

Government accused of breaking strict Civil Service rules in its rushed appointment of Sir David Higgins

His rise to chairman has been criticised as 'rushed', with the decision having been made in a 'panic'

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The Government has been accused of breaking strict Civil Service rules in its rushed appointment of Sir David Higgins to rescue the heavily criticised plans for the £42.7bn High Speed 2 railway.

Sir David, the man who oversaw the much-lauded construction of the London 2012 Olympic Park and who is currently in charge of Network Rail, was hailed as HS2's potential saviour when he was named as chairman last month. However, the appointment came suddenly, alongside the surprise resignation of Douglas Oakervee, who had endured a difficult year of spiralling costs and the threat of losing cross-party support.

The role was not advertised and headhunters were not instructed to find a replacement for Mr Oakervee, which is contrary to public sector appointment regulations designed to ensure a fair selection process.

One senior rail source said that "every Civil Service rule in the book has been broken". Even Margaret Hodge, chairwoman of the powerful Public Accounts Committee, who is supportive of Sir David's "fantastic" record, told *The Independent on Sunday* that it "would have been better to have handled the process properly" and that the appointment had been made in a "panic".

A Department for Transport spokesman said this weekend that Sir David's recruitment was "completely above board". Sir David Normington, Commissioner for Public Appointments, agreed that HS2 could hire Sir David without a competition to "ensure a smooth and swift transition", which is allowable in exceptional circumstances.

However, rail sources argued that the situation did not warrant a waiver, given that the first London-to-Birmingham phase of HS2 will not be completed until 2026. "Higgins doesn't take up the role until 1 January. If it was that exceptional, he would have started on 1 October," an industry source argued.

Although Sir David was an obvious candidate for the role, as he is leaving Network Rail early next year and the construction industry had pushed for him to be involved, the Australian would not have been the only strong candidate had there been a formal selection process.

Industry sources have pointed out that there would have been at least six other possibilities for the job: Terry Morgan, the current chairman at Crossrail; Sir David Rowland, who held the job before Mr Oakervee; Rob Holden, who led the construction of High Speed 1; Sir Adrian Montague, who has previously been in the running for the job; John Armitt, who has just completed an infrastructure review commissioned by the Labour Party; and Simon Kirby, a senior colleague of Sir David at Network Rail.

Mr Kirby is thought to be considering his position at Network Rail, having failed to be named as Sir David's successor. A former oil executive, Mark Carne, is to head up the state-backed organisation.

The news comes as HS2 supporters wait to hear who will be the minister responsible for the railway. Simon Burns resigned on Friday to run as Deputy Speaker in the Commons.

A DfT spokesman said: "A lengthy recruitment campaign would have risked not having a new chairman in post when Doug Oakervee steps down. The appointment of Sir David is the right move for a project so vital to our economic success."