

Rail Plant Association Update

RPA Management Committee Chair Andy Crago reports on the current initiatives of the association.

In the last edition of the magazine, RPA Chair Paul Helks stood down and it is a pleasure and honour to take over from him. On 4th September, I chaired the 192nd Management Committee meeting in Stafford to start my duties, which was well attended with vigorous discussions on a range of topics. There were a couple of key areas that are of note.

ALO operations

The first concerns Any Line Open (ALO) planners and coordinators on when they have to hold the Sentinel OTP 04 Control of ALO competence, which was communicated to the industry as being effective from 10th February 2025. In the latest issue of module P500 of the Infrastructure Plant Manual, which comes into force on 7th December, it states: 'All persons planning and coordinating ALO operations on NRMI and Network Rail projects shall be trained and assessed in accordance with the Sentinel Scheme Control of ALO competence.'

The Network Technical Head of Plant for Network Rail confirmed that complying with the 10th February 2025 date - i.e. complying with the Sentinel Scheme requirements - means compliance to the Infrastructure Plant Manual. All sponsors should be managing the transition from bespoke courses to the Sentinel course before that date for anyone who plans and controls ALO operations.

OTP core module

Another subject discussed was the position with the On-Track Plant (OTP) core module. I had two calls on this subject from RPA members who had had their staff turned away from sites as the date for OTP core had



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expired on their Sentinel smart card. The OTP core module was removed from the Sentinel competency framework at the end of 2023 and is now simply an e-Learning package. All who have gone through this e-learning will have been issued with a certificate to demonstrate this achievement, which should be taken to site as proof of completion.

Delivery point management

Delivery point management is a key subject to our members, and the RPA is aware of several working groups in different Network Rail Regions being established and developing processes, which is positive to hear. However, concern was raised that the process developed may differ in content across the Routes and Regions, and for national suppliers this could cause confusion as to what process to follow. It would be beneficial if the leads of each working group shared their work and develop one core process, maybe with local additions at the end. The RPA Management Committee offers its support to the working group leads to help develop a robust DPM process.

Other matters

Over the last 10 years, there have been several collisions between OTP and, following the Ramsden Bellhouse collision, a lot of work has been carried out on the RAIB report

recommendations by the Mechanical & Electrical Engineers Networking Group (M&EE Group), RSSB and the RPA. As part of the analysis of these events, the competence of the operator when driving the plant including down steep gradients was an area identified where improvements can be made. A working group was established between the M&EE Group and the RPA and good progress has been made to develop an OTP operator professional driving guidance document to provide sponsors, trainers and assessors with a robust process to cover this important element of an operator's duties. Equally, there will be a lot of guidance for an operator on driving techniques which it is hoped will form an essential and useful source of information for them.



Andy Crago, Management Committee Chair, RPA.

Steve Featherstone update

It is now a couple of months since Labour took over the government of the country. As such, I thought it was worth reflecting on what this might mean for the railway in general and for the plant community, in particular. The new government did not hang about in terms of its agenda for railways, introducing the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill within its first month in office. This means that, as franchises end, the train operating companies will be progressively nationalised and form part of Great British Railways.

I think that the various franchises have done a great job over the last 30 years in terms of improving the quality of service and increasing passenger numbers. But you reach a point of diminishing returns and renationalising the train operating companies offers a one-off opportunity for efficiency savings which can hopefully then be spent on improving the railway infrastructure. The removal of management fees, the disbanding of the delay attribution armies and the merging of common support organisations such as safety, finance, payroll, IT, communications, etc. should generate significant savings in the order of 10% of total costs.

Hopefully, these savings will be

retained by the railway and can be invested into additional maintenance and renewals activities, to improve the reliability and performance of the railway, which should, in turn, increase passenger numbers as customer confidence returns. Additional maintenance and renewals activities of course means additional requirements for plant to support the extra work.

Importantly, the new government does not want to renationalise the rolling stock leasing companies as the country would have to buy the assets. The current lease model is seen as the way forward for rolling stock. I think that this will also apply for railway plant as it would cost circa £1 billion to buy the plant assets which the government is unlikely to want to do.

In her initial assessment of the economy and immediate actions, the new Chancellor decided to close down the £500 million Restoring Your Railways Fund. In reality, this was always a political fund, rather than a railway one, designed to enthrone rural communities in the hope that they could restore a railway, closed under Beeching. The reality is that, for many schemes, it was never likely they would ultimately pass an economic test so, in my view, it was lots of money wasted producing feasibility studies which would never

ultimately lead to a restored railway. The serious projects, which are often used as a measure of success of the fund, were always part of the long-term railway strategic development plan and they will remain so in the future. From a railway plant perspective, the schemes which made economic sense will still happen and, therefore, the plant work will also still happen. The losers in this area will be the consultants who were used to produce feasibility reports which were never likely to lead to any new infrastructure investment.

The new government has indicated that it wants to devolve more decision making and budget responsibility to the Metro Mayors. I think this will be good for the railway as history shows that Metro Mayors, who are in touch with local community requirements, tend to invest more in railways than central government. In the medium-term, this should mean more railway work and more shifts for plant companies.

So far, the new government has not given any indication on what its plans are for HS2. The cancellation of Phase 2A was another politically motivated decision which did not involve knowledgeable senior railway people anywhere near enough to fully understand the consequences. The bottleneck at Handsacre Junction, and

the loss of capacity between Handsacre and Crewe, will mean that benefits of HS2 Phase 1 will be significantly reduced.

Hopefully, common sense will prevail and a Midlands to North West capacity expansion project can be introduced with infrastructure designed at 300kph, rather than the 400kph of HS2. The significance of 300kph is that it is the common standard for high-speed design and construction used around the world, so the design codes, construction standards and unit costs are very well understood, with around 50 years of worldwide experience including HS1. Constructing HS2 infrastructure for 400kph meant that much of the infrastructure was first of type, significantly increasing the timescales and costs associated with both the design and construction. If we learn one lesson from HS2 so far, it is that we should build future infrastructure for 300kph rather than 400kph. The difference in journey time, in such a small country as Britain, is fairly small but the difference in time and costs of construction are significant.

If the Midlands to North West capacity expansion project goes ahead then in the medium-term, it will be good for general construction plant and in the long-term it will be good for railway-specific plant.

The next part of HS2, which the

government has yet to make a decision on, is the link between Old Oak Common and Euston. If we could wind the clock back then, in my view, Old Oak Common should always have been the London terminal station for HS2. Unfortunately, it was designed and built as a through station in the expectation that trains would turn around at Euston. Most people get onto the tube to continue their journey when they get to London. It does not make too much difference if that is at Old Oak Common or Euston.

I do have a fairly radical alternative which is to save the money on the Old Oak Common to Euston leg and alternatively connect Old Oak Common with HS1, allowing through trains to continue on to Europe. This creates an additional London international terminal at Old Oak Common, relieving some of the constraints at St. Pancras. It also allows residents of the West Midlands to get a direct train to Brussels, Paris or Amsterdam. As a resident of the West Midlands, I would like to be able to do this. Not continuing to Euston would also create the opportunity for a significant urban regeneration scheme using the acquired HS2 land. This would create a new Euston Station, new retail outlets, new offices and new housing.

From a plant perspective, a Euston

regeneration project would be great for general construction plant and the rebuilding of Euston Station would generate lots of work for railway-specific plant.

In summary, I think that the new government have made a good start in setting a new direction for railways which should be overall positive for railway plant companies in the medium to long-term.



Steve Featherstone, RPA Consultant.