

High Speed Rail 2 could remain on critical list for some time, says David Pitchford

The High Speed Rail 2 link between London and the North is likely to remain on the critical list for some time, according to a top Whitehall troubleshooter.



David Pitchford, head of the Major Project Authority, said: 'We were able to convince them that there is a far greater prize here and that is much more effective and efficient project outcomes and that will generate greater reputational return for the Government.' Photo: CLARA MOLDEN

By Christopher Hope, Senior Political Correspondent

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David Pitchford, the head of the Major Projects Authority, said the HS2 scheme is likely to remain an “Amber/Red” scheme because of the uncertainty around it.

The Authority was formally set up in 2010 with a mandate from David Cameron to turn around the Civil Service’s record of delivering projects.

It was widely applauded in May for publishing the first ever audit of the risks faced by the Government’s 200 biggest schemes, costing £400billion. Some 191 schemes which were ranked on their riskiness according to a traffic light system.

HS2 was judged to be “Amber/Red” meaning “successful delivery of the project is in doubt, with major risks or issues apparent in a number of key areas”.

In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, Mr Pitchford suggested HS2's will be Amber/Red for some time because of its "scale, size, complexity and cost".

He said: "If it was a sporting fixture ...you'd still be in the warm up you wouldn't be on the pitch yet. The reality of it is, there's a lot of things need to be defined before, for it to come out of Amber/Red, or a rating similar to that."

He added: "Before there'll be a significant change in our assessment of it, there will need to be less uncertainty."

"High speed 2 is in effect a whole portfolio in its own right. It's not just a single project. Some of the things they'll need to build in terms of the stations and things are quite significant major projects in their own right.

"So the complexity, not only of the rail construction, but all of the infrastructure that needs to go with it, and then the operating model and the rolling stock purchase all of those things must be addressed incrementally."

Australian-born Mr Pitchford is widely respected by Coalition leaders for his ability to get a grip of Whitehall spending. He is returning to Sydney to help care for his daughter in the next few weeks.

In recent months he has helped to put Work and Pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith's planned Universal Credit back on track after some initial teething difficulties.

Universal Credit "had become far more complex than it ever should have been. It is for all the world, a business transformation programme and not an ICT programme".

He said: "Universal Credit has gone through the same process that the Australian cricket team has, I think it's come back out into being competitive and probably will deliver."

Mr Pitchford admitted that earlier this year ministers and civil servants had been unhappy with his determination to publish an annual report, which laid bare the risks associated with the biggest Government projects.

He said: "It won't surprise you there were lots of people really terrified about it and so getting through it all... The natural position of the political beast is not to put yourself in a position where you can be criticised.

"We were able to convince them that there is a far greater prize here and that is much more

effective and efficient project outcomes and that will generate greater reputational return for the Government.

“What we were able to do with some of the projects was to convince ministers that getting them done well is as good a story as getting it done quickly, because not all quick projects are done well.

“So the aim is to be able to tell a powerful story about how well it is going as opposed to ‘at least we started the bloody thing’.”

The delays meant that the authority’s report was published at 5pm on a Friday before the May Bank Holiday, which Mr Pitchford admitted had “left a bit of a bad taste”.

Mr Pitchford is widely lauded in Whitehall for getting a grip with Whitehall’s major projects and increasing the number that will be delivered on time and on budget.

When he started in 2009 the proportion was 28 per cent. The figures are now 70 per cent and should be at 90 per cent or 95 per cent by the general election.

The key to his success was to turn projects on their head, work out how it will look when it is being delivered, and work back from there.

He said: “Civil servants used to be “encouraged to be obfuscatory and non-transparent because that is the way that things were done. Where we at now is that there is an understanding that that will no longer suffice.”

He said he would identify what he calls "steady business state, when you want to have the project which is operating as business as usual" and then work out what is needed to get to that point.

He said: "You need to start at that point because if you don’t know where you are going to go you will never get there. I don’t have any magic but what I do is apply plain, simple logic which starts out with ‘what are we trying to achieve here’?"

New rules are to be introduced in coming months that will give the authority an effective veto through a compulsory ‘validation process’ over major government projects.

Mr Pitchford said: “The rule of thumb will be you don’t start until you have been through a validation process and the funding will not be approved until that validation process.

“You need to do it that way or what you are faced with is a complete ‘re-scope’ somewhere down the line.”

Mr Pitchford, who was formally in charge of the Palm Jumeirah in Dubai, had wanted to stay working for the Cabinet Office until 2015. However he has resigned to return to Australia to care for his daughter who is in her 20s and has a life threatening condition.

He said the illness was now “under management and is likely to be cured but it must be done close up” and so had to return to Sydney to help to care for her.

Ministers are going to desperately miss him. Francis Maude, the Cabinet Office minister, said that “he deserves the gratitude of taxpayers up and down the land”.

His legacy, he hopes, are the hundreds of young civil servants who are being trained in project delivery at the new Major Projects Leadership Academy, which he set up at the Saeed Oxford business school.

When arrived in 2009 he found that “world-class project leadership is absent – it had been outsourced to the consultancy sector over the last 25 years such that there was very little capability within departments”.

The first project managers have just graduated and by 2015 there should be 340 project delivery experts ready to lead big spending schemes in Government.

By 2015 it will mean that “for the first time [ministers] will have a pool of very capable experienced and well exposed leaders such that you can choose the best leader for your most complex project”.