Chartered Institution of Railway Operators

Integrated National Transport Strategy: a call for ideas

A Response to the Questions for Organisations from the Chartered Institution of Railway Operators

In your opinion, how could the transport network be better 'joined-up'?

The top priority should be setting a vision which is consistent over the medium- to long-term, with previous strategies having failed with regard to consistency. The context for this should be understanding the role of transport as a whole, and rail's place within that system. This requires clear, measurable objectives, along with an appropriate governance structure which reduces the number of organisations involved, and a whole system approach to decision-making.

Recognising the role of both passenger and freight rail services should be a priority, with better management needed of day-to-day operation to improve performance, particularly on critical mixed traffic routes.

Integration of transport modes and ticketing is a major concern. The Transport for London model is an exemplar, particularly with regards to ticketing, and there is good practice within other devolved regional authorities, with the potential for more local devolution, but there is concern about how this model could be rolled out for longer-distance journeys and outside urban areas. Achieving integration will require incentives to be in place for organisations to work together and/or for the Government to intervene.

Better connections are needed not just between rail services but also between rail and other modes, including alignment of timetables and provision of through tickets. As well as bus connections, improved integration with cycling is needed, with better and more consistent bicycle accommodation on trains and secure accommodation for bicycles at railway stations. A hierarchy of transport provision could assist here, defining how each mode can support others within a 'joined-up' system.

Data in the context of the next question can mean having better information about journeys, such as but not limited to departure times, journey planning, traffic information and accessibility information. How could data be used to improve the transport network?

Our key ask is for simplification. While there is much data available, the way it is used is not optimal, with rail currently viewed as 'data rich and information poor'. Rail passengers need easy access to meaningful and high quality data, with simple messaging presented in a standardised format, and this should be updated during disruption such that customers can make the best decision about how to complete their journey, with the potential for AI to assist with this. The current plethora of systems is confusing, with the need for a single system with a single owner driven by customer requirements. The current National Rail app is unsatisfactory, with the creation of a single app under Great British Railways an opportunity.

Technology in the context of the next question means new and innovative ways to complete journeys, for example but not limited to the use of autonomous vehicles, electric scooters and e-hailing rides. How could technology be used to improve the transport network?

This must start with a more in-depth understanding of customers' specific needs, which could vary according to their demographic. Technology has a key role to play in providing integrated transport solutions to enable seamless journeys, developing stations as transport hubs and linking rail with options such as e-scooters and cycles.

However, there is a distinction between existing technologies and those which are still maturing. There is currently too much focus on less mature concepts and products at the expense of those which are available now. Examples include the rollout of battery technology to power trains at the expense of conventional electrification, and a focus on autonomous vehicles taking precedence over e-bike and scooter hire or integration of ticketing.

The lack of an obvious channel for technology providers to submit their developments, products and services is also a concern. Where there is guidance, it is unclear how this contributes to the system as a whole, and a clear technology development path is needed to solve this issue.

How, if at all, would you improve the way decisions are made about the transport network?

Clearer, more streamlined governance with a long-term strategic vision is needed, along with better co-ordination between local and national levels, and more focused decision-making to ensure the transport system serves both passengers and businesses effectively.

This must start with a well-defined strategy and a clear organisational structure staffed by experienced, competent senior managers. Flowing from that is the need to separate decision-making from Government, with politicised decisions a key contributor to escalating costs within the rail sector. Streamlining of decision-making is another priority – currently there are too many steering groups and boards, and those that are needed should have clear terms of reference.

Decisions should be taken based on local need rather than top down decision-making from the centre. While the Transport for London model is again an exemplar, and increasingly also Greater Manchester, devolution should not mean national needs such as freight and long-distance passenger become subjugated to local politics.

Any other comments?

In conclusion, rail is an underperforming resource which can play a key role in the country's transport policy by providing an effective mass transit solution which complements other modes. To do this, there is a need to speed up decision-making and avoid adding cost through bureaucracy, and to focus outcomes on the customer.