

Railfuture response to House of Commons Transport Committee Inquiry Call for Evidence, 2025

Rail investment pipelines: ending boom and bust

a) What have been the barriers to establishing stable and transparent long-term investment pipelines in the past (such as for track enhancements, station upgrades, and rolling stock orders) and how can they be overcome?

The strongest barrier might very well be seen to have been the oscillating pendulum of central governments' priorities. New opportunities to overcome that instability should be derived from devolution to Strategic Authorities and from structures within Great British Railways if working on a devolved basis through Network Rail's regions and in alignment with those new authorities.

b) What funding sources need to be drawn on to plan such pipelines and is an appropriate framework in place for the allocation of funding to different projects?

Sources from central government departments in addition to transport are to be included since rail investment as an enabler facilitates delivery of broader socio-economic and environmental as well transport policy objectives; current examples are Mid-Cornwall Metro and Okehampton Interchange station are funded through the former DLUHC. The potential contribution of Land Value Capture as pioneered for the Northumberland Line must also be embraced. Whether or not it is considered that an appropriate framework is in place for the allocation of funding to different projects, looking ahead the opportunities presented by devolution and the establishment of Great British Railways must be seized to ensure that there will be one.

c) How could a potential pipeline provide transparency and certainty for industry? For example:

i. what time period should it cover? Since pipelines are intended to enable flows it may be more helpful to consider an evolving programme within which there are appropriate review / refresh points, rather than the rigidity of more specific periods.

ii. what level of project specification should it include? If, in order to retain some stability and avoid another oscillation of the pendulum, the five-stage process of the seemingly-hibernating Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP) is still to be adhered to, that offers a known framework with appropriate levels of specification throughout the project cycle as the three-step business case development process unfolds.

iii. what commitments from Government should it include in both the short and long-term? With a changing landscape in the structures of governance – the advent of Strategic Authorities and Great British Railways for example – perhaps the single most beneficial commitment might be for Government to first be clear about projects which it will own for their genuinely national strategic significance (for example the new East-West and high-speed North-South Main Lines) and accept that the spirit of devolution means that regional and local schemes are in future to be “determined, developed, designed, delivered, and deployed” (ref: RNEP) at those levels.

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That said, the footprint of the economic benefits generated by an enhancement investment, rather than of the physical project itself, should determine projects of 'genuinely national strategic significance' and so if for example the Transpennine Route Upgrade qualifies then so too must the F2MN route (sometimes referred to as the Far East to the Midlands and North route) including the essential Ely and Haughley Junction Upgrades.

iv. what budgets and sources of public funding should it encompass? See response to b) above.

v. how should it engage private investment? Other contributors are better-qualified and experienced to contribute.

d) What role should the industry play in the development of this pipeline and how should Government engage with industry in its delivery?

The role of Government is to define what it wants the national railway for, then the role of the rail industry – in all its many component parts but in future with what must be greater coherence through Great British Railways – is to define how to deliver it, through mechanisms including an investment pipeline. The engagement of Government in its delivery must then respect the boundaries, however fuzzy in an imperfect world, between those projects of 'genuinely national strategic significance' for which it retains control and those which are not, devolved to the new structures which Government itself has ordained.

e) What role would a long-term rail investment pipeline play in developing the railway supply workforce?

Other contributors are better-qualified and experienced to contribute.

f) How should a pipeline interact with the Government's development of a wider long term rail strategy, rolling stock strategy, infrastructure strategy, and the Invest 35 industrial strategy?

The pipeline should be informed by those other strategies if Government is properly discharging its responsibility to define what it wants the national railway for, the pipeline then being the articulation of how those national outcomes are to be secured.