

Andrew Haines: Life in charge of running Britain's railways

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Andrew Haines is a man ready to take on a challenge. It is almost 10 years to the day, that the current Chief Executive of Network Rail held the same role at the Civil Aviation Authority during the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull. At the time it was the largest air-traffic shut down since World War 2.

Now, with his role at the helm of the company which owns and operates most of Britain's railway infrastructure, Andrew faces a different challenge. Specifically during the COVID-19 crisis, it is to keep operating a safe and reliable railway that can continue to transport both key workers and supplies across Britain.

He has sat down with the Chief Executive of railbusinessdaily.com David McLoughlin – via a video link – to talk about life at Network Rail and the challenges ahead.

“In one sense it is not the biggest challenge I’ve faced as a lot of it is out of our control and there are very clear public guidelines and a real sense of us all being in this together,” Andrew said.

“In a way challenges are harder when you have to drive it yourself and where you haven’t necessarily got automatic public understanding or sympathy.

“I remember when I was dealing with the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull (a name which still slips off his

tongue with ease) after a few months at the CAA. That was an international crisis, but there was no natural response to it.

“That was ok as it was a short period of time, but there was an immense pressure to fix it, so you were more at the heart of it.

“The difference this time is we are seeing colleagues succumb to COVID-19 as an industry. I heard on the radio that 15 Transport for London bus drivers sadly lost their lives.

“This is the context that is utterly unprecedented – the personal impact it has on people – the levels of unease and uncertainty.

“One thing which really has come through is the phenomenal levels of commitment from everyone in the railways. It is a reminder of the innate loyalty to the railways and the skills being used by colleagues to help save lives.”

Andrew has worked his way up within the rail industry – his first job being in left luggage at London Victoria station – with a 10-year diversion to aviation.

It is this experience that he feels has given him a good insight into what is needed to make the rail industry thrive – particularly during the current challenges.

He said: “We are trying to do all we can to help everyone involved in the rail sector – from the big global players to the smaller SMEs who are wholly dependent on us, and in turn who we rely on.

“We can’t afford to be indifferent and during this crisis we are learning better ways to do business. It is encouraging everyone to work in a more flexible and agile manner and we do need to maintain some of that at the end of this process.

“When it comes to renewals, I think we’ve already made the structural changes for the transition from CP6 to CP7. Our framework contracts now allow us to roll over into CP7. We still have a job to do around enhancements.

“Towards the end of CP5 all the money was being spent on delivery which is great, but very little money was being spent on development. As a result, as we entered into CP6 there were very few schemes that were shovel ready, so what we’ve seen now is a big dip in work. This is not because of a big dip in funding, but simply the schemes were not at a position to be procured. We have to work at that collectively with the Government.”

But despite the uncertainty with a lot of rail projects currently paused during the coronavirus pandemic, there are reasons to be optimistic for those in the sector.

HS2 has been officially given Notice to Proceed by the Government and in recent days Bombardier Transportation UK workers went back to work – just two examples.

When asked, Andrew said he was also confident the largest spending period on the railways since the Victorian period will still continue to go ahead as planned.

He said: “My expectation is that the Government will want us to continue with our programme at the end of this process, so we need to maintain capability.

“There is also every chance that the Government will want to see the pacing up of some of the investment plans to try and stimulate the economy.

“It is going to be hard to come out of this economic challenge just through austerity and it doesn’t strike me that this Government is going to be raiding the purse strings to the extent that we will be reducing work going forward. I suspect they will want us to at least maintain the programme so we’ve got to look long term.

“What I’ve been saying to the Government is that we know if you want value for money then we must stimulate innovation and give clarity to the supply chain.”

“I’m hoping within weeks and months of this ending we will see more opportunity for business with the supply chain, but in the meantime we’ve just got to keep really, really close.”

Network Rail owns, operates and develops Britain’s railway infrastructure – 20,000 miles of track, 30,000 bridges, tunnels and viaducts and the thousands of signals, level crossings and stations.

At the same time, it is one of the most congested railway networks in Europe where, prior to the coronavirus, there were almost five million journeys made and over 600 freight trains running on the network every day.

But 18 months into his role as Chief Executive, the pressures are nothing to daunt Andrew.

He said: “If someone had said to me 18 months ago the job would be as good as it is, I wouldn’t have believed them.

“It’s a brilliant job – it’s energising, it’s frustrating at times yes, but it’s absolutely purposeful.

“I meet fantastic people and I’ve got a brilliant team around me. I love getting up to go to work. The frustrations have been far fewer than I thought and the bits that really make you proud have been much more energising than I thought.

“Most people say I look much younger and healthier than when I first started and they don’t mean that as flattery, but more as surprise.

“We’re at a time of industry change and the ability to help shape that is part of a long-term legacy and that excites me as much as getting up each day and delivering today’s railway.”

Photo credit: Network Rail