

Introduction

A month after leaving the Local Government Association, it's great to be back among a familiar crowd.

My path often crossed with that of Bob Neill and David Parsons is a senior figure at the LGA. And when I ran the national press office for local government Peter wrote many pieces about councils in the Guardian – not always to my liking but always a must read.

My very recent move has taken me from the public sector to passenger rail, representing Britain's private train companies.

But our concerns, obviously, go much wider than just train operations – ATOC also has a keen interest in a thriving rail system and a modern transport infrastructure.

So today I talk about creating a network fit for the 21st century; the need for a much bigger system to cope with a looming capacity crunch; and the appetite for rail services that can carry far more passengers, faster and in style, not just better to connect different parts of Britain but also Britain with the continent.

And I talk about what challenges these changes will throw up for both planners and the rail sector alike.

Local authorities and the railways

The love affair between the British and trains goes back to George Stephenson's Rocket hitting 29 mph at the Rainhill Trials outside Liverpool in 1829, and the relationship between local authorities and trains is almost as old.

The 19th century municipalities soon worked out the worth of railways and encouraged the building of stations as keenly as sewerage and street lighting. The result - the glories of Sheffield or Darlington or Glasgow or many other stations across the country.

Stations soon became – and still are - the gateway to a town, city or region, a powerful symbol of how the railways link people, commerce and culture.

And today that bond between councils and my sector remains as strong as ever, with us working together in many different ways.

From enormous projects such as the £600m New Street redevelopment, jointly funded by Network Rail, Advantage West Midlands, Birmingham City Council and Centro.

To the National Station Improvement Plan where, for example, Southeastern is working with Network Rail and local authorities to improve stations at Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Dartford, Sevenoaks and Canterbury West.

Around the country, in many other ways, councils contribute to the smooth running of the railway line through their area; by stone cleaning or bridge painting, landscaping or providing car parking.

It is an important relationship, bringing enormous benefits to councils and train companies, local businesses and passengers, taxpayers and railway workers.

But how will this partnership fare over the next 20 or 30 years when the rail network must and will expand, throwing up all sort of difficult planning decisions and issues?

A railway fit for the 21st century

Although it might seem strange, with the green shoots of recovery just beginning to peep through the worst recession in many decades and the increase in passenger growth slowing down, we are actually heading for one almighty capacity crunch.

In the last decade, Britain has been Europe's fastest growing railway, with passenger numbers up by 45% and freight by almost 60%.

This may come as a surprise to some. People think that France and Spain are growing faster than us but not so. Confidence in rail has returned, and with it passenger growth.

More than 1.2 billion passenger journeys were made in 2008. In Europe, only Germany carries more passengers – on a network over twice the size of the UK's.

Around 90,000 passengers arrive at Waterloo in the peak three hours every morning; every year more than 100 million people arrive and depart from the station – equivalent to the total number of passengers at Heathrow and Gatwick airports combined.

Over the next 20 years, a conservative estimate is that passenger journeys will more than double, to over 2.4 billion.

And this renaissance in train travel comes at a time when public opinion could not be more positive towards the railways.

One reason is that most people understand the economic benefits of rail. That it provides capacity for large workforces to commute to city centres, increasing markets for skilled labour; that it offers fast and reliable inter-urban connections between major cities, providing access to clients, colleagues and markets; and that it extends the range and potential of the economies of

London and other major cities, leading to benefits for firms in satellite towns and from the spreading of communities.

For every pound ploughed into upgrading Thameslink, the British economy gets £3 back; for CrossRail, the return is £3.10; for speeding up trains between London and Nottingham, Sheffield and Derby, it's £11.

Ipsos MORI has found that sixty one percent of MPs say train operating companies make a positive contribution to the country's economy – broken down by party even 51% of Labour MPs agree.

And there is a perception that people switching from their cars and planes to trains will help Britain to cut carbon emissions. On average rail has a carbon footprint around half that of cars and a quarter of domestic air.

This will improve as more lines are electrified and the electricity supply industry itself is decarbonised. And trains are better for the countryside; a double track railway can carry as many people as an eight lane motorway.

So perhaps it's no surprise that all three political parties appear to have turned their backs on motorways as the answer to transport problems. Adonis, Villiers and Baker have all expressed their support for high speed rail, electrification, and a possible rolling back of Beeching closures.

Only last week, a collection of some of Britain's largest cities, representing a coalition of all the main political parties, launched a campaign to expand high speed rail network.

So demand will increase, and there is strong backing among politicians and the public for expanding the network. But how will these plans play locally? What will this expansion actually mean to people, to their lives and homes?

The challenges for the planning system

The government's routes of a possible high speed line travelling north from London have not been published yet. The first bulldozer cannot even start moving before 2015. The cost of the project also looks enormous at a time of great pressure on public finances.

But already the proposals have generated controversy, with warnings about blight and journalists digging up cuttings from the 1980s to revisit the outcry in Kent when the high speed link to France was in its early days of planning.

High speed is some way off and would not alone solve the looming capacity crunch. What is at least as important is the need for important improvements to the existing network. Bigger stations, more lines, an expansion of the existing network and opening up of disused lines.

And expansion does not just mean more tracks and extending stations. There will need to be more car parks. Bridges need to be widened or removed. Longer trains mean bigger depots and all of this needs to be to modern standards to reduce noise and emissions.

So how will the planning system cope with these new demands?

Well, we in the passenger rail sector are supportive, give or take some tweaks, of the way the process has developed during the past couple of decades. And we

believe that, if the planning regime is built upon some key principles, putting party or policy to one side for a moment, the much needed expansion in rail travel over the next couple of decades stands a good chance of coming about.

Our key consideration here is this: does the planning system recognise the uniqueness of rail? That, unlike nuclear power stations or oil refineries, we are not dealing with one, maybe two, authorities, but rather a collection of councils along a corridor, crossing a region, even two, three or four, cutting across 100 miles, 300 miles, between two conurbations or many more.

And speed. Will the process move quickly enough? Planning for high speed rail, for example, even if the building is not to start for six years, must get going very soon.

The 1992 Transport and Works Act removed the need for new railway works to have their own act of parliament. This helped to smooth the way for responding to the needs of the network. Since 1995, 27 new lines and 68 stations have been opened, many funded, as many here will know, by devolved or local government.

A further improvement has been the changes following the 2007 white paper and the development of 30 route utilisation strategies. There is no doubt that these have helped to align the planning horizons of local and devolved government and the railways. But a mismatch still exists. Planning cycles may be better coordinated, however the objectives of each are often very different, with local authorities looking at planning issues and economic development while railways are focused on transport issues and managing costs and resources on a capacity constrained network. We are still developing a common language here.

England, outside London and the PTEs, has been left behind, with the new strategic arrangements in Scotland and Wales showing the way. This is the gap that Connecting Communities, our report on expanding access to the rail network published earlier this year, aims to fill. Our analysis shows that in England there are 14 places where there could be a positive business case for a new line to provide access to communities each

with a population of 15,000 or more but which are not served by rail.

The Infrastructure Planning Commission

And so to the IPC. What isn't included are heritage railways, light railways and guided bus ways. What is included are railways – including short connecting lines - will be deemed projects of national significance and so fall within the commission's remit.

National Policy Statements, designated by the Communities Secretary, will set out the policy framework for decisions to be made by the commission and when projects are put forward. Sustainability appraisals and public consultations must be part of the package.

Development orders for new railways will require an application to the IPC, with consideration based largely on written submission, with provision for oral evidence. There will be relatively little opportunity for cross examination. A hearing would be held but for the first time, limits will be set for determination of applications, with six months for the examination period and three

months for the commission or secretary of state to decide.

What I would be interested in hearing today from you is how are we going to make the best of this new system? What do planners need from the railways? How can we best work together to ensure this new approach works smoothly? What messages should I take back to ATOC, the train companies and the rail sector about what we can do to ensure the strong bonds between us grow even stronger?

Civil servants are busily drafting national policy statements as we speak. And the commission begins operating fully by next April. Then we have an election, probably in May. It is not for me to guess the outcome but we know the Conservatives and Lib Dems have both said they will abolish the commission.

Whatever the outcome of the election, I believe the future of the railways is one of expansion, and that the next government – whatever its hue - will help to ensure that trains play an ever more important part in our transport infrastructure.

Our vision for passenger rail is compelling – a railway that serves customers with high quality, fast trains which make a major contribute to Britain’s carbon targets – benefiting passengers, business and the environment.

That great adventure started at Rainhill in 1829 has many more years to run.

Thank you.