

IRP: Industry notes possible delays on journey to Net Zero

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There is concern that the new Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) cuts back rail's journey to deliver Net Zero, and might create some uncertainty.

Lawyers, renewables experts and engineers working in the industry all spoke out about how they felt the IRP could impact green efforts.

Michelle Craven-Faulkner, partner and rail lead at law firm Shoosmiths, said: "The eastern leg of HS2 was set to create new gateways to parts of the UK that are currently underserved by fast rail links, while also improving connectivity cross country between some of our major cities. The proposed infrastructure had one of the best economic cases of any part of the new high-speed rail network, supporting 74,000 new jobs and £4bn in gross value added in the East Midlands alone.



Michelle Craven-Faulkner

“Improving the rail system isn’t just about the economic and social benefits, though. Rail travel has key environmental advantages. While the new plans will go some way to upgrading local transport links, scaling back high-speed rail will limit much needed connectivity and hinder the UK’s journey to net zero.

“Promoting a culture of rail travel is a noble aim. However, until its benefits are fully realised, and greater consideration is given to increasing capacity, reliability and speed, this will remain a dream, not a reality.”

The Association for Consultancy and Engineering (ACE) represents companies who design, deliver and manage national infrastructure and built environment.

Andy Bell, director at Ramboll in the UK, and chair of ACE’s transport group said it the plan creates uncertainty which does not help engineers develop skills and resources: “Just 18 months ago the Prime Minister told Parliament in a statement following the Oakervee review, that it ‘does not make any sense’ to build Northern Powerhouse Rail without HS2 and the Government’s strategy was to do both ‘simultaneously’. Clearly the pandemic has strained public finances since then, but another change of approach does not help an engineering sector scaling up skills and resources – at a time of global demand for rail expertise – around what appeared to be clear commitments and pledges.



“The priority now must be to make the new approach deliver for both society and the Net Zero economy we must build. This means ensuring that the schemes that do go ahead increase rail freight capacity and encourage people out of cars, while also ensuring that they are designed as part of broader place-based regeneration strategies. With the change from Network Rail to GB Rail another potential complicating factor, ensuring a coherent and dependable pipeline of work for efficient rail investment needs to be a priority for the Department for Transport.

“Only then will rail be able to effectively contribute to improving the lives of people in communities across the UK.”

Andy Bagnall, director general of the Rail Delivery Group, representing independent train operators, said: “Rail has a vital role to play in driving the new economy and the fair, clean recovery the country wants to see. While millions of people will benefit from this major investment in boosting connectivity between major cities in the North of England and the Midlands, leaving out key pieces of the jigsaw will inevitably hold back the ability for the railways to power the levelling up agenda and the drive to net zero.”

Leo Murray, director at solar rail company Riding Sunbeams, said: “If the government wants to deliver a rail network that is fit for future generations and works for every community and every passenger, it must put decarbonising the network at the heart of its plans. The plan recognises this but does not go nearly far enough. It’s disappointing that there’s no mention of using renewable energy – which can be owned by communities – to directly power the tracks. The railways are the largest consumers of electricity in the UK, and zero carbon solar traction power could provide at least one tenth of the energy needed to move trains on the UK’s electrified routes every year, so let’s get on and get it done.”

The Construction Equipment Association (CEA) said this change of approach could damage faith in future plans: “The demise of Phase 2b, East Midlands-Leeds HS2 high-speed line, clouds the original vision of HS2 as a dynamic North/South link in line with the levelling up agenda. The concern is whether the government will row back on other infrastructure ‘commitments’. A solid project pipeline is the lifeblood of our sector.” said Suneeta Johal CEO of CEA.