Feras Alshaker

Director, Planning and Performance

Paul McMahon
Director, Planning and Regulation
Network Rail

By email

18 December 2023

Dear Paul

Data quality compliance

I am writing to follow up on the concerns we have raised at working level about the quality of the data we receive from Network Rail.

This letter seeks assurances that Network Rail is committed to making the necessary improvements to comply with its licence conditions and to support the effective sharing and use of critical network data.

Context

The Network Licence sets out the data requirements that must be complied with by Network Rail and specific reference is made to the obligation to maintain 'accurate and readily accessible' data.

The provision of accurate and complete data in accordance with the Data Protocol underpins our ability to hold Network Rail to account and to make informed decisions in the public interest. Any loss of confidence in the accuracy of the data therefore has a direct impact; undermining the trust of stakeholders, who require the data to make business decisions, and on ORR in its ability to carry out its functions effectively. Concerns over data quality must inevitably also raise questions about the information that is driving Network Rail's own decision-making.

Issues

We recognise and appreciate that Network Rail collects and shares with us a huge amount of high-quality data.

Over the previous 12 months we have however seen instances of data quality issues. These cut across a range of topic areas including, but not limited to, maintenance and renewals, operational performance and network capability. Errors involve incorrect presentation of targets, inconsistencies across outputs and failure to identify variances beyond expected thresholds. Since the beginning of last year we have had to either manually correct or ask Network Rail to correct 37 datasets, which works out at 7% of datasets. This contrasts with 3.3% in the year before (April 2021-March 2022) and 1.6% in the year before that (April 2020-March 2021).

The erosion of trust in the data provided leads to more time spent checking data quality and can result in Network Rail producing several iterations of the same report. As you will appreciate, this is not sustainable or efficient.

Progress in improvements

In June 2023, Network Rail initiated an improvement process for data quality, which is further supported by a data cleansing strategy. The aim of this was to create a more robust data quality assurance framework. This initiative is welcomed.

However, we initially escalated concerns about data non-compliance in 2022. The rate of progress thus far has not reflected the seriousness of the issue and the ramifications of poor data quality. We have not been provided with evidence demonstrating any overarching governance structure in place with defined responsibility for data quality across Network Rail. This, and the above factors, indicate a potential systemic issue that requires attention.

To address our concerns, we require a plan by **Wednesday, 14 February 2024** on how Network Rail intends to improve its data assurance. This plan should include identifying the accountable authority, timelines for delivery, what processes Network Rail will implement to minimise the risk of data errors and ensure that robust quality assurance is in place across all its data streams.

We will continue to monitor and, where necessary, act in response to current and future data quality issues in line with our Holding to Account Policy for CP6.

Yours sincerely

Feras Alshaker