

Modernising Transport Operations:

A practical guide to
minimising disruption and
maintaining staff welfare

Introduction:

The pressure to modernise (2025-2035)

Across all UK rail, airports and ports, the next few years will see operators facing unprecedented challenges. That's largely because large-scale modernisation programmes are accelerating at exactly the same time as budgets, skills and operational resilience are under extreme pressure. The UK Government has set out an infrastructure pipeline worth £718bn (as of March 2026) and a wider ambition to deliver at least £725bn of projects over the next decade.¹ That's a scale of activity that will inevitably drive refurbishment, upgrades, decarbonisation works and capacity changes across transport estates.

When depots, terminals, stations, or port facilities are under construction there are of course practical questions to address, such as: how do you keep work teams safe? How do you remain compliant? Also, how do you avoid any disruption that might cause delays, downtime, or reputational risk?

This guide is designed to help estates and their operations and project teams answer all those questions. We'll discuss where disruption typically appears during upgrades as well as the three non-negotiables, and the practical, proven approaches operators use to keep works moving without compromising people or performance. You will leave with a clearer plan, faster decision-making and a checklist you can apply immediately whether you manage rail facilities, airport operations, or port infrastructure.

Rail



Network Rail's Control Period 7 (2024-2029) plan is backed by around £44bn for operations, maintenance, and renewals, driving extensive upgrade activity through to 2029.²

Water

(Freight/Ports)



Lower Thames Crossing: £9 billion mega-project entering major construction in 2026. One of the UK's most ambitious projects, £9bn value, improving freight flow to major ports and reducing bottlenecks.³

Air



Decarbonisation requirements are accelerating infrastructure changes.⁴ UK infrastructure strategy prioritises becoming a "clean energy superpower," pushing transport hubs, including airports – to modernise energy, buildings, and estates.

References:

1. Decade long Infrastructure Strategy to deliver stability, investment and national renewal - GOV.UK
2. UK Rail in 2026: Strategic Challenges and Priorities Ahead | Rail Industry Connect | Connecting you with rail industry insight and best practice
3. Top 10 Major UK Infrastructure Projects in 2026
4. Transport decarbonisation plan - GOV.UK

Where modernisation creates operational disruption

Modernisation activity across transport estates is intensifying, not only in scale but in overlap. In rail, the £44bn Control Period 7 programme (2024-2029) is driving sustained renewal across ageing assets such as track, signalling, drainage and structures. Alongside this, climate-resilience schemes are expanding, with flood defences, drainage upgrades and weather-risk interventions frequently requiring partial closures, staff decanting or depots operating with restricted access. While essential, these works directly affect how sites function day-to-day.

Ports are experiencing similar pressures as quaysides are modernised, shore-power electrification is introduced, and wider decarbonisation programmes gather pace. These upgrades often reduce usable operational space for prolonged periods, even though freight movements, marine operations and security processes must continue uninterrupted. Station modernisation is also accelerating under Great British Railways reform, with longer-term planning cycles placing renewed focus on upgrading back-of-house operational areas alongside passenger environments.

Airports face an even tighter margin. Major hubs such as Heathrow are already operating close to full capacity, leaving little tolerance for disruption as multi-year redevelopment programmes progress. At the same time, net-zero commitments are driving extensive retrofitting of energy systems, ventilation and on-site renewables, often placing additional pressure on staff accommodation and operational space while works are underway.

The common impact across all three environments is not a single point of failure, but the gradual erosion of resilience. As buildings are taken out of use, construction footprints expand and capacity constraints tighten, teams are displaced and facilities come under sustained pressure. These conditions expose the limits of informal workarounds and make it increasingly difficult to maintain welfare standards and operational continuity at the same time, setting the context for the three non-negotiable requirements that follow.



The three non-negotiable requirements

Modernisation programmes place sustained pressure on transport estates because multiple constraints apply at the same time. While construction phases may change, three requirements do not. Critically, each one drives the next.

1. Welfare compliance cannot pause

Regardless of refurbishment schedules, regulatory obligations around staff welfare, safety, accessibility and environmental standards remain fixed.

2. Operations must continue throughout works

Rail services, flights, freight movements and port operations cannot stop simply because core buildings are unavailable. Critical teams still need safe, functional space to operate.

3. Space must therefore be replaced

When permanent facilities are taken offline, operators must create alternative, compliant space quickly to absorb the impact without introducing risk, delay or non compliance.



Welfare compliance

Welfare provision is one of the least flexible elements of any modernisation programme. Regulatory obligations around safety, hygiene, accessibility and wellbeing remain fixed, regardless of construction phasing or programme timelines.



Key pressures include:

- Welfare standards must remain fully compliant even when permanent buildings are under refurbishment or environmental upgrade.
- Many existing welfare blocks fall below current expectations once phased works begin, creating immediate compliance gaps.
- Decarbonisation, environmental regulation and wellbeing standards add further complexity, often reducing usable welfare space during construction.

As estates age and standards tighten, even short periods of non-compliance can expose operators to risk, making welfare planning a critical early consideration rather than a reactive task.

Maintaining operational continuity

Alongside welfare obligations, day-to-day operations must continue uninterrupted throughout modernisation programmes. Construction activity increasingly overlaps with live environments, leaving little margin for disruption.

Across rail, air and ports, this typically means:

- As modernisation programmes run alongside live operations, the risk shifts from disruption to degradation.
- When teams are fragmented, relocated poorly or forced into unsuitable environments, coordination suffers, safety risks increase and decision-making slows.
- Essential functions such as planning, control and security being placed under pressure during extended works programmes.

Without these conditions, continuity is compromised even if services continue to run.



Temporary space during works

Once compliance requirements and operational continuity are taken as fixed, the impact of modernisation becomes a question of space. Construction zones, asset upgrades and phased closures permanently or temporarily displace established functions.

This challenge is intensifying due to:

- Multi-year, phased programmes that restrict access to buildings for extended periods.
- Highly constrained sites where relocation options are limited.
- Rising contractor numbers, increasing demand for on-site welfare, office and coordination space close to active works.

Creating flexible, replacement accommodation is therefore no longer a contingency measure. In practice, the question is no longer whether temporary space is needed, but how early it is planned for.

Solutions transport operators are using: modular welfare units and temporary office suites

At this stage of most modernisation programmes, transport operators are increasingly adopting temporary buildings as a practical way to bridge the gap between live operations and long-term estate upgrades.

Modular welfare units

Temporary welfare accommodation is used to maintain consistent standards when permanent facilities are inaccessible.

In practice, this allows estates teams to:

- Maintain compliant welfare provision throughout refurbishment, renewal and decarbonisation works.
- Provide appropriate rest areas, hygiene facilities, drying rooms and accessible spaces without relying on outdated buildings.
- Deploy and relocate welfare facilities within constrained sites as construction phases progress.

By treating welfare as infrastructure rather than an afterthought, operators reduce compliance risk while protecting staff wellbeing during prolonged works.



Temporary office suites during refurbishment

Modular office accommodation is increasingly used to decant operational, administrative and specialist teams when core buildings are taken out of service.

These spaces support continuity by:

- Allowing operations teams, planners and contractors to remain co-located and coordinated.
- Protecting critical functions such as control, engineering planning and security during multi-year programmes.
- Providing flexible, well-equipped environments close to active work zones, reducing inefficiency and disruption.

When planned as part of the works programme, temporary office suites absorb the operational impact of modernisation and enable projects to progress without destabilising live transport networks.

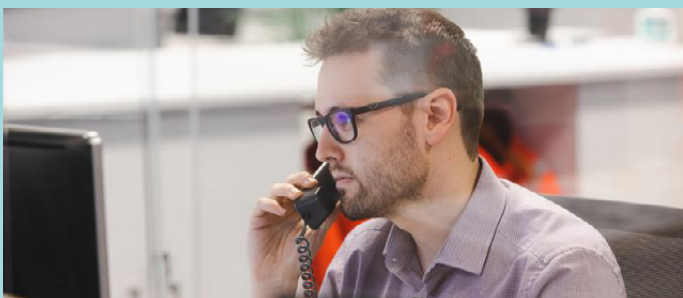


Conclusion

Modernising transport estates is no longer a discrete programme to be delivered and completed; it is an ongoing operational reality. Across rail, air and ports, operators are required to renew ageing infrastructure, meet rising environmental and safety standards, and deliver these changes without compromising live operations.

What distinguishes successful programmes is not the scale of investment, but how effectively the non-negotiables are managed. Welfare compliance does not flex. Operations cannot pause. And when permanent facilities are taken out of service, space must be replaced. Failing to plan for any one of these creates knock-on risk across the entire estate.

Operators that plan early, identify pressure points in advance and treat temporary accommodation as core operational infrastructure, rather than a last-minute contingency, are better able to maintain control. They protect staff welfare, keep critical teams functioning and allow upgrade programmes to progress without unnecessary disruption.



With the right planning approach, modernisation does not have to mean compromise. It can be delivered in a way that safeguards people, maintains continuity and keeps transport networks functioning while long-term improvements are put in place.

Modernisation Readiness Checklist

A quick self-assessment for estates, facilities, operations, and project teams.

Use this checklist to identify the risks, gaps and operational pressures you may face during upcoming modernisation works.

1. Modernisation Planning & Timing

- Do you have clear visibility of all planned infrastructure works on your site over the next 12-36 months?
- Are your most business-critical spaces (depots, terminals, port admin buildings) scheduled for refurbishment or partial closure?
- Have you mapped which functions cannot be paused during these works (e.g., ops rooms, engineering planning, security teams)?

2. Welfare & Compliance

- Will existing welfare facilities still meet updated safety, accessibility, and environmental requirements during the works?
- Have you identified where welfare provision will temporarily fall below standards as buildings undergo refurbishment?
- Do you have a compliant fallback option ready if welfare space becomes unavailable at short notice?

3. Operational Continuity

- If parts of your estate become inaccessible, do you know where those teams would relocate to maintain service delivery?
- Can your operation run safely and efficiently if access routes, staff areas or workspaces are restricted for extended periods?
- Do you have a plan for managing increased contractor presence alongside day-to-day operations?

4. Temporary Space & Flexibility

- Have you identified which roles and teams will require temporary offices, break rooms or specialist spaces during works?
- Can you provide alternative workspace quickly if a project phase changes, overruns, or doubles in scope?
- Do you have enough physical space on-site for construction compounds and temporary staff facilities?

5. Risk, Contingency & Communication

- Do you have a contingency plan for delays, phased closures or unexpected asset failures during modernisation?
- Have all stakeholders (estates, ops, HSQE, contractors) agreed on how operational disruption will be minimised?
- Are you confident you can maintain staff welfare, safety, and service levels across all phases of the project?



Explore our case studies to view previous projects from Transport

Network Rail



Portakabin worked closely with Network Rail to develop a building that overcame the restrictions of the site but also delivered office and welfare facilities of the highest standard. The 1650m², three storey building included offices, mess rooms, toilets and showers for up to 130 people.

[View the case study](#)

Sparrows Engineering



The existing buildings were approaching the end of their life and the client had identified a need to expand their capacity to meet increasing training needs. They needed a flexible solution that would achieve a high quality learning environment with a canteen and toilet facilities.

[View the case study](#)

Manchester Airport



While Terminal Two at Manchester Airport undergoes a £1bn transformation, airside office space and high-quality engineering workshops were required to accommodate specialist engineers from Storm Aviation.

[View the case study](#)

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