

# THE PRICE OF PROGRESS

**Just before Parliament rose for the summer recess, the Government slipped out its delayed white paper setting out a 30-year plan. So there was little chance to debate it until this month's party conference season. Perhaps that's just as well, suggests Paul Clifton – there's barely an original idea in it**

**A**t least the rail industry knows where it is going. Steady progress on existing infrastructure, with passengers picking up the bill for a handful of minor tweaks and long overdue improvements. And maybe that's better than we've had in the past: it's the first rail strategy produced by the Government in decades; previous iterations came from British Rail, Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority. Now we have a shopping list rather than a wish list, as Anthony Smith of Passenger Focus put it. Passenger numbers are rising faster than anyone had anticipated, despite some eye-watering fare increases. Journeys are getting slower and rush hour overcrowding is becoming intolerable.

The white paper covers over these cracks and satisfies the short term needs. There's enough investment to keep the system going, clear some bottlenecks and satisfy the needs of the Olympics. But beyond that, there is little vision. Cut through the political rhetoric about doubling passenger numbers in 30 years and examine the firm commitments. There aren't many. Instead, the Department for Transport has chosen to hide behind the fallacy that it is impossible and inappropriate to plan for the long term. There's no decision on Crossrail; that's been deferred. Whilst the Government remains outwardly supportive towards the £15bn scheme, there is no mention in the white paper of how much public money might go into it or on what timescale. Crossrail's supporters find little to praise in this.

Thameslink 2000 – given the name because that was the year it should have been completed – will only be half ready in time for the 2012 Olympics. The section from Blackfriars to Bedford will carry 12-car high-frequency trains. But the rest, via London Bridge to Brighton, will not be finished until 2015. Yet these run-down trains with peeling paintwork and scrappy interiors are some of the most overcrowded on the network. Delaying this half of the scheme side-steps decisions about how to alter London Bridge – a critically important bottleneck as anybody who squeezes themselves onto a First Capital Connect platform will attest – and the linked redevelopment of Borough Market.

But Reading station gets the full works. It will get £425m from central government and a further £90m from various other sources to remove one of the country's biggest rail bottlenecks, the effects of which are frequently felt as far away as Cardiff, Plymouth and Birmingham. The Reading project includes demolishing the existing depot where the Class 165 and 166 fleet is maintained. It's to make way for a flyover to take lumbering freight trains heading north from Southampton docks away from the busy Great Western main line. A new depot is to be built north of the line, which will have scope to accommodate the replacement for high speed trains after 2015.



Passengers will fund the majority of the white paper projects through fare rises.

It will also have passive provision for Crossrail stock as well as the potential future Airtrack project for a new westerly access to Heathrow Airport. Whilst these aren't part of the current plans, there will be space for them at a future date. Crossrail's vocal supporters in Reading continue to hope the route will once again be extended this far west. It's currently planned to terminate at Maidenhead, but there is logic in reverting to the major interchange of Reading – the second busiest station outside London with 750 trains a day.

There is no mention of the specific projects one might expect of a 30-year strategy. Greengauge 21, the advocate of a high speed north-south line, was disappointed by 'the five years of thinking time that the white paper signals'. Nor is there a view on future electrification to meet both capacity and environmental sustainability targets. 'The case for network-wide electrification will be kept under review,' states the white paper. There is no mention of local infill electrification such as extending westwards from Reading to Newbury.

With new intercity express design work in hand, it seems the Great Western will be staying on diesel for another entire generation. In trying to avoid falling into the trap of making vague promises that may later not be kept, the Department for Transport is stuck firmly in short-termism. Would other western European countries take such a tame view? What of the

Cambridge-Oxford link? No word. One small section of track needs creating. A report last March by the East West Rail Consortium highlighted a strong case for it, linking Milton Keynes to Oxford, Aylesbury and Bedford. More recently, Steer Davis Gleave was appointed by English Partnerships to develop the business case for the route, which could provide a route for east coast freight without the need to travel across London.

What of reinstating the missing Lewes-Uckfield link, which enjoys enormous local support? No mention. Returning the Uckfield branch into a diversionary route for the Brighton Main Line makes obvious sense in the context of Thameslink. It reduces the distance that commuters in East Sussex have to trek by car to reach their trains, and releases that strain from the Brighton line. Rail is not put in its wider context. Passengers will have to pay rapidly increasing fares, while the cost of travelling by car remains at worst static after a decade of falling gently. For a family looking for a reasonably cheap weekend day out, taking the car instead of the train will become the only option.

It's the peak commuters who dictate the cost base of the railway, and the off-peak passengers who travel on the less popular margins. By capping peak fares to increases of one per cent above inflation, but allowing unregulated off-peak fares to rise rapidly – 20 per cent this year in several cases – off-peak travellers will indirectly end up subsidising the peak travellers. The white paper's claim that the government 'is delivering improvements without imposing new burdens on passengers' is disingenuous. Between 2009 and 2014, passengers will fund £39.2bn of the railway's finances, with government providing £15.3bn. Whilst the Department for Transport estimates that an extra 180m passenger journeys a year will raise about half the increasing passengers' contribution, the rest will have to come from higher fares.

Witness the off-peak increases built into the most recent franchise awards. In total the percentage of total rail funding coming from passengers will increase from a little over 50 per cent now to 75 per cent by 2014. In hailing it as 'the most ambitious plan for expanding the railway in 50 years,' the Government is less than explicit on this critical point. It's in there, but wrapped up in references to post-Hatfield spending and reverting to 'historic levels' of funding.

How does this square with the public belief, expressed in Passenger Focus surveys, that rail fares already represent poor value for money? Overall passenger satisfaction, although high, has fallen in the last year.

There's £200m to 'start work' on a strategic freight network. The route from Southampton to the Midlands must surely be the most pressing part of that. Again, no firm commitment. Southampton specialises in the fast-growing trade with the Far East, which is seeing the most rapid migration to high-cube 9-foot 6-inch containers. As a result of the increasing number of bigger boxes, rail's share of the transport to and from Britain's second biggest container terminal is slipping. That has already created thousands more lorry journeys a year onto the M3 and A34.

We had already been promised 1,000 new carriages over seven years. That's risen to 1,300 to tackle overcrowding. Around 900 will go on commuter routes into London. Most are to make existing trains longer. Longer trains need longer platforms. But £150m to upgrade 150 stations sounds pitifully inadequate. The aim is to accommodate passenger growth of 22.5 per cent between 2009 and 2014. But with growth of more than 40 per cent in the preceding decade, coupled with the heroic forecasts of recent franchises, the estimate appears conservative.

So how will the industry plan ahead? Steady progress: solid and unspectacular, so that it is always struggling to cope if growth is maintained at current unexpectedly strong rates – especially in London and the south-east where 70 per cent of all rail journeys occur. But shifting the financial burden more heavily onto passengers is essentially a reversion to using price as a means of stifling demand. Forcing marginal off-peak fares through

the roof, when the most popular commuter journeys remain capped at one per cent above inflation, seems illogical in every respect. Why fleece people choosing to buy currently empty seats when the overcrowded journey-to-work trains are to remain affordable? It also flies in the face of planning, housing and environmental policies, ensuring the trend for people to work in London but travel huge daily distances in search of affordable housing, encouraging people to live as far as they can stand – physically and figuratively, given the overcrowding – from where they work.

Since the advent of the private car, railways have not been able to pay for themselves. All western European countries have concluded that rail's external benefits justify substantial support from taxpayers. In Britain, the concept of road users supporting railways has been viewed in the same vein as healthy people funding the NHS or childless people contributing to the cost of education. Making rail users pay an increasing proportion of rail's total costs undermines its role as a catalyst for wider economic growth. This is a fundamental shift in emphasis: surely the six per cent of the population that regularly travels by train cannot be expected to support something which benefits society as a whole?

Most people in the rail industry will conclude that there is absolutely nothing inspiring, innovative or even remotely original in the government's thinking behind this white paper. Despite the fine words from Ruth Kelly, below the surface there is no firm strategy beyond the short term, explained away by a need to remain 'flexible'. Rail is firmly back in the box labelled 'too expensive, delay for the next government to worry about'. An opportunity that won't come around again for another five years.

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