Railwatch

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A strategy for growth?

By Mike Crowhurst

The long-awaited strategic plan for the railways is not an inspiring document, despite the hype that preceded it.

It commits no new money but explains where the Strategic Rail Authority deems it best to spend the money made available for investment in the Government's Ten Year Plan. The plan is however "designed to lead to the expansion of the railway".

If money is limited, little can be achieved and New Labour's reality continues to be: Hard choices. There is still no indication as to where the private sector contributions from industry and financiers - about half - are expected to come from.

An interesting but worrying aspect of the plan is the way investment is focused on London and the south east, and outside London, on InterCity and long-distance services, often at the expense of developing local services.

Problems in London are more severe than elsewhere and while the solutions are more expensive, they benefit users from the rest of the country - such as making journeys across London easier.

It is also easier to achieve a "50% more passengers" target by concentrating on the south east than by spreading the jam more thinly country-wide.

This could be seen as the rail equivalent of fiddling health service targets by tinkering with hospital waiting lists. It also reflects a party political view, with transport policies being slanted to influence voters in key constituencies at the next election.

Railfuture must lobby for a fair balance between London and the regions, between urban and rural areas, local and long-distance services, also between passenger and freight traffic. The proportions must be carefully monitored. It could be argued that local authorities can put in extra funds in their areas. In practice however, only the passenger transport executives and the devolved assemblies have sufficient clout to do so.

Even where shire counties have been more pro-active, they have often been unable to persuade the SRA, Railtrack or train operators to prioritise development of new services, or reopen stations and lines since privatisation. The PTEs have had more success developing and defending local services, but have come in for criticism from the SRA when pressing for service levels which obstruct proposals for more long-distance services, particularly in the West Midlands. There has been much criticism over lack of investment in the hub of the national network.

We want to see rail targets in the Ten Year Plan achieved but only so much traffic can be fitted on to existing infrastructure. Extending operating hours or running freight at night means less time for essential maintenance.

Making more effective use of the existing railway is essential. Running 12-coach peak trains in the south east wherever possible, resignalling, and restoring capacity taken out are practical options, as is using parallel routes such as the Lincolnshire Joint Line and the Camp Hill freight line in Birmingham. Dealing with some major bottle-

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Switched on

The accountants at Railtrack did their best to bury the idea of more electrification in Britain but elsewhere in the world real progress is being achieved by railway experts who know just how many operating and environmental advantages, as well as customer benefits result.

In South Africa 140 miles of track between Kimberley and De Aar were officially switched on last year.

The cost was £11million but Spoornet (formerly South African Railways) expects annual savings resulting from the electrification scheme to be between £1million and £2million. "We will improve our efficiency and the time it takes to transport goods and commuters," said Spoornet chief executive Zandile Jakavula.

"We are investing in this project for ourselves but also for the whole country." Government officials are also hoping it will boost the economy of the Northern Cape area.

Picture by Robert Magwaza