

## ICE Private roundtable: Delivering major transport projects: National and local challenges.

### In conversation with the Rt Hon Richard Holden MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Transport

*June 2026*

The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) convened a private roundtable bringing together senior infrastructure leaders and the Rt Hon Richard Holden MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Transport. The discussion provided an opportunity to engage directly with a range of industry experts as Richard develops his priorities.

The session focused on the delivery of major transport projects in the UK, with participants invited to reflect on the systemic barriers affecting performance at both national and local levels. Discussion centred on strengthening long-term confidence in the pipeline, addressing fragmented governance, and improving how value is defined and delivered, alongside the impact of planning, regulatory and capability constraints.

The roundtable took place in the context of major infrastructure policy change over the last 18 months. The [10 Year Infrastructure Strategy \(10YIS\)](#), [Infrastructure Pipeline](#) and [recent recommendations](#) from the Competition and Markets Authority formed the basis of the discussion.

#### Key messages

- **Strategic clarity and pipeline confidence.** While strategic frameworks are emerging, inconsistent project pipelines and short funding cycles continue to limit industry confidence, investment, and the ability to retain skills. A stable direction of travel, even where detailed plans cannot be fixed over the long term, is needed.
- **Governance, decision-making, and fragmentation.** Empowering delivery bodies and reducing duplication would support faster and more effective project delivery.
- **Environmental standards.** A consistent framework, with planning, trade-offs and environmental requirements agreed at an earlier stage of the project, could improve certainty and maintain public confidence.
- **Shifting from outputs to outcomes.** Measures that focus on specific types of transport or individual actions can blur the wider economic, social and environmental value of projects. Focusing on outcomes would support decision-making and better showcase the benefits of infrastructure.
- **Skills, capability, and culture.** Gaps in public sector capability, combined with uncertainty in the supply chain and a focus on technical performance over long-term value, can reduce efficiency and limit innovation.

## Strategic clarity and pipeline confidence

Attendees reflected on the persistent challenge of maintaining confidence in the long-term pipeline of transport investment. While recent developments, including the national transport strategy, 10YIS and infrastructure pipeline, were seen as positive steps towards a more strategic approach, there was a shared view that these do not yet provide sufficient certainty to support sustained delivery. This echoes the findings of the CMA's market study.

Participants highlighted the impact of short-term funding cycles and inconsistent investment patterns, which disrupt delivery and workforce planning. As programmes approach the end of funding periods, skills and capability are often lost from the sector. This creates additional costs and inefficiencies when activity resumes, limiting the sector's ability to build and maintain expertise over time.

### Confidence and adaptive delivery

There is a close relationship between strategy, pipeline and project-level deliverability. Insufficient development of projects at an early stage can lead to unrealistic cost estimates and delays at later stages. A more rigorous approach to scheme development, ensuring projects are fully understood before entering the pipeline, was seen as important for maintaining confidence in delivery.

At the same time, the limitations of long-term planning in a changing political and economic environment were acknowledged. Some proposed a more adaptive model that combines strategic direction with incremental progress. This included building momentum through a pipeline of smaller, deliverable interventions, alongside larger programmes, and strengthening alignment between national strategy and locally deliverable projects.

## Governance, decision-making, and fragmentation

Governance and decision-making structures can be a significant constraint to the effective delivery of major transport projects. A common view was that the current system is characterised by fragmentation, complexity and slow decision-making, which together contribute to delays and increased costs.

Multiple layers of approval and oversight are common in project delivery. Relatively modest projects can be subject to prolonged approval timelines, with business cases and scope changes escalating through several levels of bureaucracy. This can result in decisions being taken far from the point of delivery, reducing responsiveness and increasing risk.

### Delivery blockers

Overly centralised decision-making was also identified as a blocker. While oversight and assurance were recognised as necessary, too much departmental control, particularly following high-profile project challenges, such as [HS2](#), can hinder delivery rather than improve it.

Decision-making models where responsibilities are more clearly defined and operational decisions are made closer to the project level can enable greater agility and accountability.

### Fragmentation and gaps

Participants also pointed to enduring institutional silos, both within transport and across the wider infrastructure system. The separation between rail, road and local networks can limit the ability to plan and

deliver projects that maximise wider system benefits. Similarly, fragmentation between national, regional and local bodies creates challenges in aligning priorities, funding, and delivery responsibilities.

These issues are compounded by unclear ownership of outcomes, particularly where projects deliver benefits across multiple parts of the network or across different geographies.

Participants highlighted examples such as rail freight improvements linked to the Felixstowe corridor, and local road upgrades supporting performance on routes like the M25. These illustrate how investment in one part of the system can generate wider network benefits. However, responsibility for funding and delivery often remains unclear, leading to missed opportunities and suboptimal decisions.

Simpler and more coherent governance arrangements, with clearer accountability for delivery, would also help. This could include moving decision-making closer to delivery organisations where appropriate, reducing duplication in assurance processes, and strengthening coordination across institutions. There was also support for further enabling devolved and regional bodies to make decisions aligned with local priorities, within a clearer national framework.

## Environmental standards

Environmental requirements were a particular focus of discussion. While there was strong support for protecting the environment, participants noted that the current system can lead to inconsistent and disproportionate application of standards. In some cases, requirements evolve over the course of a project, creating uncertainty, increasing costs, and delaying delivery without clear measures of improved outcomes.

These challenges could be addressed by embedding environmental considerations at the right stage of project development. Projects are more likely to encounter challenges during delivery when environmental issues are addressed late or iteratively, rather than integrating them into early design and planning stages. This can result in rework, redesign, and greater public scrutiny, further impacting timelines and cost.

## Shifting from outputs to outcomes

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the need to move beyond a narrow focus on outputs and towards a clearer articulation of outcomes. Current appraisal and delivery frameworks often prioritise quantifiable outputs, which can blur the wider purpose of investment and limit effective decision-making.

Participants highlighted examples where success is defined in terms of measurable outputs, such as kilometres of infrastructure delivered or changes in travel patterns. This can create a disconnect between what projects are designed to achieve and the outcomes they deliver. The benefits experienced by individuals, communities and the wider economy are not always fully realised.

This challenge extends across both national and local delivery. Outcome frameworks tied to funding settlements at a local or strategic authority level can incentivise compliance with predefined metrics, rather than enabling more holistic, place-based approaches. This can constrain innovation and limit the ability of delivery bodies to respond effectively to local needs.

## Articulating value

The lack of clarity around outcomes was also linked to how projects are defined and communicated to decision-makers and the public. Insufficient articulation of purpose can lead to poor design choices, including over-specification or a focus on high-profile solutions rather than those that most effectively meet people's needs.

Participants reflected on maintenance and renewal often being undervalued, despite their importance to network performance and productivity. Reframing maintenance as part of a broader programme of upgrades and improvements could strengthen the case for investment and align it more clearly with outcomes for individuals and communities.

Quantitative evaluations need to be complemented with a broader understanding of value, recognising that not all benefits can be easily measured in financial terms. This includes outcomes linked to health, wellbeing and place, offering opportunities to deliver wider community benefits when considered early in the design process, while strengthening public support for new projects.

## Skills, capability and culture

Skills, capability and wider industry culture are critical factors influencing the performance of the transport infrastructure sector. Concerns were raised about capability gaps across both the public and private sectors, and the implications this has for project development, delivery and value for money.

### Gaps across the system

In the public sector, capability gaps in commercial, technical and delivery expertise persist, particularly within local authorities and delivery bodies. Limited in-house capability can constrain the ability to challenge cost assumptions, engage effectively with suppliers, and navigate complex planning and procurement processes. This can result in prolonged negotiations, uninformed decisions, and increased reliance on external advisors with other priorities.

Resource constraints and workforce instability make matters worse. Skills are often lost when investment slows down. This means capability has to be rebuilt at additional cost when programmes resume.

### Culture and incentives

From an industry perspective, cultural challenges affect delivery performance. There is a perceived tendency to prioritise technical outputs rather than practical outcomes or value. There is a growing need to strengthen critical thinking and decision-making skills across the profession, particularly in navigating trade-offs between cost, performance and wider benefits.

Participants also noted that capability challenges extend beyond individual organisations to how the public and private sectors work together. Differences in expectations, incentives and ways of working can limit collaboration and innovation. Strengthening relationships and building a shared understanding across these areas was seen as important for improving delivery outcomes.

The government and professional institutions, like the ICE, have an important role to play in developing a more stable and sustainable skills pipeline, supported by greater visibility of future work and clearer signals of long-term demand. This could be by strengthening professional development to focus not only on technical expertise, but also on commercial awareness, systems thinking and outcome-focused decision-making.

## Further reading

- [CMA Civil engineering market study final report](#)
- [ICE blog: How the UK can save £5 billion a year on road and rail projects](#)
- [ICE Roundtable: Resetting HS2: What will be different this time around?](#)
- [ICE blog: Mind the investment gap: why the UK needs a stable plan for rail](#)
- [ICE blog: What's in the UK's £718bn infrastructure pipeline?](#)
- [ICE policy paper: What are the pinch points to delivering the UK's infrastructure ambitions?](#)