

More big projects needed for UK, says Crossrail boss

Boss of Crossrail project says 'continuity' needed for UK to stay 'top of its game'

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Britain's construction and engineering industries need a more stable pipeline of work if they are to stay "right at the top of their game" following major works such as the Olympics, the boss of Crossrail has warned.

Andrew Wolstenholme, who is overseeing the £14.8bn rail project across London, has laid down the gauntlet to ministers, claiming a "lack of continuity" is endangering the country's competitiveness and threatening to push up prices.

"If you see where UK infrastructure is right now...the reputation we are gaining to deliver on time, on cost and of high quality is building," said Mr Wolstenholme. "UK plc is right at the top of its game in delivering these major works."

But he added: "What we need to do is find ways to bring the pipeline forward... so that the industry is presented with a continuous pipeline of these major projects."

His comments come at a crucial time for infrastructure in the UK, with projects such as High Speed 2 coming under increasing pressure. On Tuesday the Institute of Directors has joined those calling for HS2 to be scrapped, branding the £50bn high-speed rail project "a grand folly".

A survey of IoD members found that just 27pc feel HS2 represents good value for money, and 70pc say the scheme will have no impact on the productivity of their business.

The Crossrail project will connect Maidenhead and Heathrow with Shenfield in Essex and Abbey Wood via a 75-mile rail line when it is fully complete in 2019. Transport for London is now also currently analysing the case for "Crossrail 2" which could link areas to the south of London to the north.

Mr Wolstenholme said "lessons should be learnt" from the project, which took 35 years to progress from a study to the first shovels going into the ground in May 2009. The project was severely delayed in the nineties when a Parliamentary bill to sanction the scheme was defeated amid concerns over costs.

Crossrail is now having to train up to 3,500 people in underground construction due to a lack of

workers with the relevant skills to carry out the scheme, which is currently the biggest in Europe.

Mr Wolstenholme said that "well-funded, well-directed economic infrastructure is very good for stimulating economic growth". But he added: "One of the reasons why we are always talking about the costs of doing things in the UK compared to the Continent is because we don't have that continuity of these major projects.

"These projects do take quite a long time to get to the start line but I think what we need to do is learn from Crossrail and understand how we can take those lessons forward to bring Crossrail 2 forward more quickly."

Although the cost of Crossrail far outweighs any other recent infrastructure project in Britain, including the Olympics, it has been calculated that it will deliver a £42bn benefit to the UK economy as a whole, including supporting the equivalent of 55,000 full time jobs.

Londoners stand to benefit the most, particularly from a sharp rise in house prices, but Crossrail claims 57pc of every pound spent on the project goes to the regions, with work being awarded to suppliers from Falmouth to Fife. It will increase rail capacity in London by 10pc and will mean an extra 1.5m people will live within 45 minutes of central London by train

The positive claims for Crossrail stand in stark contrast to some criticisms of HS2. A report last week by the Institute for Economic Affairs claimed the costs could spiral as high as £80bn, and there have been objections from leading politicians including former Labour ministers Alistair Darling and Lord Mandelson.