railfuture

Campaigning for better services over a bigger rail network

Railfuture response to Call for Evidence by Mass Transit Taskforce

The Taskforce has the following objectives:

- An assessment of the wider economic, spatial and social benefits of integrated mass transit systems with a focus on mass transit's role in supporting economic growth, new jobs and housing.
- Identification of the barriers that impede the development and efficient delivery of mass transit systems.
- Targeted recommendations to central and local government for practical reforms to project planning and approvals, financing and delivery models to speed up delivery and efficiency.

Accelerating development and delivery of mass transit schemes

Railfuture's particular emphasis is on practical ways of accelerating the development and delivery of mass transit schemes. Railfuture's response is therefore focussed on these two aspects, although some understanding of the context is critical if schemes are to rise above the largely outdated and narrow business case methodology and narrowly defined business or cost ratios.

Accelerating development

Railfuture contends that if schemes are to be expedited they must be presented as solutions to economic, transportation, environmental and social needs of cities or larger conurbations. This approach was adopted by the London Mayor for the highly successful Crossrail project in London where the Crossrail rail scheme was positioned as the most cost-effective way of addressing the transport capacity needs of Greater London in order to achieve growth of the economy and also the population of London.

The key takeaway was that the mass transit scheme was a solution to the city's range of economic and social inclusion needs, such as sustaining the working population and obtaining the benefits of concentrating productive activity in key centres so boosting productivity. This was true with factories in the Industrial Revolution and remains key with concentration of activity of finance and business services, as was the case in London with the Crossrail proposal - the "agglomeration effect".

The first choice is whether we want to achieve the economic benefits of establishing viable cities, cities that are presently underperforming owing to the lack of a viable transportation system. In making such choices to invest in our cities we must demonstrate that this approach is a wise choice set against other options such as spreading productive activity around the country largely based on use of the car or teleworking. There have been many attempts at this over the years, so quantifying the benefits of viable cities should not be impossible.

Worldwide experience suggests that viable cities are seen as key and yet many struggle with investment in mass transit.

We tend to think of mass transit as a rail based high capacity operation such as the London Tube or the New York Subway. However each mode of transport is most operationally efficient at different levels of ridership from walking and cycling through buses, light rail and high capacity rail projects like Crossrail. No one size fits all, even in our larger cities, even London and New York.

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This suggests that the context, to be successful, needs to be in the context of an integrated plan for the city or conurbation so the whole region benefits and each component element is viable so maximising potential stakeholder support. The stated benefits include the economy, social inclusion (cohesiveness as well as access to work), health and environmental factors. Recent experience in other cities, perhaps championed by Paris is that cities have to compete for population and economic growth so making the city environmentally attractive as a place to live and work is increasingly recognised as important. The business case to investment in cities must reflect all these benefits, even if many are not easily included in a straight business case of a transit project scheme is only part of the city's transport plan and indeed where greater benefits above the fare box are realised outside the project's finances.

Accelerating delivery

The requirement for efficient project construction in the form of a continuous programme of investment, retention of skills and teams of people are well documented and remain critical to the effective delivery of projects. However the area that remains contentious is project authorisation, which historically can take over half the life of a transit project or more.

Railfuture contends that the key to this is devolution of both planning powers and funding to devolved authorities, if current waste of project development costs is it be reduced so focussing any available funding on the actual projects. Railfuture does not advocate any less financial control of financial project outlays, but that devolved bodies should have funding for all their activities subject to the normal constraints. Such bodies should have to make choices in where to invest, including in mass transit schemes. Obviously schemes that have national implications should be subject to adherence to national policy objectives, and in specific additional cases where national implications are involved eg changes to the national network.

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