

Launch of Project SPEED challenges rail industry to cut time and costs of rail upgrades

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The Government has challenged the rail industry today (Friday, February 26) to pioneer new ways of working, to halve the time and reduce the cost of delivering critical infrastructure projects as the country builds back better out of COVID-19, with the launch of the next stage of Rail Project SPEED.

In a key note speech at the Project SPEED conference today, hosted by the Rail Industry Association (RIA), Rail Minister Chris Heaton-Harris invited the 1,800-strong virtual audience to get on board with the new approach to become faster, smarter and more efficient in the way that projects are delivered.

Rail Project SPEED (Swift, Pragmatic and Efficient Enhancement Delivery) was jointly developed by the Department for Transport and Network Rail last summer. Infrastructure projects at different stages of development have been reviewed to identify how Government funding could go further and how work could be carried out faster.

This approach identified 10 key themes to lower costs and speed up the delivery of infrastructure schemes, such as rapidly increasing the use of innovative construction methods and removing complexity from planning processes.

These new and innovative ways of working will be rolled out across all rail upgrades, with the intention of ensuring passengers experience better journeys more quickly, giving greater value to taxpayers, and transforming the pace and way in which our railways are improved.

A project already benefitting from Project SPEED principles is the scheme to reopen the Northumberland line between Ashington and Newcastle, which closed to passengers in 1964 as part of the Beeching cuts.

Northumberland County Council, DfT, Network Rail, and AECOM have collectively worked to identify opportunities to bring this into service as quickly as possible. This could take months off the schedule and deliver efficiencies which save millions from the programme.

Rail Minister Chris Heaton-Harris said: “The whole country has relied on the transport industry over the past year, to keep the country moving, supplies delivered and key workers to their jobs saving lives. We are now depending on transport to kickstart our economic recovery.

“Rail Project SPEED, forged alongside Network Rail, is a call to arms to cut unnecessary red tape, be bold and purposeful, and empower the railway to be radical in its thinking to halve the time and reduce the cost of delivering infrastructure projects.

“By maximising the benefits of every pound that we’re channelling into rail, we will make the case for continued investment. Our intention is to create a more resilient, resourceful and robust railway, equipped for the challenges ahead and delivering better for its passengers, as we build back better from COVID-19.”

Andrew Haines, Network Rail’s chief executive, said: “There has never been a more important time to make the case for rail. The pandemic has spurred us to make real progress in removing barriers that have long hindered industry transformation. But of course, there is still much more to do, and we will do that faster and more effectively when we work together across the industry.”

At today’s conference, the Rail Minister has called on the supply chain to come up with creative ideas where they can help reduce the cost of delivering infrastructure projects, with the best ideas set to recognised in future industry awards.

The launch of Rail Project SPEED builds on the new Acceleration Unit announced by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps in August last year to complete public investment projects more strategically and efficiently.

The new Unit in the Department brings together transport experts, ministers, businesses, local government and other specialists to inspire fresh ideas, getting to grips with opportunities to improve infrastructure delivery and help transport share best practice and learn from other industries.

Commenting on the launch, Robert Nisbet, Director of Nations and Regions at the Rail Delivery Group, which represents rail companies, said: “Accelerating the roll out of investment to improve the railway through Project SPEED will allow rail companies to deliver more for passengers and the country, critical to supporting Britain’s post-pandemic recovery and the levelling up agenda. We will work together as one team with all parts of the railway by challenging ourselves to deliver upgrades faster and more effectively.”

Photo credit: Department for Transport