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SRA announces five new projects and begins to build a Safer, Bigger, Better Railway and announces five new projects

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Britain's new Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) marked its first day of official operation with a meeting of the new SRA Board to plan the implementation of the Strategic Agenda for the railway. At the same time, the Authority announced five projects for the development of the railway:

The next stage of the East London Line project, linking the Underground with the National Rail network to provide a new North-South Link for Londoners.

Development of projects to upgrade the lines from the major ports of Felixstowe and Southampton to carry more rail freight and provide much-needed relief to the trunk road network

Reopening the Vale of Glamorgan Line to passengers

Interchange project at Haverfordwest (Pembrokeshire)

Building a new station at Corsham (Wilts).

The new organisation is now fully equipped and ready to meet the challenges ahead, after a little over 18 months of shadow operation. Its role is to represent the public interest and to fund and invest in a network through public/private partnerships. In particular, it will be focused on the interests of passengers, working with the Rail Passengers' Council and Committees, which transfer to SRA sponsorship today. Under the Government's Ten Year Plan, nearly £30bn of public funds will pass through its hands into the industry by March 2011.

The SRA will not operate trains or infrastructure itself, but will provide the framework for the private sector to deliver a safe, efficient and growing railway system. It will form a consensus where possible, but provide leadership when needed. Importantly, the Act empowers the SRA to invest equity and loan capital in the railways. The SRA strategy will be investment-led, and long term, joining up the participants in a major public service and well integrated with other forms of transport.

Speaking at the start of the SRA's existence, the Chairman, Sir Alastair Morton said:

"The vision of the SRA, to which we are all committed, is that within ten years, Britain will have a rail system of which we can all be proud.

"Today, we start with a less than fully functional railway system requiring vigorous, sometimes radical evolution if it is to achieve its objective.

"Despite recent problems, the prospects for rail in Britain are brighter than for many years with the largest investment programme for 45 years planned, providing the opportunity to reverse decades of serious under-investment. My call today is for the railway industry to co-operate to improve, to invest and to deliver a safer, bigger and better rail system."

Welcoming the Authority's transfer from shadow to full legal status, SRA Chief Executive Mike Grant said:

"My focus is on delivery of the short and longer term improvements in capacity and services that passengers and taxpayers have every right to expect, working alongside Railtrack and train operators to achieve this.

"As a first step, I can announce today approval to three new schemes:

£4.1m for reopening the Vale of Glamorgan line in South Wales, providing a new passenger service between Bridgend, Barry and Cardiff.

£1.3m for building a new station at Corsham in Wiltshire to serve new development.

£90,000 for improving interchange at Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire.

Funding is provided through our Rail Passenger Partnership scheme, bringing to 17 the total of new passenger projects we have so far approved".

"I can also announce that we plan to set up two Project Development Groups with Railtrack and other investing partners to provide increased capacity and structural clearances to carry maritime containers from the major ports at Felixstowe and Southampton. These projects will help to provide relief from the pressure of juggernauts on the A14 and A34.

"Finally, I am today announcing the start of design development work on the linking of London Underground's East London Line with the National Rail Network, to provide new cross-London services in conjunction with Transport for London."

The SRA's priorities will be straightforward in concept - based on what the organisation has learnt from listening to passengers and other stakeholders. The priorities will be:

Investment in continued improvement in safety,
Less crowded trains, with 15 out of 16 meeting punctuality targets,
Improving accessibility to allow the network to carry a 50% increase in passenger miles,
Removing bottlenecks to increase capacity
Increasing rail freight tonne-miles by 80%,

Better stations and rolling stock
More resilient rail operations
Better information for passengers.

Over the last eighteen months, the SRA has achieved a great deal, through franchise replacement negotiations, major capacity studies, innovation in intermodal freight, new tougher measures to monitor the performance of train operators, and the biggest survey of passengers needs since privatisation. Details are set out in the accompanying information pack.

Notes to editors:

1. From today, the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) assumes responsibility for the promotion, development and strategic direction of the 10,400 mile (16, 650 kilometre) passenger and freight rail network in Great Britain, as well as for managing the contracts with passenger train operators as well as certain licence obligations.
2. The SRA also assumes sponsorship of the Rail Passengers Council and its eight regional committees. (The London Transport Users Committee is sponsored by the Greater London Authority.)
3. Since July 1999, the SRA has been operating in shadow form, using powers vested in the Director of Passenger Rail Franchising (OPRAF) and the British Railways Board (BRB) under the Railways Act 1993. These powers, along with those transferring Freight Facilities Grants from DETR, and consumer protection issues latterly handled by the Rail Regulator, pass to the SRA under the Commencement Order now made, following Royal Assent to the new Transport Act on 30 November 2000. The responsibilities of the British Railways Board for the British Transport Police, residual BR liabilities, including backdated compensation claims and BR property issues, will also transfer to the SRA.
4. Economic regulation of Railtrack, including access charging and performance targets, remains the responsibility of the Rail Regulator, and safety continues to be regulated by the Health & Safety Commission.
5. Separate press releases have been issued today for the two Rail Passenger Partnership schemes for the Vale of Glamorgan line and Corsham station. A separate briefing pack is also available giving details of:

The SRA's purpose and objectives
SRA Board Members
Organisation Chart
Work of the Shadow SRA
Railfreight
Details of Rail Passenger Partnership schemes
Franchise replacement

1. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions may give the Authority directions and guidance. It can also receive directions and guidance from Scottish ministers within the GB framework. Similar parameters apply with regard to the Mayor, in relation to services within London. The SRA works in close collaboration with the Welsh Assembly on the provision of services in Wales, and with the English regions and local authorities.

**For further details contact the Department for Transport Rail Press desk:
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