

Self-delusion in the official 23-year plan for rail

The Government is confident the railways can carry double the number of passengers by 2030. But Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly's 23-year plan, announced in July, has some major flaws and has been damned by some commentators as merely "tinkering at the margins". Others say the Oxford-educated minister's plan will strangle rail growth. Railfuture chairman Mike Crowhurst casts a critical eye over mother of four Ms Kelly's new "baby" and concludes that the crucial importance of the railway is still not recognised by ministers bedazzled by 60 years of pro-road and air propaganda

We were waiting eagerly for much of 2007 for the rail White Paper to come along and give us an idea of what future lay ahead for rail.

In the event along came the White Paper in July, and so too did the high-level output specification (HLOS) and the statement of funds available (SOFA).

As always with such documents, we found both good and bad.

But overall there is not enough good news.

Infrastructure

Three major projects are given a green light: Birmingham, Reading and Thameslink. Fine, but Thameslink "2000" is strung out to at least 2015. It is not clear if even then it will be complete.

The redevelopment of New Street station in Birmingham will improve conditions for passengers but not actually provide any more rail capacity.

There is still no commitment to Crossrail which has now been around longer than most of our leading politicians, although the Reading station scheme should at least remove the excuse for Crossrail not serving that key location.

But what about other notorious bottlenecks in other cities, such as the Manchester "throat" to mention but one?

There is at least a commitment not to close any rural or "regional" routes in this plan period. Nor is it envisaged that any lines will be reopened.

Indeed safeguarding disused alignments is also rejected on the grounds that "a blanket approach... would be disproportionate and blight homes and property". It is not clear how safeguarding available disused formations would blight any existing properties.

This lack of interest in safeguarding even existing public transport corridors does not look much like a commitment to "growing the railway". We did not ask for



VISION FOR THE FUTURE: The front page picture on one of the Rail White Paper documents

blanket safeguarding. What we and Transport 2000 suggested was a review of available disused formations by the Government and local authorities, with a view to safeguarding those which were considered most viable and useful.

We suggested a list of some 20 front-runners, all of which had a degree of official backing. Among these was the Oxford-Cambridge route, which could connect the Government's housing expansion areas.

Long-term

Only the most optimistic rail campaigners expected any firm commitment from this Government to high-speed routes in this review. But a more positive approach to examining the potential for such routes at some point in the future would have been helpful.

The Maglev pipe-dream however has sensibly been dismissed.

It is also right that when contemplating the case for new lines, the emphasis, initially at least, should be on increasing capacity to accommodate growth, rather than on increased speed for its own sake.

But when the White Paper notes that "rail and air together already meet the business traveller's needs", and that new lines "would have to be appraised against other measures including road widening", it is clear that the environmental case for less use of motorways or short-haul flights and more of higher-speed rail has not yet been understood, despite some politicians and officials paying lip-service to sustainability. Indeed the White Paper seems more

concerned about the environmental impact of high-speed lines but conveniently forgets the far greater damage to the environment caused by air travel and motorways.

Similarly, any idea of a new freight-only line is ruled out on the grounds that "most freight trains run in the off-peak when passenger capacity is less constrained".

The Department for Transport seems to be confusing cause and effect. Freights run largely outside the peak because capacity is fully stretched in peak for passenger traffic! Even if the officials were right, could not such new routes also cater for peak passenger traffic? In practice nobody has ever suggested an exclusively freight route, but rather one which was

The railway should help power economic growth and enhance the quality of our lives.

Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly

designed for and gave priority to freight.

Indeed the White Paper does recognise that freight needs a core network capable of handling more, longer, heavier trains with higher loading gauge, and that neither passenger nor freight should expand at the expense of the other.

But it also sees this as being paid for by higher charges, which again is hardly the way to encourage freight to transfer from roads.

The possibility of reopening the old Great Central Railway in the long term is, however, recognised.

To add insult to injury, the cost of strengthening road overbridges to cater for heavier lorry traffic is funded in part at least from rail access charges, representing a further cross-subsidy from rail to road while no additional charge is made to road hauliers.

Electrification

Here the White Paper is profoundly disappointing. "Electrification is expensive" and can only be pursued at the expense of measures to increase capacity, we are told. Why?

The fact that electrification itself contributes to increasing capacity is overlooked, as is the key point that electrification represents a high initial capital outlay in order to gain benefits from a more efficient railway in the longer term.

It is also stated that "as a green transport option, high-speed rail does not stand up on the basis of the present electricity generation mix", but that "if the carbon footprint of electricity generation reduces or zero-carbon self-powered trains become available, the case for 350kph will look very different".

Or put simply it depends how you generate your power. Precisely!

Which is exactly why an electrified railway and sustainably generated power must go hand in hand. No need for fancy new technology. We already have proven technology that works! So why not at least bring forward some modest infill schemes within the plan period? As oil supplies become scarcer, less secure and more expensive, the need to prepare for the post-oil era becomes ever more pressing. The White Paper merely concedes that the case for electrification should be kept under review. It also notes

helpfully that it would be more cost-effective if implemented after signalling upgrades, thus reducing the need for immunisation, especially if transmission-based signalling is installed.

Paradoxically, hybrid (dual mode) traction might similarly decouple electric rolling stock and infrastructure investment, hitherto inextricably linked.

Rolling stock

The commitment to more and longer trains is repeated as the best short-term fix for overcrowding, with 1,300 extra carriages promised – 900 in London with up to 12 or even 16-carriage trains suggested, 100 inter-city, and a pool of 300 carriages to "respond to growth on regional routes".

This is welcome, but there does not seem to be any discussion of implications for platform lengthening, strengthening power supply or passenger flows at stations.

There is also recognition of the potential of tram-trains sharing heavy rail infrastructure.

The new intercity express is promised to come into service from 2015.

Fares

This is the most worrying part of the White Paper. Higher fares are sure to reduce demand for rail travel at a time when we need more people to switch from cars to rail to combat global warming.

What we have long suspected, namely that fare increases were actually being encouraged by the DfT through the process of

refranchising, is at least now openly admitted. Franchising may "keep down costs" for the Treasury, but it pushes up prices for the passenger and will make the whole community pay a heavy price in increased pollution and faster global warming.

It is clear that the Government not only wants to see any investment funded predominantly by fares increases, but it is also seeking to recover rail subsidies from the same source.

If investment can only come from fares or state subsidy, what became of all that private capital that was supposed to follow privatisation, one wonders?

The Department for Transport justifies fare increases on the grounds that "we don't see why rail fares for the well-off should be subsidised by non-rail users".

As a pro-rail advocate, this naturally concerns us, not just from self-interest.

It indicates a move back towards pricing off demand for rail travel, rather than providing more capacity (predict and provide) which still seems the rule for air and especially for roads.

Instead of the fuel duty escalator which could be justified on environmental grounds, we now have a rail fare escalator which is completely unjustifiable on social or economic grounds.

It merely makes life easier in the short term for the Treasury.

Putting up rail fares as a policy disregards the environmental value of rail in sustainable transport, not to mention its key social and economic importance, and suggests that rail is still regarded by Government as a costly luxury,

The projects announced are a step in the right direction but we also need to see a commitment to a new north-south high-speed link and the go-ahead for London Crossrail.

RMT leader Bob Crow

not an essential service. On the contrary, aviation use is far more leisure-oriented than rail.

Furthermore, independent studies show rail is not the preserve of the better-off, but in fact is used by a pretty much typical cross-section of social groups.

For people without cars and people who want to travel without their cars, rail is the only real alternative.

If non-rail users are instead going by car or plane, then they are polluting the planet and

contributing to climate change far more than rail or bus users. They should be penalised financially to reflect this – if an environmental transport policy means anything at all.

If these rail users are as well-off as the DfT seem to believe, then not only are they likely to make more journeys than average, but they will no doubt also have the use of cars, and will revert to using them if priced off the railway. So much for sustainability in transport.

If the railway is considered a public service rather than a luxury, then it is no more inequitable for non-users to contribute to its costs than

This is madness, at just the time when it is vital to get people and freight off the roads, out of planes and into high-speed trains.

Mary Riddell, The Observer

it is for non-parents to contribute to schools and colleges, the healthy to contribute to hospitals, or come to that, non-motorists to contribute to the cost of roads and non-fliers to that of aviation.

We can find some consolation in the undertaking that regulated fares will be held to 1% over the retail price index in contrast to unregulated fares for which 3.4% over RPI seems the norm.

Nevertheless it is inevitable that a good deal of traffic will be pushed back on to road or air alternatives.

Commuters' season ticket prices are regulated, which means that the group which largely determine capacity requirements and are thus the most expensive to cater for, at the margin, continue to enjoy some of the lowest fares.

It is with somewhat mixed feelings therefore that we note that the White Paper threatens long-distance commuters in particular with steeper price increases in the longer term.

While this may restore some equity among passenger groups, it risks having an undesirable effect on peak-hour road congestion in the cities, and thus undermining one of rail's most important roles – catering for heavy commuter flows.

Two other silver linings to this bleak picture are the encouragement to zonal fares in provincial cities and the simplification of fares structures in general.

Anything which makes ticketing simpler and easier for users to understand has to be welcome, but we await more details such as exactly what the dividing line will be between off-peak and super off-peak, will the distance cap on off-peak day returns be

removed, and of course what the price differentials will be. There are also promises to restrain abuse of penalty fares by some operators, and to examine changes to rules so that single-line working past engineering work becomes easier, avoiding bus replacements.

Organisation

The Government attitude to passenger transport executives is confused. The DfT seems determined not to allow them to be co-signatories to franchises, yet say they want to give them a bigger influence over franchise specifications.

It is difficult to reconcile these two policies. At the same time the Department of Communities and Local Government sees the role and coverage of PTEs as expanding, judging by the consultation on the Local Government Bill.

Joined-up thinking seems conspicuously absent! In our view there ought to be nationwide coverage by PTE-type bodies, either at county or regional level.

In the 30 or 40 years that PTEs have existed, they have demonstrated that they understand more about integrated public transport than the Government ever will.

They represent local autonomy at its best, and should be encouraged to involve local rail services fully in their transport policies and plans.

Meanwhile, somewhat overshadowed by the White Paper and its attachments, a useful little document has emerged from, of all places, the Rail Safety & Standards Board, called *The Case for Rail*. Sounds familiar? Yes Railfuture published a similarly named

The plans are a national embarrassment.

Will Hutton, The Observer

document last year. The RSSB one is a mere 20 pages long, easily digestible and lavishly illustrated with graphs and charts, but more importantly, it contains a wealth of usable data and quotes – just what you need when responding to media enquiries or nonsense from the road lobby.

It is available online on the RSSB website: www.rssb.co.uk or copies can be obtained from them, phone 020 7904 7518 or by email: sustainablerrailprogramme@rssb.co.uk

It is good to see the industry blowing its own trumpet at last, but it has received remarkably little coverage in any of the usual periodicals, which is a great shame. I spotted it mentioned in one of the normally less-interesting glossy publications I receive. I commend it strongly.