

# Exclusive: Network Rail Chief Exec Andrew Haines on major Easter weekend works

April 14, 2020



Despite the challenging circumstances surrounding the coronavirus crisis, Network Rail has managed to complete an impressive amount of rail improvements over the Easter weekend.

Each project had to be reassessed and re-examined in just a matter of weeks to ensure the safety of staff, and to ensure key workers and critical freight goods such as medicines and food could keep moving.

Network Rail's Chief Executive, Andrew Haines, has spoken exclusively about their work this Easter to David McLoughlin, Chief Executive of railbusinessdaily.com.

He speaks openly about the challenges they have faced getting the work done. In the first part of the interview, David quizzed Andrew on how any work managed to go ahead when new assessments had to be completed in a matter of weeks.

He said: "The vast majority of the work had been planned months in advance, and indeed the big signalling schemes are planned several years in advance.

"What we were faced with four to six weeks out was the challenge of how much of that work could be resourced still and delivered in a way that would comply with social distancing requirements.

"In those circumstances when that couldn't be complied with, we looked at whether or not it was essential to carry on with the work.

In the first instance, we would see if we could do the job while complying with social distancing. If that wasn't possible but the work was essential we could look at not complying fully with social distancing, providing we found appropriate mitigations. But the priority was making sure all workers were kept safe.

"Out of the 23 major projects, we had to cancel 10."

Assessing the work that could still take place

With just weeks before the work was due to take place, Network Rail set up a mechanism with Rob McIntosh, Managing Director of the Eastern region, to do an overview of every project due to take place.

Among the projects to go ahead included the biggest investment for nearly 40 years in the Guildford area, which included work to upgrade track and signalling – something that is ongoing.

During the interview, Andrew said how Network Rail challenged, not just themselves, but also the supply chain, on deliverability.

He said: “Although we had a prioritisation mechanism set up, in the end we didn’t need to use it.

“We lost two of our significant signalling jobs because the contractor recognised that they would not have been able to resource the work and maintain social distancing. We couldn’t justify saying it was absolutely essential that this work had to take place this particular Easter.

“In other cases, resource availability meant that the supply chain said they just weren’t going to be able to resource that.

“The vast majority of the work went ahead and was delivered really well. We had one minor overrun on Tuesday morning over at the far end of the West Coast Main Line near Lockerbie, but that was a tamper failure on the final shift.

“With that exception we’ve had a right time hand back which is brilliant and demonstrates the level of commitment there is in the sector.

“If you’ve ever been out over Easter, or Christmas, and seen the orange army mobilised, it is a well-established machine and the people out there want to get the work done, and work done well.

“We’ve been brilliantly supported by the supply chain – people have responded very flexibly and very professionally.”

Impact of COVID-19 and the rescheduling of the postponed work

Although the majority of the major projects went ahead as planned, there are still several that will need to be rearranged.

Despite admitting to David that this will be a challenge, Andrew is confident it will get done in the coming years.

He said: “In terms of the rescheduling of the work that had to be postponed, it is a big challenge and we’ve got some bigger ones coming up as well. Major works at Christmas are under threat. This isn’t because of the supply chain availability, but because of the whole industry’s ability to plan those in these time scales – the ability to do driver training for diversionary routes, that kind of thing.

“We’ve set up a team to look at the re-planning. Over the next four years we’ve got sufficient space to do it, but we’ve also got some major projects like HS2 coming online. The phasing of HS2 will have quite a material bearing on how we profile, not just for the West Coast Main Line, but obviously we don’t want to be blocking the East Coast Mainline, and doing the King’s Cross works at the same time as Euston.

“We’ve got to work very closely with those external partners, but we’re pretty confident that we can re-programme within these next four years.

“If there’s one thing that the last few weeks have shown us, it has highlighted the commitment of everyone involved in the railways and that we can be much more innovative on how we do things.”

*Part two of the interview between Andrew Haines and David McLoughlin will appear on [railbusinessdaily.com](http://railbusinessdaily.com) next week.*

*Photo and video credit: Network Rail*