

Transport Committee,
House of Commons,
Westminster,
London,
SW1A 0AA

please reply to:

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2021-01-15

Dear Sir/Madam,

Major transport infrastructure projects: appraisal and delivery

Raillfuture is Britain's leading and long-established national independent voluntary organisation campaigning exclusively for a better railway across a bigger network for passengers, and freight users, to support economic (housing and productivity) growth, environmental improvement and better-connected communities. We seek to influence decision makers at local, regional and national levels to implement pro-rail policies in development and transport planning.

We offer the following for the Committee's consideration in its Inquiry.

Transport infrastructure strategy and priorities

- *The Government's transport infrastructure priorities, including those set out in the National Infrastructure Strategy;*
As a pro-rail campaigning organisation it will be no surprise that we advocate sustained investment in the nation's rail infrastructure especially in the context of policy imperatives to improve connectivity for the social and economic inclusion it brings and to increase capacity for the necessary modal shift of passenger and freight traffic to less carbon-intensive modes.
- *the contribution transport infrastructure can make to the Government's 'levelling-up' agenda and the economic growth of the UK's towns, cities and regions outside London;*
Transport infrastructure is without doubt a necessary, but of itself insufficient, pre-condition for socio-economic transformation. Lateral as distinct from conventional vertical silo policy-making across education, health, spatial planning, place-making etc is also essential.
- *to what extent the coronavirus pandemic and its longer-term implications affects the necessity and cost-effectiveness of current and future major transport infrastructure projects;*
As the longer-term implications of the pandemic are unknowable and speculative the worst course in our view is a collective loss of nerve and momentum which, while relatively quick and easy to achieve, with unavoidably long lead-times for proper planning and procurement as well as delivery of major infrastructure projects, runs a strong risk of reducing and inhibiting the nation's capability to recover productive activity levels in that same long term.

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- *how major transport projects can be delivered while ensuring the Government meets its decarbonisation 2050 net-zero targets;*
Major transport projects should in our view be selected for reasons specifically including their contribution to decarbonisation targets; those which cannot demonstrate such a contribution should not proceed.

Appraisal and funding of transport infrastructure

- *The effectiveness of the Government's decision-making and appraisal processes for transport infrastructure projects and any changes required to the 'Green Book';*
It is in our experience a widespread perception that Government's own decision-making and appraisal processes add disproportionate delays and associated costs to the procurement and delivery of transport infrastructure projects.

Oversight, accountability and governance of transport infrastructure projects

- *The Government's role in the delivery of major transport infrastructure projects, including whether the Department for Transport has sufficient skills and expertise to oversee the successful delivery of transport infrastructure;*

There appears to be a long tradition of responding to perceived inadequacies in policy-making and decision-taking institutions by establishing additional bodies, regulators, and review mechanisms, with cross-currents of the language of devolution simultaneous with the practice of centralisation. The Department faces the twin challenges of internal 'churn' across government and of external attractions of alternative homes for the practice and development of specialist skills. Perhaps one of the central concerns is the Department's ability to attract and retain a sufficient calibre to pursue convincingly its role as an intelligent client, to be an 'informed buyer'.

- *the relationship between the DfT and other Government departments and agencies, devolved administrations, and the private sector, in delivering major infrastructure projects;*

Related to the closing point above, a concern that the Department is more manager than leader.

Factors influencing the cost of transport infrastructure in the UK

- *The reasons for continual high costs of major transport infrastructure projects, both past and present, and whether projects could potentially be delivered in a more cost-effective manner;*

One of the biggest single causes most frequently cited is the seemingly constant stop-start / feast and famine cycle of central decision-taking, interwoven with indecision and further inquiry; what became for example of the Hansford Review? We are neither the first nor by any means alone in highlighting the equivocation over electrification while non-specialists are too-easily seduced and distracted by the latest ostensibly alternative alchemy.

- *what lessons can be learned from other countries in the delivery of major transport infrastructure projects;*

It is perhaps ironic that while, correctly, we seek to learn best practice from other countries they in turn reportedly flock to Britain to learn from ours! If it is accepted that ultimately the delivery of major transport infrastructure projects is like everything else a reflection of the national cultural and political context in which it is set then the best, most enduring transferable lessons may in fact be learned closer to home.

Transport infrastructure capacity and skills

- *the extent to which there is enough capacity and the right skills within the UK to deliver the Government's transport infrastructure plans, and options to help address shortages in transport infrastructure skills.*

We suggest that a more predictable and sustained pipeline of projects would assist in retaining capacity and skills otherwise being attracted to opportunities abroad.

Yours faithfully,

Roger Blake BA, MRTPI (Rtd), MTPS
Railfuture
Director for Infrastructure & Networks