to operate.

"So, although we have separate funding streams, we have all the information that comes with a vertically integrated railway. I have

better information now than I did when I was at London Underground, and the tools we need to make better decisions."

Will this be the template that [SWR](#) and [Anglia](#) must follow? And then others?

"There is tremendous autonomy from Alex Hynes and DFTO," says White.

"If we're going to have a customer-centric railway, what [LNER](#) does and what we do will not be identical.

"The way that [Lawrence Bowman](#) has set up his top team at [SWR](#) is similar. We are clearly siblings: drivers and signallers will be in the same team in all three integrated railways - [SWR](#), [Anglia](#) and us.

"We are working within a framework - we wrote it. It shows what we found really works well, and what works less so. Having an integrated CCTV strategy between the route and the operator makes perfect sense, so we have a 'guiding mind' for CCTV.

"Daytime maintenance access has been really helpful, so we are recommending other routes do the same. But the framework is not a textbook - there is more than one way to answer a question."

Both men wear lanyards for their identity badges. They carry two logos: [Network Rail](#) and [Southeastern](#).

Should [RAIL](#) refer to those, and not the merged South Eastern identity that exists in the imagination of the leaders, but remains unseen by passengers? Semantics, or an important point?

"Our lanyards have two brands

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Slade Green is one of the depots which services Southeastern's fleet of Networker electric multiple units.

because that is what our payrolls say," White explains.

"But I suggest you write us as South Eastern, just as Lawrence is running South Western, which isn't SWR."

Now, while we're discussing identity... how about the contentious GBR livery of red, white and blue, ridiculed by many commentators? White has publicly stated that he's not about to repaint any of his trains in the new colours.

Cue nervous laughter. There's a diplomatic tightrope to be walked here, and a long pause before the response is a giveaway.

White: "We are working our way through this. I'll answer a different point first."

He's obviously done his media training. This is a technique called 'bridging' - how to get from the question you don't want to answer to the question you wish you'd been asked, preferably without sounding like a government minister appearing on the *Today* programme.

"Three things are going to make this railway better. The first is vertical integration: track and train.

"The second is horizontal integration: by the end of May, South Western, GTR and South Eastern will all be in the same owning group. Look at the synergies you will get from that. Eventually we will all have the same customer app.

"The third thing is the digital revolution of machine learning - AI. GBR is where all that is heading, and red, white and blue is the chosen colour scheme."

That doesn't remotely answer the question. Try again.

"If you're Heidi Alexander [Transport Secretary], you travel in on Great Western, which is a proud and clear brand. If you're among the thousands of people who work for Great Western, you think that brand is important.

"We are very proud to be part of Team Rail, but we think our brand is important too. We've just wrapped all the Javelin fleet and our Class 376s.

"The piece of work in progress that we have to agree is what our interim branding looks like: South Eastern Railway as part of GBR.

"We don't achieve that by painting



500 trains red, white and blue, and we don't have the budget for that. Our customers are not ready for it.

"You will start to see some GBR branding from later this year, but how that looks remains to be decided.

"The starting point is building trust. GBR is going to have 90,000 people. People don't have a natural affinity with very large organisations, unless it's the NHS. If we are going to be accountable to our customers, we need to be the voice of our own railway.

"I've been promoting that Southeastern has a million discounted tickets available as part of the Great British Rail Sale. We think it's important that customers see there is a local team in charge of their local railway."

Meanwhile, there are new trains to order. Southeastern's Networkers are close to the end of their working lives, and they can't hang around, waiting for

the government's long-promised rolling stock strategy to appear later this year.

"We would love to 'do a Greater Anglia' and use new rolling stock to replace the Networkers," says White.

"They are '80s technology and they are proving challenging to maintain. If the trains were even older, they would be simpler to maintain. Bakerloo trains are much older but their technology is very simple. The 1980s electronics are far more difficult.

"We are at the point of evaluating best-and-final-offers from manufacturers. We are now inviting financiers to align with that.

"We go to Treasury later this year with a final business case, stating which train we want, and who we want to pay for it.

"It will have an on-board battery. We have some very old legacy third-rail power supply. If that fails on us, trains with a battery can keep going. It will give the capacity we need, but it will be a good fit with the draft strategy DFOT are creating."

South Eastern has been at the forefront of promoting social mobility.

As RAIL has highlighted over the past two years, it is recruiting local people from disadvantaged backgrounds, people from low educational achievement or from prolonged unemployment. This is being done in collaboration with The

"If your railway is publicly owned rather than privately run, you would expect it to be run on behalf of the passenger, and not just the taxpayer."

Steve White, South Eastern Railway MD

STEVE WHITE

Steve White is a chartered engineer with more than 30 years of experience in the transport industry.

Starting at British Rail, then Silverlink, he spent six years as production director at Eurostar, and then a decade at Siemens. Following a period at Transport for London, he was deputy chief executive at Govia Thameslink Railway.

He joined Southeastern from Govia as managing director in 2021, as it was taken back into the public sector.

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Purpose Coalition, led by former Transport Secretary Justine Greening.

However socially laudable, the benefits are notoriously difficult to "prove" in terms of cold financial numbers alone. Is it even harder, now that track and train are being brought together with an explicit requirement to cut costs and reduce headcount?

"It's equally hard," White says. He now chairs the industry's social mobility steering group.

"The economic case is good. If you give a job to someone who really, really needs it, and for whom that job is life-changing, the loyalty and endeavour they will give you is enormous.

"One of David's project managers came from a previous life that involved homelessness. He is an outstanding advocate for how the railway changes lives."

Davidson interjects: "He went from homelessness to having a master's degree that the railway paid for. And he's going to progress further.

"Last year, working with the King's Trust, we took 11 people. Some to

stations, some to infrastructure maintenance. Seven of those 11 are staying with us in full-time jobs.

"Those are people from backgrounds where their parents are unemployed, have perhaps never worked in their lives. Now they have salaries and they will stay for good, strong careers. These are entry-level jobs, and we'd have had to recruit from somewhere."

White: "In The Purpose Coalition, there are some amazing private sector companies, such as Sodexo and Barclays Bank, doing some stunning social mobility work. Alongside, we have c2c, Anglia, Lumo, Avanti, Northern and South Eastern.

"We really want GBR to be an engine for that. We're not just a railway that comes with a subsidy - we're driving economic growth, decarbonisation and social mobility. That's really important."

If RAIL returns at the end of 2026, to ask exactly the same questions, what will have changed? And will passengers notice any of it?

There is a long, long pause for thought.

Davidson: "We've hit our targets. We've lowered SPADs [signals passed at danger]. We've got failures down. We want to sustain that. We want to prove that we can carry on improving."

White: "I think we will be going further and faster. We have a formula now. We've learned that integration is not just track and train.

"There are 6,700 people in South Eastern Railway. And we are part of a wider ecosystem. All capital delivery is still done by Southern Renewals Enterprise. To keep our customers safe, we work with British Transport Police. We have relationships with Transport for London and the Regulator. The whole system is not just our integrated business unit.

"Track and train is more than the sum of its parts. We used to think that a fatality on the track was over when we'd cleaned up and restarted service.

"From a Network Rail perspective it was done. What they now know is that there might be a driver who is unable to work for the next six months and that a train might need some repair work. Now there is an understanding of the entire impact.

"It was difficult for Network Rail to 'put passengers first' without ridership information, revenue details, or customer service scores. Now they have that.

"We support the fares freeze. It will make the railway more affordable, it will increase the number of people who travel this year, but it will reduce revenue. It's a good thing for the railway, as we are helping to add value for money.

"If your railway is publicly owned rather than privately run, you would expect it to be run on behalf of the passenger, and not just the taxpayer."

A sign at Charing Cross warns passengers to mind the gap, as a Southeastern 'Networker' stands in an adjacent platform. These units are close to the end of their working lives.



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DAVID DAVIDSON

Scotsman David Davidson started his career with Network Rail as a management graduate in 2006, working in Cardiff.

He was operations director on the Anglia route during COVID, and from 2022 was interim route director on Network Rail's Western route.

He joined South Eastern Railway last year as chief operating officer.