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Crossrail project on track at midway stage

By Mark Odell, Transport Correspondent



A Crossrail construction site at Stepney Green in east London

The head of the £14.8bn Crossrail programme has warned of bigger challenges to come as the scheme to build an east-west rail line under London approaches its halfway point.

Andrew Wolstenholme said Europe's biggest infrastructure project was running on schedule and on budget as it neared the milestone, which is expected towards the end of January.

He said it was crucial for the civil engineering phase, which includes the excavation of 21km of twin-bore tunnels under the heart of the capital, and the construction of nine stations, to be on track before the task of building the physical rail infrastructure started.

The use of eight large tunnelling machines under London involved "huge risks", he said, but they were not as big as getting the rail line built and running.

"Fitting out the stations and making a world-class railway are the larger risks, but if you're not on time and on budget halfway through, then you are always going to constrain that second half," said Mr Wolstenholme.

The civil engineering work, including the tunnelling, is scheduled to finish by early 2015, at which point the focus will move on to putting in the track and signalling systems, as well as fitting out the stations.

The scheme will create a 120km rail line linking Maidenhead, west of London, through the centre of the capital and out into the eastern suburbs, both north and south of the river Thames.

Transport for London, which is the lead authority on the project, is due to award a £1bn-plus contract to build trains for Crossrail in the first quarter of 2014. It is also expected to select an operator to run the line by the end of 2014.

The operator, Crossrail, and the train manufacturer will then face the challenge of ensuring the rolling stock and signalling system work together.

Crossrail is not due to open until 2018, but the winning operator will take over services between London Liverpool Street and Shenfield in Essex from mid-2015 as part of a phased build-up to the start of services across the full 120km of the line.

Crossrail has been designed to complement the 11 lines that make up the London Underground, the world's oldest metro system, which celebrated its 150th anniversary this year.

With most of the Tube network dating from the early 1900s, the lines pass through narrower tunnels than more modern underground trains.

Crossrail will run trains through full-size tunnels, lifting London's rail capacity by a tenth.

Each 200-metre-long train will be able to carry 1,500 passengers, almost twice the capacity of a Tube train, with 200m passengers forecast to use Crossrail each year.

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