

Viewpoint

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High speed but with caution

New changes in the planning system should help get new rail projects going.

The government is pressing ahead with a number of high profile rail projects. It will need to find ways to deliver them more quickly than in the past if they are to benefit the faltering economy. A couple of these are related projects, the implications of which are exciting. Importantly, they should be happening soon.

The Intercity Express Programme (IEP) has been hailed as "the most significant UK investment in rolling stock for over 30 years".

However, the procurement of the new diesel and electric fleet of intercity trains to replace the ageing stock is only part of the story.

Although a consortium led by Japanese company Hitachi is preferred bidder, large parts of the fleet are to be built in England. Sites for the factory and five new servicing depots are now under consideration.

Electrification will complement the IEP procurement and reduce our reliance on oil. There are two main categories of work; infill to join up existing parts of the electrified network and new electrification to the Great Western and Midland Mainlines. The work involved in mainline electrification will be significant and include power lines, revised signalling, track work and bridge alterations.

The new infrastructure required for these projects is likely to fall under a new planning regime. It will also need to interface with the heavily controlled live rail network. Both create significant hurdles to those wanting to implement major projects.

The planning implications of major projects should be taken seriously. The current process is notoriously inefficient. It took 20 years to plan and build CTRL but

only 22 years, following the opening of the Liverpool to Manchester railway in 1830, to construct all of the mainline routes in England!

The Planning Act 2008 will, however, provide a new regime to deal with nationally significant infrastructure projects. The new Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) will fast track schemes and is scheduled to accept its first applications early in 2010. The impact of the new Act on rail projects will be set out in the government's National Policy Statement (NPS) on transport. But it is safe to assume that many recently announced rail projects will become Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) under the Act.

Planning permission is only one hurdle in this heavily regulated sector. Those working on rail infrastructure will also need to be aware of Network Rail's:

- Standards and design approval regime (known as GRIP Stages)
- Asset protection requirements for rail infrastructure
- Possession regimes and safety requirements for work on a live rail network
- Prior approval schemes for contractors and consultants (eg Link-Up)

Those wishing to get involved with these projects should look out for and contribute to the National Networks NPS consultation, which the Department for Transport is due to start later this year.

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