

Ardent

Delivering Mass Transit Faster

*Ardent evidence, analysis and recommendations
to the Mass Transit Taskforce*



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Delivering Mass Transit Faster

Ardent evidence, analysis and recommendations to the Mass Transit Taskforce

Ardent welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Mass Transit Taskforce's call for evidence.

For almost 35 years, Ardent has worked on major transport infrastructure across the UK, including more than 25 Transport and Works Act Order projects. Our experience spans strategic land and property advice, land referencing and assembly, affected-party case management and data management, consent management, project delivery management, and stakeholder engagement, consultation and communications with involvement in schemes including Manchester, Nexus and Midland Metrolink, Edinburgh Trams, West Yorkshire Mass Transit, Nottingham Tram, Docklands Light Railway, the Northern Line Extension, Bank Station Capacity Upgrade and Croydon Tram.

The Taskforce is considering barriers and opportunities across the full lifecycle of mass transit, from understanding economic, spatial and social benefits through to governance, capability, strategic fit, business case development, engagement, funding, consenting and delivery.

Our response focuses on the areas where Ardent's project experience, practitioner insight and published analysis provide the strongest evidence.

Across that experience, there is a clear and recurring issue: mass transit delivery cannot be improved by considering each stage of a project in isolation.

Route and mode decisions affect land. Land affects people and businesses. Stakeholder issues can influence design. Design changes can alter the business case. Environmental, statutory and operational requirements can determine whether the proposition is ultimately deliverable.

Taken together, our analysis and experience suggest that one of the greatest opportunities to improve mass-transit delivery is not simply to make individual processes faster, but to bring delivery knowledge into projects earlier and manage the interfaces between those processes more deliberately. Speed and cost-effectiveness should be the product of readiness, integration and experienced delivery not the compression of unresolved risk and must remain aligned with the quality and strategic purpose of the investment.

Start with the outcomes mass transit is intended to unlock

Ardent evidence and practitioner insight

In Ardent's published [From Devolution to Delivery analysis](#), we argue that transport should be treated as enabling infrastructure for economic development and placemaking, not solely as a means of moving people. Mass transit can provide a critical missing layer in the infrastructure of towns and cities seeking to unlock housing, regeneration, employment and wider opportunity.

Drawing on Greater Manchester, the analysis identifies an increasing connection between transport investment and housing delivery, town centre regeneration, employment growth and placemaking. It also considers the Bee Network as an example of buses, trams and active travel being brought together within a more integrated system intended to support economic growth, regeneration and passenger experience.

The same published analysis argues that future investment decisions may increasingly need to consider how individual schemes contribute to wider transport connectivity, regeneration and economic growth rather than assessing projects in isolation. It identifies several practical implications, including the need for wider network thinking, stronger demonstration of regeneration and placemaking benefits within business cases and greater collaboration between transport planning, engineering, land, stakeholder engagement and regeneration disciplines.

Our published analysis also identifies a stronger role for Combined Authorities and regional transport bodies in connecting individual projects with regional transport strategies and local growth plans, supported by earlier engagement with local stakeholders.

Ardent analysis

Applying those insights to the Taskforce's questions leads us to two conclusions.

First, the strategic case for mass transit should be clear about the place outcomes the intervention is intended to enable, not simply the transport outputs it will provide.

Where a scheme is expected to support housing, regeneration or economic growth, those outcomes need to influence the scheme from the outset. They should form part of the criteria against which options are assessed rather than being added later as wider benefits.

Second, wider outcomes create wider dependencies. A mass transit scheme intended to enable regeneration may depend on landowners, developers, local authorities, businesses and communities whose actions or interests sit outside the direct control of the transport promoter.

Strategic fit should therefore be tested not only against policy, but also against the practical conditions required for wider economic and spatial benefits to materialise.

These conclusions draw on Ardent’s published analysis and direct practitioner experience. Their practical implication is that strategic ambition must be tested against the land, stakeholder, consenting, funding and delivery conditions required for the intended benefits to materialise.

Where mass transit investment is expected to unlock significant development, regeneration or land-value uplift, those relationships should also inform funding strategy from an early stage. Major landowners, developers and other beneficiaries should be identified during route and options development so that potential contributions, land arrangements and wider value-sharing opportunities can be explored while the proposition remains capable of change.

This could include direct financial contributions, provision of land at reduced or nil cost, infrastructure works or other forms of value sharing where these are proportionate to the benefit created.

Recommendations

The Taskforce should encourage promoters to:

- establish the wider economic, spatial, social and place outcomes a scheme is intended to enable
- demonstrate alignment with regional transport, growth, housing and regeneration strategies
- identify major beneficiaries and potential value-sharing opportunities during route and options development rather than once the alignment is fixed
- assess individual interventions as part of wider networks
- incorporate wider place outcomes explicitly into options and business case development
- involve those responsible for land and property, consent, regeneration, economic development, stakeholder engagement and delivery—alongside affected communities and organisations—early enough to test whether the intended outcomes and preferred options are realistically deliverable.

Test deliverability while schemes can still change

Ardent practitioner insight

Across Ardent’s major infrastructure work, a recurring delivery lesson is that the early identification of issues relating to access, highways, servicing, utilities, ecology, land, construction and business continuity can materially improve a proposition. If these issues emerge only after substantial design, appraisal or political commitment, they can instead result in redesign, delay or objection.

Ardent’s land and property teams work from route optioneering and feasibility through consent, acquisition and delivery. Early strategic land input can inform route and red-line boundary development, identify ownership and rights constraints, avoid unnecessary land take, assess compensation and acquisition risks, and identify permanent and temporary requirements such as access routes and construction compounds. It can also identify impacts on homes, businesses, access and servicing that require early mitigation or affected-party case management.

Published Ardent project experience

East West Rail Phase 3 provides a practical example of land and property considerations informing scheme development before route decisions were fixed. Ardent supported the option selection process by providing compensation advice across the route options, helping the project understand property risk and identify opportunities to avoid potentially high-value land and property through design evolution. This demonstrates how land considerations can contribute to optioneering rather than simply being managed after a preferred route has been selected.

Major infrastructure schemes can involve hundreds or thousands of titles, interests and affected parties. Accurate and controlled data management is therefore critical: changes to design, land requirements, stakeholder information and consenting documentation must remain aligned through a clear and auditable source of project information. Alongside this technical requirement, consistent case management is important for people and businesses facing uncertainty about acquisition, access, compensation or disruption. Poor handling of these impacts can create avoidable objections and wider community unease; expert and sensitive management can protect both stakeholder wellbeing and confidence in the project.

Our published *From Devolution to Delivery* analysis reaches a similar conclusion from a wider strategic perspective, identifying land acquisition, statutory powers, planning, TWA/DCO processes, utilities, depots, construction capacity, supply chains, stakeholders and local-government capability as factors that can constrain the translation of political transport ambition into delivery.

Ardent analysis

Bringing these sources together suggests that scheme maturity and design maturity should not be treated as synonymous.

A route may be technically well developed while significant questions remain unresolved around land, stakeholders, environmental requirements, statutory powers or eventual construction.

If those factors enter the programme primarily as later-stage tests, apparent progress can be followed by redesign, reassessment or delay.

Our analysis is therefore that a stronger approach would test deliverability progressively alongside technical development.

This does not mean resolving every detail before a preferred option can emerge. It means bringing sufficient expertise into the project at each stage to identify material constraints, dependencies and uncertainties while there remains realistic scope to respond.

What this means in practice

During optioneering and scheme development, promoters should progressively understand:

- significant land and property constraints
- likely requirements for permanent and temporary land
- impacts on businesses, access and servicing
- statutory and environmental interfaces
- stakeholder and community impacts
- potential construction requirements
- significant operational dependencies
- likely consenting implications.

This is also relevant to business case development.

That progressive testing may also require appropriately timed contractor and operator input. Construction expertise should inform scheme development where decisions made before consent could materially affect buildability, cost, disruption or programme, while operational requirements should be understood early enough to influence design and delivery planning. Testing, commissioning, operational readiness and passenger information should therefore be treated as programme considerations from an early stage rather than matters addressed principally towards the end of construction.

Where deliverability assumptions remain untested, cost, programme and benefit assumptions may subsequently need to change as those issues become clearer.

Assure progressively and proportionately

The same principle should apply to business-case assurance. Assurance is necessary where significant public investment is involved, but it should be proportionate to risk and structured to support decision-making rather than repeatedly revisit issues that have already been resolved.

As schemes progress through approval gateways, assurance should focus increasingly on what has materially changed, which uncertainties remain and whether previously identified delivery risks are being managed. Where possible, questions from government and assurance bodies should be coordinated and raised concurrently rather than sequentially, reducing the risk that individual review stages extend programme without materially improving the underlying proposition.

A useful principle would be to approve progressively and assure continuously, while avoiding the unnecessary reopening of decisions already made unless new evidence or material change justifies doing so.

Recommendations

The Taskforce should encourage:

- multidisciplinary input during route and options development
- a broader definition of project maturity that incorporates deliverability
- earlier strategic land and property, affected-party case management, stakeholder, environmental, operational and consenting input, supported by controlled and connected project data
- assurance gateways that test material cross-project dependencies alongside design and business case maturity
- clear ownership of unresolved delivery risks as schemes move between stages
- proportionate and progressive business-case assurance, with greater continuity between approval stages
- coordinated review processes that raise material issues concurrently and avoid unnecessarily reopening settled decisions.

Integrate engagement, consultation and communications throughout scheme development

Ardent practitioner insight

Across Ardent's work on major infrastructure projects, we see a recurring pattern in which public involvement becomes concentrated around formal consultation.

Design and business case teams progress the proposition, consultation is launched and important issues are then identified through responses that could potentially have been explored earlier through targeted engagement, collaborative workshops, landowner dialogue and local knowledge.

Our practitioner insight also highlights the risk of asking consultation to perform too many functions simultaneously: building awareness, explaining the strategic case, comparing options, testing route or mode, identifying impacts, gathering mitigation ideas, assessing support and generating evidence for later decisions.

1. Based on this experience, Ardent distinguishes between three related but different functions:
2. engagement as continuing dialogue and relationship-building used to understand needs, identify issues, improve proposals and resolve matters collaboratively
3. consultation as a structured and time-bound process seeking views on a defined proposition, question or decision
4. communications as the continuous provision of clear and accessible information about the strategic case, project development, decisions and opportunities to participate.
5. These functions should be planned together but used for distinct purposes. They should also be aligned with the design, business case, land, environmental and consenting programmes.

Ardent project experience

On Transport for Greater Manchester's Second City Crossing, Ardent's work included early and sustained stakeholder and landowner engagement, supported by dedicated case managers along sections of the route.

On West Yorkshire Mass Transit, our teams have worked directly with businesses and communities to understand their requirements and explore the opportunities associated with the project, supported by a dedicated business group and the Trambassador network.

Published Ardent project evidence

The value of early engagement is also visible in Ardent's wider transport portfolio. On the A12 Chelmsford to A120 widening scheme, Ardent combined land referencing, landowner engagement and survey-access negotiations, securing intrusive survey access with 92% of landowners for the first phase. This enabled survey work required to inform subsequent environmental and scheme-development activity. While this is a highways example rather than mass transit, it illustrates the practical value of resolving stakeholder and land interfaces before they become downstream programme constraints.

These examples support a wider Ardent principle: local relationships and stakeholder intelligence should be treated as project-development inputs, rather than simply as outputs from a formal consultation process.

Ardent analysis

The conclusion we draw is not that consultation should simply be maximised or minimised. Consultation is most valuable when it has a clear decision purpose and forms part of a longer programme of meaningful engagement and consistent communications.

The Planning and Infrastructure Act's wider reforms provide an important and persuasive policy read-across. Although changes elsewhere in the infrastructure consenting system do not replace the detailed TWAO requirements, they signal a movement towards more proportionate and effective pre-application processes. Procedural simplification places greater responsibility on promoters to use engagement, consultation and communications strategically to improve proposals, identify issues early and support efficient decision-making.

Earlier engagement can surface local knowledge and project issues while design remains capable of responding. It can distinguish between misunderstandings, impacts capable of mitigation and areas of genuine disagreement.

Formal consultation can then concentrate on obtaining structured feedback on a sufficiently developed proposition rather than simultaneously trying to build understanding, discover fundamental issues and determine the scheme.

Ardent's proposed shift is therefore from identifying issues primarily during or after formal consultation towards identifying them progressively during option development, while change remains possible.

Consultation should change through the project lifecycle

Ardent's analysis is that engagement and consultation should not be treated as a single event or fixed package of activity. Their role should change as the scheme develops.

At the strategic mandate stage, the priority should usually be targeted engagement and research to understand the problem, strategic priorities and affected interests rather than major scheme consultation.

During options development, engagement can be used to test assumptions, identify impacts, understand trade-offs and improve route, mode and system options. Consultation should take place at this stage only where there is a clear decision purpose and enough information for meaningful participation.

As an emerging preferred proposition develops, engagement should intensify with affected authorities, communities, businesses, landowners and statutory bodies, while communications explain how choices are narrowing and what remains open to influence.

Where major public consultation is required or appropriate, it should have a clearly defined purpose and be supported by sufficient information for participants to understand the benefits, impacts and matters that remain open to influence. Consultation on wider options may be appropriate where responses can genuinely inform option selection; consultation on a more developed proposition may be appropriate where the purpose is to test impacts, mitigation or detailed design.

Following consultation, the emphasis should move to response and refinement: analysing feedback, explaining decisions, recording commitments and continuing targeted engagement on unresolved issues.

That engagement should continue into TWAO preparation and application, maintaining relationships, pursuing agreements and ensuring that issues, responses and commitments are properly evidenced.

The key point is that consultation is one stage within a wider relationship and evidence-building process, not the beginning and end of public involvement.

Throughout that process, communications should maintain a clear and consistent strategic case for investment, explaining the problem being addressed, the benefits sought, how decisions are being made and how stakeholder evidence has influenced the project. Done well, this can help build informed and durable support, including the political continuity that complex projects may require across several electoral cycles.

Use engagement to understand the real choices

Route and mode decisions are often highly visible and politically sensitive, but they are also technically complex.

Ardent's practitioner insight is that engagement can often provide better evidence by exploring the underlying needs and trade-offs than by asking stakeholders to select between headline technical options.

For example, engagement can explore what people need from a mass transit system in terms of reliability, capacity, accessibility, interchange, public realm, disruption, cost and future expandability. This provides richer information for technical and strategic decision-making than a simple preference between modes.

Public preferences remain important, but they should be considered alongside scheme objectives, demand, capacity, network integration, economic and regeneration effects, environmental impacts, land, construction, affordability and operational performance.

Inclusion is a safeguard, not an add-on

Earlier and more targeted engagement creates risks that need to be managed. If engagement relies too heavily on the most visible or organised stakeholders, it can overlook people whose voices are harder to reach or create a perception that important decisions are being developed privately before wider public involvement takes place.

For that reason, engagement and consultation strategies should explicitly consider language and literacy, disability and accessibility, digital exclusion, under-represented groups, multiple participation routes and whether stakeholder mapping identifies groups that may otherwise be overlooked.

Recommendations

The Taskforce should:

- establish a clearer distinction between engagement, formal consultation and communications in mass transit guidance
- encourage engagement to begin during options development, so local knowledge, stakeholder issues and delivery constraints can influence proposals before choices harden
- require engagement, consultation and communications strategies to align with design, business case, land and consenting programmes
- ensure each formal consultation has a clear decision purpose and is proportionate to the project stage, proposition maturity and issues under consideration
- encourage promoters to maintain stakeholder relationships between formal milestones, including targeted engagement where specific issues or changes affect particular communities or stakeholders
- recognise communications as a continuous delivery function that maintains a clear and consistent strategic case, explains what remains open to influence and shows transparently how engagement and consultation have shaped the project.

Make consultation a purposeful programme decision

Ardent practitioner insight

Formal public consultation is a substantial programme in its own right. It requires appropriate governance, technical information, communications, accessible digital and physical channels, stakeholder briefings, response-management systems, analysis, reporting and arrangements for incorporating feedback into the project.

Where engagement and technical activity become concentrated around an announced consultation date, programmes can experience rapid mobilisation before the event followed by extensive analysis, redesign and reactive issue management afterwards.

Earlier and continuing engagement allows evidence to be accumulated, assumptions to be tested and issues to be addressed before formal consultation begins. Consultation can then perform a defined role within the decision-making process rather than being expected simultaneously to build awareness, explain the strategic case, identify fundamental issues and determine the proposition.

Based on this experience, Ardent applies a consultation-readiness approach which tests whether:

- the consultation has a defined decision purpose
- the proposition and relevant options are sufficiently developed
- adequate information about benefits, impacts and potential mitigation is available
- the programme can explain what is fixed and what remains open to influence
- key stakeholders and affected parties have already been engaged proportionately
- major issues and likely objections are understood
- consultation is aligned with the design, environmental, business case, land and consenting programmes
- appropriate analysis, governance and change-control arrangements are in place
- communications, inclusion and accessibility arrangements are ready.

A consultation date should therefore be the consequence of scheme readiness rather than the principal determinant of it.

This does not create a presumption against consulting on wider options. Consultation on options may be appropriate where responses can genuinely influence option selection. Consultation on a more developed proposition may be appropriate where the purpose is to test impacts, mitigation or detailed design. In either case, the consultation should be proportionate to the project stage and have a clear role in the decision being made.

Assess consultation by its quality and usefulness

Consultation respondents are self-selecting, so response numbers should not automatically be interpreted as a representative vote on route or mode. Public preferences are important evidence, but they should be considered alongside scheme objectives, technical appraisal, environmental effects, affordability, land requirements and deliverability. Where statistically representative opinion is required, consultation can be supplemented by appropriately designed research.

Consultation quality should be assessed through:

- accessibility and clarity of information
- diversity and geographic spread of participation
- participation by groups that may otherwise be under-represented
- relevance and usefulness of the evidence received
- whether responses had a genuine opportunity to influence the project
- transparency about subsequent decisions.
- Promoters should close the feedback loop by explaining what was heard, what changed, what did not change and why, and how unresolved issues will be mitigated, negotiated, monitored or considered through the statutory process.
- The measure of successful consultation should therefore be more than the number of responses received. It should include whether the process generated useful evidence, improved understanding and contributed to a more robust proposition.

Recommendations

The Taskforce should:

- introduce a consultation-readiness principle for major mass-transit projects
- expect each consultation to have a clear and proportionate decision purpose
- align consultation timing with scheme and evidence maturity
- discourage repeated consultation where it serves no distinct decision need
- assess consultation quality beyond raw participation numbers
- expect promoters to explain transparently how responses influenced the project.

Manage the interfaces between disciplines

Ardent project experience

Ardent's transport experience demonstrates the value of integrated delivery across project management, strategic land and property services, stakeholder engagement, consultation and communications, consent management, design and environmental disciplines.

Our approach on TWAO programmes uses:

- clear definition of scope, inputs and outputs
- ownership and defined touchpoints
- proactive identification and resolution of delivery challenges
- removal of programme bottlenecks
- governance gateways and control of project timelines.

Published Ardent project experience

Ardent's long-term work with Docklands Light Railway demonstrates the value of maintaining continuity across multiple stages of mass transit development. Over a 20-year period, Ardent supported DLR extensions and upgrades across land advice, option development, consultation and landowner engagement, compulsory purchase, objection management, statutory processes and land acquisition. This experience reinforces the importance of connecting decisions made during scheme development with the statutory and delivery processes that follow.

Our practitioner experience also shows that stakeholder and community teams should not operate simply as channels that collect concerns before passing them into the wider programme. They need structured interfaces with design, environment, land, highways, operations, business case and legal teams, with issue ownership and response requirements visible across the programme.

Ardent's published *From Devolution to Delivery* analysis similarly identifies interface management alongside programme management, consents strategy and stakeholder engagement as important to de-risking transport programmes and translating strategic ambition into delivery.

Ardent analysis

Bringing these sources together leads us to a broader conclusion: some of the most significant programme risks arise between disciplines rather than within them.

For example:

- stakeholder issues require technical responses
- land constraints can alter design
- design changes can create new environmental or stakeholder impacts
- commitments made through engagement can create future delivery obligations
- consenting strategy affects programme sequencing
- unresolved statutory or stakeholder matters can influence business case confidence.

This is Ardent analysis synthesised from our project experience and published insight, rather than a quantified finding.

The practical implication is that governance should focus not only on whether each workstream is progressing, but on whether the dependencies between workstreams are being resolved.

Resolving those dependencies also requires clear accountability and sufficient authority to act. Major schemes can lose time where responsibilities are distributed across promoters, government, advisers and delivery bodies without clear ownership of decisions that sit across organisational or contractual boundaries.

Programmes should therefore establish a clearly accountable senior owner, defined delegated authorities, named owners for critical decisions, agreed decision-making timescales and transparent escalation routes for matters that cannot be resolved at working level. Where government departments or other approval bodies sit on the critical path, programme accountability should extend to those interfaces as well as to the promoter.

Effective interface management also depends on reliable and connected project data. Complex TWAO and compulsory-acquisition programmes may involve substantial volumes of land, stakeholder, consent, design and commitments information that change as the scheme develops. Clear data ownership, quality control and an auditable source of project information are therefore delivery requirements, not simply administrative support.

Evidence and issue management

Ardent's practitioner approach includes maintaining a connected project evidence trail through tools such as:

- stakeholder registers
- engagement records
- issue registers
- design-response logs
- decision records
- commitments registers
- consultation-response data
- equality and inclusion records
- objections forecasts
- communications records
- land and property records.

The objective is not to create additional administration.

It is to give programmes visibility of what is known, what action has been taken and why.

Digital visibility

Ardent also applies this principle through its own project-delivery tools.

Atlas is designed to bring landowner engagement, land referencing information and wider stakeholder data into one shared platform, giving project teams greater visibility across disciplines.

The Ardent Consents Tracker similarly brings together statutory consenting milestones, obligations, conditions, land interests and third-party stakeholders to support visibility between design, consent and delivery.

Digital systems do not accelerate delivery in isolation. Their value lies in providing accurate and timely visibility across disciplines, supported by reliable data, defined processes and clear responsibility for acting on the information they contain.

Align incentives with project outcomes

Integrated delivery is harder to sustain where individual organisations are measured only against their own contractual outputs. Major advisers and delivery partners should retain discipline-specific responsibilities, but a proportion of performance measurement should also relate to shared programme outcomes.

These shared measures could include achievement of key consent milestones, reduction in unresolved objections, progress in securing land agreements, design maturity, cost and programme predictability, avoidance of late change and successful transition between project stages. The objective is not to remove individual accountability, but to create a collective interest in resolving issues that affect the overall scheme.

Commercial structures should reinforce this behaviour where appropriate, for example through common project KPIs, performance incentives or shared gain mechanisms linked to outcomes that participating organisations can genuinely influence.

Recommendations

The Taskforce should encourage:

- integrated programme governance across design and delivery disciplines
- explicit ownership of cross-workstream interfaces
- senior escalation routes for unresolved issues
- common approaches to issue and commitments management
- clear data governance and appropriate digital visibility across land, stakeholder, design, consent and commitments information
- clear decision rights, delegated authorities and named owners for critical cross-project decisions
- agreed response and escalation timescales where unresolved issues sit across organisational boundaries
- align key adviser and delivery-team KPIs around shared programme outcomes, alongside discipline-specific measures, so that commercial incentives reinforce integrated delivery
- assurance focused on whether dependencies are being actively resolved, not simply whether individual workstreams are reporting progress.

Consenting procedures and securing legal powers

Ardent practitioner insight

Ardent has extensive experience supporting major infrastructure and transport programmes through planning, consenting and delivery, with experience across more than 25 Transport and Works Act Order projects within the wider business. This includes experience spanning route development, land referencing and acquisition, stakeholder engagement, consultation, objection management and project delivery, brought together through an integrated approach to consent management.

Ardent's Consent Management capability brings together the disciplines required to secure and then deliver the legal powers for major infrastructure projects. This includes coordinating planning, legal, land, environmental, design and delivery inputs so that the consent is developed as an integral part of the project rather than as a standalone approval.

Our experience highlights a recurring issue: delays attributed to consenting are often not caused by the statutory process alone. They arise where information, decisions or issues across these disciplines have not been identified, coordinated or resolved at the right point in the project lifecycle.

For mass transit schemes, this can result in changes to the developing design, uncertainty over land and rights, unresolved stakeholder or environmental issues, objections that could have been narrowed earlier, and amendments to the legal powers required to deliver the scheme. Each can create rework and introduce uncertainty into the delivery programme.

This suggests that improving consenting efficiency is not simply a question of shortening statutory timescales. It requires a more integrated approach to consent management, with clear ownership of the relationship between the developing scheme, the evidence supporting it, the legal powers required and the requirements for subsequent delivery.

Ardent analysis

A stronger model would create a clearer relationship between pre-application readiness, securing legal powers and subsequent delivery.

Promoters should be expected to undertake proportionate and meaningful pre-application work and demonstrate sufficient scheme readiness before an application is submitted. This should include:

- a sufficiently mature understanding of the developing scheme and its interfaces;
- identification of the land, rights and powers required to construct, operate and maintain the scheme;
- an understanding of significant environmental, stakeholder and statutory issues;
- early identification and management of likely objections;
- a clear understanding of the legal powers required to deliver the scheme; and
- evidence that these matters have informed the developing design and delivery proposition.

This should be supported by an integrated consent management function that maintains a connected view of these dependencies rather than treating land, consultation, environmental matters, design changes, commitments and legal powers as separate activities.

The benefit is that issues are identified and resolved while the scheme remains capable of responding to them. Once an application is submitted, the promoter, affected parties and decision-maker should therefore have greater confidence that the proposition being considered is sufficiently mature.

This does not mean reducing scrutiny or consultation. It means moving more issue identification and resolution to the stage at which projects remain capable of responding, while providing greater certainty once the formal statutory process begins.

Evidence of the causes of delay

The Department for Transport's own TWAOs guidance identifies inadequate preparation as a significant contributor to delay. It highlights issues including poor preparation of the draft Order, unresolved departmental queries, inadequate application documentation and failure to address objections before an inquiry.

This is important because it demonstrates that programme delay cannot be considered solely in terms of the statutory period for determining an Order. The quality and maturity of the work undertaken before submission can materially affect what happens afterwards.

The lesson for mass transit is therefore that programme certainty needs to be designed into the consenting strategy from the outset, rather than treated as something that can be achieved once an application has been submitted.

Learning from the DCO regime

The Development Consent Order regime provides a useful comparison. DCOs and TWAOs serve different purposes and should not simply be made identical. However, the DCO regime demonstrates the value of greater structure around pre-application engagement, application readiness, examination and decision-making.

The lesson is not to import the complexity of the DCO regime into mass transit consenting. It is to identify which elements of that approach could improve programme certainty and reduce avoidable rework.

In particular, there is value in:

- clearer expectations about the quality and maturity of information before submission;
- structured pre-application engagement;
- early identification and narrowing of areas of disagreement;
- clear ownership of issues and commitments;
- defined stages and target periods following submission; and
- continuity of information from application through examination and into delivery.

Creating greater programme certainty

Greater predictability could be supported through clearer target periods for the principal stages following submission, including validation, consideration of objections, inquiry or examination, Inspector reporting and Secretary of State decision.

This does not necessarily require a single rigid timetable. Different schemes will have different levels of complexity and objection. Instead, the process could provide greater transparency about the expected programme and the circumstances in which that programme may change.

Exceptions would remain necessary for genuinely complex or unusual cases. However, delay should increasingly arise from identifiable project circumstances rather than uncertainty about the process itself.

Connecting consenting to delivery

A further opportunity is to strengthen the connection between securing legal powers and actually delivering the scheme.

Consent management should not stop when an Order is made. The information developed through scheme development, consultation, land and environmental assessment should provide the basis for managing commitments, requirements, land and rights, environmental obligations, design interfaces and changes during construction.

A connected and auditable evidence base should therefore be maintained across:

SCHEME DEVELOPMENT → CONSULTATION → LAND AND RIGHTS → ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT → LEGAL POWERS → COMMITMENTS → CONSENT → CONSTRUCTION → OPERATION.

This would reduce the risk of information being recreated or interpreted differently as a project moves between development, consenting and delivery teams.

For mass transit schemes, this is particularly important because legal powers are not an end in themselves. They are the mechanism that enables the promoter to acquire the land, undertake the works, manage interfaces and ultimately operate the transport system.

Consent management should therefore be viewed as a delivery-enabling function, rather than simply an application-stage activity.

Recommendations

The Taskforce should:

- review how the TWAO regime could provide greater programme predictability while maintaining appropriate scrutiny;
- establish clearer and proportionate expectations for pre-application scheme readiness;
- require promoters to demonstrate early understanding of the land, environmental, stakeholder, design and legal powers required to deliver the scheme;
- introduce clearer target timescales for the principal post-submission stages, with transparent exceptions where project complexity genuinely requires them;
- strengthen the management of objections before inquiry so that the formal process focuses on matters that remain genuinely unresolved;
- encourage the use of an integrated consent management function to connect land, environmental, stakeholder, design, commitments and legal powers throughout the project lifecycle;
- maintain a connected and auditable evidence base from scheme development through consenting and into delivery; and
- consider which elements of the DCO regime's pre-application discipline, examination management and programme certainty could improve TWAO efficiency without importing requirements that are unnecessary or disproportionate for mass transit schemes.

The objective should not simply be a faster consenting process. It should be a more predictable route from scheme development, through secure legal powers, to delivery and operation.

What responsible acceleration looks like

The evidence and analysis set out above point towards a delivery model built around seven principles.

Start with outcomes

Mass transit schemes should be positioned within wider transport, growth and place strategies, with clarity about the economic, spatial and social outcomes they are intended to enable.

Test deliverability early

Strategic land and property, stakeholder, environmental, operational and consenting knowledge should influence options while there remains realistic scope to respond.

Engage continuously

Relationships and local intelligence should contribute to scheme development rather than being concentrated around formal consultation.

Consult purposefully and proportionately

Formal consultation should have a defined decision purpose, be proportionate to the project stage and be supported by sufficient information for meaningful participation.

Manage interfaces explicitly

Programme governance should make cross-discipline dependencies, issues and commitments visible and provide clear ownership for resolving them.

Build reusable evidence

Land, stakeholder, design, consent and commitments information should be structured, controlled and connected so that reliable evidence can support business case, assurance, statutory and delivery processes.

Align consent, business case and funding

Consent, design, land, engagement, business case and funding programmes should be developed as an integrated whole, with early activity funded where it reduces uncertainty and improves scheme maturity.

Taken together, these principles suggest that mass-transit programmes should be organised around the critical path to opening rather than treated as a series of largely sequential processes.

Strategy, business case, land, engagement, design, consenting, funding and delivery will each have distinct requirements, but the programme should make their dependencies visible and organise decisions around protecting the milestones necessary to move the scheme into operation.

Conclusion

The Taskforce has an opportunity to improve not only the speed of individual processes, but the way mass transit schemes move through the development lifecycle.

That opportunity matters because mass transit can be a critical missing component in the infrastructure of towns and cities, connecting people with opportunity while supporting housing, regeneration and long-term investment. The focus on cost and speed should therefore remain aligned with the quality and strategic purpose of the schemes being delivered.

Ardent's experience suggests that some of the greatest gains are likely to come from bringing the knowledge that determines deliverability into schemes earlier.

That means connecting strategic objectives with practical delivery, involving affected people before options harden, integrating land, stakeholder, design and statutory disciplines and ensuring major programme milestones occur because schemes are genuinely ready for them.

Our project experience demonstrates the value of earlier stakeholder and land involvement, integrated delivery and stronger visibility across project interfaces. Our published transport analysis supports a wider shift towards considering transport as part of place, growth and regeneration strategy.

Taken together, these sources suggest that faster delivery should not mean compressing activity until risk appears elsewhere in the programme or treating speed and cost as ends in themselves. It should mean identifying uncertainty earlier, resolving more issues while change remains possible and developing the right schemes so that they are better prepared to progress through business case, consent and delivery, with their quality and strategic purpose intact.