

Transport Committee: To hit its own decarbonisation deadline, Government must set out clear strategy for rail network

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The rail industry needs a clear strategy from Government on how to decarbonise the network, says the Transport Committee in a new report, *Trains fit for the future?*

As a matter of priority, the Government should publish a long-term strategy that sets out its vision for electrification and for the use of battery and hydrogen technology that is underpinned by appropriate costings, a credible delivery plan and enabling targets and milestones.

As part of its strategy, the DfT should commit to a 30-year rolling programme of electrification projects. If the Government is to meet the legally binding target of net zero carbon emissions by 2050, and a former Minister's pledge to remove all diesel trains from tracks by 2040, the current Government must take the first steps and start the electrification programme as soon as possible rather than waiting for the start of the next control period in 2024.

Network Rail and the industry should be subject to greater transparency and controls over cost to ensure

the rolling programme delivers value for money. As electrification is the only immediate decarbonisation option for most of the network, the Department should publish the list of 'no regret' electrification schemes identified by Network Rail and confirm which will come first and when.

Uncertainty is a key obstacle to delivering a decarbonised railway. The Committee heard that delays to key transport strategies such as the Department's Decarbonisation Plan, the Rail Reform White Paper and the Williams Review, combined with a mismatched target framework, have cost the sector valuable time for planning and investment.

Battery and hydrogen technology should be embraced as an important way of decarbonising the rail network, says the Report. The Committee encourages the DfT to make the case for hydrogen technology and to ensure that hydrogen trains are fully incorporated within the forthcoming national Hydrogen Strategy. The DfT must report on how it intends to support the growth of a domestic battery industry for use on the railway.

Trains fit for the future? considered not just the mode of power but passenger accessibility to train services. The Report considers the failure of several train companies to meet targets to make their trains fully accessible to be unacceptable. The Committee asks the DfT to set out the sanctions that will apply if companies fail to meet the deadline again.

Transport Committee Chair, Huw Merriman MP, said: "Decarbonising rail, and making our trains cleaner and greener, will be a considerable challenge for us all. Transport accounts for the largest source of carbon dioxide emissions of any sector in the UK at 27 per cent. Trains in Great Britain still rely mainly on diesel traction - an estimated 62% of the rail network is diesel-powered compared with 38% electrification. It will be some time before battery and hydrogen-powered trains are ready to depart the station, leaving electrification as the main option.

"Electrification has a patchy record of delivery. It's time to invest in a rolling programme which will speed up delivery, drive down costs and hold to account those who do not deliver to time or budget.

"We know that the Government is keen to encourage the development of hydrogen power and ask that the decarbonisation plan is flexible enough to include alternative and new technologies. To help, our research and development capabilities must be properly supported and funded.

"Rail contributes less than one per cent of the total UK annual greenhouse gas emissions and has a huge role to play in helping us move people and goods around using zero-carbon solutions. We must ensure that we don't push freight on to the roads as the move from road to rail freight is an important part of meeting our net zero targets.

"As for the passenger service, the industry has have had 11 years to prepare for legislation making it unlawful for a passenger rail train to be in service unless it is accessible. There are at least four train operators that are still not complying with legal accessibility requirements. It is not acceptable for the Department for Transport to continue to sign dispensations. Public transport must be accessible to all. The Government and industry must make this happen."

David Clarke, Technical Director of the Railway Industry Association, said: “We very much welcome the Transport Committee’s report on decarbonising the rail network, including the call to start as soon as possible a thirty year programme of electrification and investment in hydrogen and battery trains.

“We need to get on with decarbonising our rail network today if we are to meet the Government’s target of Net Zero by 2050. That means starting a rolling programme of affordable electrification that avoids the ‘boom and bust’ profiles of the past, thereby allowing the rail industry to continue to retain and develop expertise and capabilities so that it can deliver efficiently and affordably. We also need to see fleet orders of battery and hydrogen trains, which the industry is now developed enough to deliver, so that we can decarbonise branch lines around the country, placing the UK at the forefront of the global green industrial revolution.

“We now urge the Government to work with the rail industry to begin the decarbonisation of passenger and freight rail today, ensuring we play a key role in the ‘build back better’ agenda and support the UK’s economic bounceback from Coronavirus.”