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Elsewhere in this edition of IRSE NEWS you can read about the UK's plans for the Digital Railway Programme. The Programme is attracting considerable interest both in the UK and elsewhere, and in late February the UK Parliament's Transport Committee announced an Inquiry into Signalling and Traffic Management Technology, looking at the plans for deploying new digital technologies and how they will impact the use of the network by passenger and freight services. You will not be surprised to learn that the IRSE will be making a written submission to the Inquiry.

Amongst those I speak with, there is almost complete agreement that the ambitions of the Digital Railway Programme are broadly correct, namely to deliver more capacity, better connectivity and far greater reliability – and all of it cost-effectively. What is questionable, and perhaps will be a key element of the Inquiry, is whether it is deliverable in anything like the timescales proposed. A target for completing the Programme by 2029 has been proposed. This may seem rather distant, but bear in mind that this goal includes not only the provision of ERTMS right across the UK national rail network by that date (one of the government's Top 40 in its 'pipeline' of National Infrastructure Projects), but also the implementation of more advanced traffic management systems and connected Driver Advisory Systems. In addition it includes 'digital' developments outside the immediate domain of train control and communications, aimed even more directly at improving the customer's experience of rail travel. There are several major challenges associated with delivering the Programme, of which the technological ones are only a part.

The phrase 'Digital Railway' is a bit of a misnomer, in reality. Readers of IRSE NEWS will be only too well aware that all modern signalling, traffic management and communications systems have employed digital technology for many years. What the Programme is really all about, as Andrew Simmons (our President) rightly observed in choosing his theme for his Presidential year, is the 'data-enabled' railway. In other words, how do we make much better use of data to build, operate and maintain our railways for the benefit of its customers? The railway of today is not short of digital technology, nor of data. But we are, compared with many industries, poor at integrating and making best use of that data to optimise the efficiency, cost-effectiveness and customer-orientation of the services that railways provide.

Francis How, Chief Executive



Front Cover: Inside the high speed train simulator at Beijing Jiaotong University. Photo Francis How.

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