

# HS2: what happens now?

**Options for passengers and freight... and changing priorities for the North**



## HS2 ... the fallout and the future

- Implications for the rail sector and the wider society.
- Industry experts Andrew McNaughton, Maggie Simpson and William Barter deliver their verdicts.

## Westminster and the railways

- Counting down to the General Election.
- Are ministers still committed to the railways?
- Labour's approach to public transport.

**ANALYSIS, STRATEGY AND INSIGHT**

## Q4 Editorial Board Chairman introduces RailReview

**Sir Michael Holden** *RailReview* Editorial Board Chairman

**Q4 National Railways and a structure for growth**



The editorial board has been pleased to have Sir Michael Holden as its Chairman. Sir Michael has a wealth of experience in the railway industry, having worked for British Rail, Network Rail, and the Department for Transport. He has also served as Chairman of the Rail Delivery Group and as a member of the Rail Industry Council. Sir Michael is a strong advocate for the railway industry and is committed to ensuring that RailReview provides a platform for the industry to voice its views and concerns. He will be introducing the editorial board to the readers of RailReview and outlining the magazine's focus for the fourth quarter of 2023.



The construction phase in the north of the country is a key focus for the editorial board. The cancellation of HS2 Phase 2a north of Birmingham has significant implications for the railway industry and the region. The editorial board will be exploring the challenges and opportunities that arise from this decision, including the impact on the local economy and the need for alternative transport solutions. The board will also be looking at the progress of other railway projects in the north and the role of the government in supporting the industry's recovery and growth.

## HS2 Features The important strategic issues

**HS2: the fallout for the railway and society**

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**RailReview**

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**RailReview**

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**ANALYSIS, STRATEGY AND INSIGHT**

**An Avanti West Coast Pendolino at Manchester Piccadilly. TOM MCATEE.**

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# Sir Michael Holden RailReview Editorial Board Chairman



## Q4 National Railways and a structure for growth

Three significant decisions have been taken by central government this autumn which, taken together, are indicative of the downward spiral that the rail industry in England is firmly on.

The need for a change of direction is clear and urgent. But how best to drive this change?

The first of these indicators is the decision to cancel Phase 2a of HS2, despite it having legislative consent in place and despite the very obvious need for it in order to make any sense at all of Phase 1 - with or without the section from Old Oak Common to Euston.

My colleague Professor Andrew McNaughton makes the most eloquent argument against this short-sighted decision elsewhere in this edition, so I will not attempt here to compete with him. But it is illustrative to examine why it got to this point.

HS2 Ltd is an entirely public sector creation, controlled throughout its short life so far by officials at the Department for Transport, and overseen by ministers in each of Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments in turn.

In so much as post-mortem analysis may eventually suggest that it might have been over-specified, or that its contracting framework did not produce best value, the incontrovertible fact remains that this is a disaster entirely made and controlled by Whitehall.

There is probably a wider story to be told by others (such as Sir John Armitt, perhaps) about the inability of this country's governance structure to see large infrastructure projects successfully through their whole lifecycle.

However, the consequences of short-sighted strategic decisions such as this have to be lived with by the railway industry in England - for the next generation at least.

We are to be left with an expensive white elephant (already dubbed 'Acton to Aston'), which has somehow contrived to reduce capacity north of Birmingham rather than add to it, has stopped much-needed growth

in rail freight along the spine of the country, and has obstructed the construction of the Northern Powerhouse rail project into Manchester - the one big rail project to which the Government says it is still committed.

A better course of action at this juncture would have been to allow Phase 2a to complete as it is already too far gone to escape significant sunk costs, and to complete the tunnels from Old Oak Common to Euston as the tunnel boring machines are already bought and paid for (and this would represent a clear declaration of intent), while declaring a pause for a strategic review of how best to complete Phase 2b and Northern Powerhouse Rail affordably, adding to the pause on Euston already called for just this purpose.

My second indicator of a downward spiral is the decision to withdraw the ticket office closure proposals in their entirety, rather than seeking to identify a way forward to make sensible progress towards the goal.

This is because the original goal, to eliminate people sitting behind glass windows whose sole role is to sell rail tickets, is a good one - and one of the better ways available to remove unnecessary cost from the industry.

It's the way that it has been tackled which was so obviously wrong. I won't labour the point here about putting the cart before the horse, because I have made this argument before (as have many others) that several key enablers are required before you try and move towards wholesale ticket office closures - none of which were put in place beforehand, and they still haven't been.

It's an uncertain point as to the extent that elements within the industry encouraged the Government to take this approach, as opposed to being encouraged by the Government to take it, as all this was done behind closed doors.

But it is clear and obvious that it was a very poor approach to tackling the issue to adopt, and one that a better-led industry would not have taken.

A more rational response to the tidal wave of criticism to the consultation would have been to identify the one or two train operating companies (TOCs) which had the most considered proposals, modify them to placate the most vociferous of the objectors, and then run these as trial programmes over a two-year period - while also launching a programme of enablers to a wider and gradual rollout across the network subsequently. Maybe chunks of Great Western Railway and Greater Anglia could have been used for this purpose?

The third indicator of downward spiral is the decision (seemingly taken unilaterally by ministers) to offer a 5% pay deal for the 2022 claim to RMT members working for the franchised TOCs, but without any of the reform strings previously attached to the offer.

Instead, there is a long-overdue decision to disaggregate negotiations on changes to terms and conditions (the productivity elements) to individual employers, and handle these as part of a separate negotiation on a 2023 deal early in 2024.

This rubbing out of a red line which was firmly held for nearly a year and a half has been greeted with amazement by the RMT,

*"The governance structure we have today slows everything down, makes for cautious decisions, makes everybody risk averse, ensures that good opportunities are lost through delay and obfuscation, and sucks the life out of the industry's leaders and managers. Never mind the administrative cost of it all."*



its members, and managers in TOC land.

While it is arguable that this is one of the more attractive of the ways forward at this point, given how ingrained the disputes have become and how damaging they are to the rail industry's reputation and growth prospects, the employers should never have got themselves into this position in the first place.

It was a wacky idea to try and negotiate reform of terms and conditions at national level, when 30 years of a devolved and partly privatised structure has led to so much variation between TOCs depending on their varying needs.

So, we have endured 18 months of pain and grief with very little progress to show for it. Worse than that, the managers within the TOCs are exhausted after having to operate through these damaging disputes for such a long time. To have got no progress at the end of it will make it much harder to sustain another round of strikes in 2024.

Meanwhile, the RMT is riding high, having seen off both the hated ticket office proposals and productivity demands - even if the latter is only for another year.

These three government decisions have a common thread running through them: a muddying of the waters between the sector's overseers in government and the industry's leaders.

It has reached the stage where, unless you are intimately involved in the toing and froing between government and industry on an issue, it is hard to tell where ideas originated from, and who influenced their development along the way.

Government traditionally operates in a secretive manner, requiring all parties to stay silent in public until either such time as government is ready to announce a decision, or the relevant industry party is instructed to initiate a course of action which will involve it spilling into the public domain.

We have got so used to the Government calling all the shots in the period since the pandemic struck that this behaviour has become normalised. But it does mean that it has become impossible to hold people to account for their decisions, or even to understand how particular courses of action were decided upon.

What I do know, from my own first-hand experience over many years, is that civil servants are by nature risk averse.

What follows is necessarily a generalisation, but it does seem to be quite widespread - there is always a fear of proposing something which might not find ministerial favour, and always a nagging concern about how actions taken may be scrutinised after the event by the National Audit Office or the Public Accounts Committee.

**An excavator at work during the construction of a cross-passage for the Chiltern Tunnel on HS2. While the Old Oak Common to Birmingham section that incorporates this tunnel is to be completed, Sir Michael Holden says a strategic review should have been held to determine how best to complete the cancelled Phase 2b. HS2.**

Historically, the civil service culture has been one of fine minds which can turn their attention to any given issue without the baggage accrued through having lots of relevant experience.

And while the DfT absorbed a number of non-civil servants when the former Strategic Rail Authority was disbanded in 2004, the hitherto prevailing civil service culture seems to have reasserted itself over time.

Civil servants perform at their best when asked to develop policy proposals and put them to ministers for decisions to be made. Many are bright, hardworking people, but only a few understand enough of the industry they are controlling to be able to make operational decisions well, as opposed to policy recommendations.

Now that the minutiae of industry decision-making is being controlled centrally by government, the weaknesses of this approach have become all too obvious. ➤

*“It seems to me that the single thing which is most needed now is to get railway decision-making back out of the weeds of central government and into the hands of railway professionals.”*

► Civil servants are being asked to make actual decisions on operational matters such as detailed timetabling choices, rolling stock specifications, ticket office opening hours, and so on.

Many are ill-equipped knowledge-wise to make these decisions, as they often lack the necessary operational expertise. They might worry that by agreeing to what is suggested to them by an industry party, they might be being taken for a ride, or that the minister might not approve, or that it might go wrong later and they will get the blame.

In this situation, there are one of two default actions which often occur: either there is a request for further information “to help better inform a decision”, or it is kicked upstairs for ministers to make a decision.

Thus, ministers can find in their red boxes overnight (for example) a paper requesting them to make a decision on whether a particular train should call at a particular station or not.

This bureaucratisation and politicisation of operational decisions is one reason why our railway has got into such a mess.

The governance structure we have today slows everything down, makes for cautious decisions, makes everybody risk averse, ensures that good opportunities are lost through delay and obfuscation, and sucks the life out of the industry’s leaders and managers. Never mind the administrative cost of it all.

And this is before we get to the situation which has developed since the pandemic, with HM Treasury double-guessing every decision made within the DfT. This has added to the complexity of decision-making and imposed a far more risk-averse culture on revenue-generating proposals.

The icing on the cake has come with the latest change of Prime Minister. Decisions which would formerly have been taken within the DfT or HM Treasury are now being taken out of their hands and made by a small cabal of Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer and their coterie of advisers in Downing Street.

We have morphed seamlessly into a world where decisions are routinely taken as far from the place where they should be taken as it is possible to get. And they are often taken without considering both cost and revenue together.

I think we can all understand how and why this has happened. But it is absolutely

the worst way imaginable to run our railway system.

The *Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail* addressed this malaise by proposing to create a new body, Great British Railways, to which would be delegated most of the operational decision-making currently entrusted to the DfT.

However, it has become quite clear that government as a whole is not sold on the proposals contained in this plan. Frankly, I’m not surprised by this as they are not especially coherent.

Essentially, there is a lack of agreement about the extent of private sector involvement in the future industry.

The desire to sweep away the complexity of the current industry structures sits uneasily with the needs of freight operators and open access operators.

And the proposal to integrate track and train at a regional level makes it harder to engage the private sector in a way which injects genuine risk capital or even simply outsources revenue risk.

It is telling that in the two and a half years since publication of the Plan, and despite a small army of people beavering away on it in the GBR Transition Team, there is very little in the public domain to show for it - and it is obvious that there remains a lack of agreement on it within government, too.

How else to explain the decision in the King’s Speech to publish the draft Bill and put it out to pre-legislative scrutiny, rather than proceeding to place it before Parliament immediately?

The thing I find most annoying about this continued dither and delay is that most of the energy seems to be focused on what we can think of as second order decisions - how to drive retail reform, how to move to regionally devolved but vertically integrated organisations dovetailing into local government, and so on.

It seems to me that the single thing which is most needed now is to get railway decision-making back out of the weeds of central government and into the hands of railway professionals.

Back in pre-1994 days, this was routinely achieved by the simple expedient of setting the British Railways Board (BRB) a series of annual net revenue targets, and then stepping back.

This meant that all the tricky trade-offs between competing priorities and the

overarching need to balance the books became the job of a specialist agency, rather than central government. If the BRB failed to meet its objectives, it was easy to fire the chairman and start over.

If we were now to re-create such an agency (for want of a better name let’s call it National Railways, to echo its sisterly roads organisation), I would want to keep its aims simple in the first few years.

The object of the exercise would be to minimise disruptive change in the first instance, while leadership, timeliness and revenue growth are reasserted within the industry as quickly as possible.

All the difficult decisions - such as vertical integration, regionalisation, franchising policy, and the role of open access operations - would initially be put to one side. Effectively, these become second order decisions. I’m suggesting that the existing regulatory structure remains in place, at least for the time being.

National Railways would need to assume the key executive elements of running the railway: franchising and concessioning management moves into it from DfT; Network Rail moves as a single entity inside it, but with one caveat (hold that thought). The Rail Safety and Standards Board I would leave independent, as the history of the last 30 years shows that this is where it has best performed.



There are a number of different organisational models which could be adopted. But my opening structure would minimise the need for substantial reorganisation, in order to regain a firm grip and to speed up better-quality decision-making as quickly as possible.

This new body needs a non-executive chair who is committed to working maybe three days a week, and a full-time chief executive.

In my opinion, both of these roles should be occupied by experienced railway professionals who are at the top of their game, and who can get on with what needs to be done without a long and steep learning curve.

Great leaders though they are, we should not be relying on NR Chairman Lord Hendy and NR Chief Executive Andrew Haines to slide across into these jobs - for three reasons: firstly, this cannot become (or be seen as) a NR takeover; secondly, there is still the same challenging role for NR to perform in the revised operating model; thirdly, because no matter how good they both are, they cannot be expected to carry on working at this intense level for the next several years or so.

Reporting to the Chief Executive, I would keep the structure as simple as possible.

Finance director, chief counsel, and directors for property, communications and people can all be recruited on the

open market, with railway expertise not a particular requirement.

I would propose to have a Policy and Specification Director, whose role would be to determine the future desired outputs of the railway network and plot the course to achieve those. A freight policy advisor would report into that role.

A Director of Train Services would oversee teams leading on franchise letting and management, in-house operations, and a head of customer experience.

Finally, I would separate out the System Operator role from Network Rail and have that report directly to the Chief Executive.

This would enable a considered approach to be taken particularly on capacity allocation, while keeping it as independent as possible from the 'doing' parts of the organisation, which could be conflicted in dealing with open access and freight, for example.

The good news is that, in my opinion, there are enough top-quality experienced rail leaders available to enable all of these pivotal roles to be filled. A few are currently working abroad, but most are here in the UK and could do it.

The only real thing that stops this from happening today is a lack of government will. If government had the will, a small and simple Bill would be needed to enable franchising decisions to be taken by an

agency rather than by government.

I think that if this was all carefully explained, it would not need to be seen as politically controversial and so could expect to pass through Parliament relatively easily.

There is one more thing I think I would change.

I was impressed by Alastair Lees' opinion piece in the Q3 edition of *RailReview*, in which he posited the development of a clear product offer for GB passenger trains and a single brand.

The key point of this philosophy is that strong branding, combined with a clear product offer, has the ability to drive significant revenue growth. Since this is the outcome (above all else) that we most need right now, I think it is worth considering carefully despite the potential disadvantages.

There is a plethora of train brands out there now - possibly 40 or more, including sub-brands. Some are good ones, but others are less effective.

Alastair proposes to use the double-arrow symbol and paint all trains in the same primary colour with a single overarching brand. Let me be bold and suggest "Rail England" as a working Masterbrand.

Importantly, there would need to be market-based sub-brands to enable clear product differentiation, providing clarity for consumers as to what to expect on board.

Readers can come up with their own market grouping proposals, but for now I can see little wrong with keeping the former British Rail structure of three key sub-brands: InterCity, South Eastern and Regional. Trains in each of these three brands would be painted in a subtly different livery, while retaining the overall feel of the single national brand.

Developing a Masterbrand and sub-brands in this way would enable very much more effective marketing proposals to be developed, and would lead a drive towards consistency of product across England.

This would have significant value in making rail more attractive and hence drive revenue growth. It need not inhibit distinctive local marketing opportunities from being grasped.

All of this could be put in place by the start of the 2025-26 financial year, if government could be persuaded to get on with it. But I recognise that the single word "if" is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that last sentence. ■

**TransPennine Express 8082209 stands at York as LNER 801220 approaches. In *RailReview* Q3, Alistair Lees discussed the development of GB passenger trains with a single brand, an idea that Sir Michael Holden feels is worth considering and perhaps developing. MIKE PINDER.**



Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announces his decision to axe HS2 north of Birmingham at the Conservative Party conference in October. ALAMY.



# HS2: the fallout for the railway and society

The decision to cut back HS2 came as a blow to the rail industry. Not least to the Department for Transport, Great British Railways, the National Infrastructure Commission, and the 30,000 people engaged in building the line between London and Birmingham.

They were not consulted. This was a decision taken within 10 Downing Street.

What we face now is a tree trunk of a railway - with no branches, no roots, no leaves, and no fruit. In this special issue of *RailReview*, we examine the implications and consider what happens next.

■ In a passionate defence of HS2's benefits, Professor Andrew McNaughton writes of the Government decision: "It consigns the north of England to be left behind economically and socially: I am angry. It would seem this Government thinks there is an alternative future: sitting in a motorway traffic jam."

■ William Barter tells us that Euston to Birmingham is now a "minimum viable product".

■ Neil Robertson talks of the damage to rail recruitment and training.

■ Russell Jackson says the supply chain is still "reeling" from "the biggest possible wake-up call".

■ And a senior industry source assesses that the system of judging value for money from infrastructure spending "is tilted towards the South East".

We look at what the decision means in the North and in London, across the railway and in the wider economy and society.

The decision sets the UK apart from virtually every other large, developed nation in Europe and Asia, all of which favour high-speed, high-capacity railway lines connecting their principal cities.

Here's a warning from Lord Andrew Adonis, who kick-started HS2 back in 2010: "Despite the amputation of the Manchester and Leeds branches of HS2, trains will run off the high-speed line north of Birmingham and proceed slowly to Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow on existing tracks.

"When that happens, the contrast between old and new will be so stark, and congestion north of Birmingham so severe, that

I expect the Manchester and Leeds branches will be built fairly rapidly.

"The main effect of the Sunak axe will be to dramatically increase costs and regional disparities. Every year of delay in extending HS2 will have a severely detrimental effect on the economies of the northern conurbations.

"I predict that Sunak's decision will be seen as one of the worst, most short-sighted transport infrastructure decisions of the last 50 years."

Until this autumn, HS2 had enjoyed a large degree of political consensus across national and devolved government, and across all main parties.

No longer... as we explain, there will now be a battle to overturn the decisions to stop safeguarding land for Phase 2 and to sell off property already purchased along the route - the vast majority of it farmland. If the sale goes ahead, extension of the line is surely doomed, denying future generations the opportunity to take a different view.

That view could take many years to emerge. Any new government will have more pressing priorities than resurrecting a project abandoned by the outgoing administration.

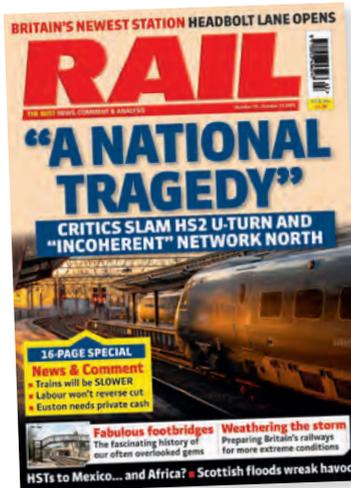
As Stephen Joseph argues in these pages, the industry needs to find a coherent voice to make the case for rail investment all over again, for a new political generation.

In that context, Great British Railways has been a regular commentator in this journal, with Network Rail Chairman and GBR Transition Team's Lord Henty of Richmond Hill fronting the last edition. But on HS2, GBR has remained silent, declining to take part in this issue. That is concerning.

The HS2 decision was taken in response to short-term pressures in the year before a General Election. The present government regards its choice as decisive and illustrating its commitment to change.

In the pages that follow, we suggest it will have an impact felt for decades across all levels of society and in all parts of the UK.

Who now will speak for the railway? ■



# HS2: a truncated route c

**PROFESSOR ANDREW MCNAUGHTON** explains why connectivity between cities and urban regions is so important... and how HS2 could play an essential role in achieving that

**T**he consequences of the loss of Phase 2a of HS2, the barely 40-mile extension of Phase 1 from Lichfield to Crewe, will be significant and long-lasting to our country on a number of levels.

Some are obvious - to the railway system and the national transport network, of course.

But it's more than that. It consigns the North of England to continuing to be left behind both economically and socially. As someone brought up and who has spent much of his career across the North, I am angry.

If the Government had announced "we are a bit short of money at the moment and need to pause for a couple of years, and sort out the management and Board of our delivery company so we get costs under control", then I would have understood. Maybe not liked, but that's secondary.

But just pretending the bi-partisan strategy of the past 15 years was suddenly wrong is extraordinary.

Why is Phase 2a so important? Others are writing about this at a technical level, but it goes like this...

Phase 1 releases capacity to enable growth of housing and jobs (prosperity) in the Milton Keynes-Northampton-Rugby region.

Which is good. But the news to the Westminster bubble is... this is not the North. It does nothing for the expansion of freight by rail on the country's principal freight corridor, rejoining the West Coast Main Line where there is no spare capacity.

Phase 2a bypasses all that and, in re-joining north of Basford Hall, opens the door to at least doubling freight by rail.

This is a key point. HS2 not only tripled passenger capacity, it also provided a future for sustainable freight logistics.

It would seem that this government thinks there is an alternative future: sitting in a motorway traffic jam. But remember that HS2 has nearly three times the capacity in half the land take of a motorway.

Now the bigger picture. Where will our children and following generations live, work, play?

Phase 1 is already enabling Birmingham to become a prosperous city region equal to the South East - a great region to live and work in. Nothing new there, except to be under an hour from the City of London, which is still one of just a few world centres of wealth creation and investment.

Why does that matter? Essentially because of that hour. Some

things have changed little from pre-history, and one of them is the number of hours in a day.

Examine the rise of civilisations from the dawn of man and you will see people have a 'travel time budget', which is the time they will spend to access a better job, education, leisure activities, or meet people. And that is around an hour each way routinely - maybe 90 minutes if a few times a week or for something special.

Phase 1 of HS2 plugs the Birmingham city region into the City of London, the melting pot of world finance, law and modern engineering (by the way, not many people know there are more engineers in the Square Mile than financiers).

It is why firms are re-locating to Birmingham - a better quality of life, yet still connected whenever they want, and bringing with them higher-quality, skilled 21st century jobs.

Single cities are individually too small to survive alone. The age of the general-purpose city region of a couple of million people is coming to an end.

Critical mass of skills and innovation, centred around education, research and development hubs, dictates that cities have to choose what they will be excellent at. They will need to attract talent to want to live there - and part of the attraction is connectivity to other places, family and friends.

You can build a 'world-class' medical facility in the back of beyond, but you won't attract the 'world-class' humans to want to work there if they are cut off. It's not a penal colony, they have a choice! It's called human capital... and it is far more important than financial capital.

The critical mass factor explains why the City of London, or Singapore or Sydney Barangaroo, have such a density of entrepreneurs alongside finance and commercial law, irrespective of cost of living.

I can't emphasise how important this agglomeration effect is, both economically and socially.

Let's be clear, it is very important to connect our northern cities together. Liverpool facing the world, Manchester as a creative and media city, Leeds a financial one, the North East facing Europe and a centre of sustainable manufacturing. All will be stronger when people and goods can flow freely and more quickly between them.

But that's not sufficient.

Phase 2a was to complete the initial section of the connectivity spine of our country. As the three reports by Sir David Higgins in the last decade envisaged, in doing so much to awaken the city regions, HS2 was more than a transport system. It brought the brighter future about to be enjoyed by the Birmingham city region nearer to the North West.

The transport economists playing 'gaming the green book' could show a very high incremental benefit:cost ratio of this short and relatively inexpensive main branch addition to the London to Birmingham tree trunk.

But Higgins was highlighting Crewe as a new high growth area. More than a transport hub, but in future a great area to live under an hour from central London and 20 minutes from central Birmingham. In world terms, still a satellite to the city region planets - but a satellite with attitude.

Phase 2a set up the next winners from Phase 2b. The North West

*"Higgins was highlighting Crewe as a new high growth area. More than a transport hub, but in future a great area to live under an hour from central London and 20 minutes from central Birmingham. In world terms, still a satellite to the city region planets - but a satellite with attitude."*

# uts off city lifelines



Firms are re-locating to Birmingham city centre because the region will be connected to the City of London. The same will not be true of cities further north, says Andrew McNaughton. ALAMY.

*“Single cities are individually too small to survive alone. The age of the general-purpose city region of a couple of million people is coming to an end.”*

region not only connected to London, but (for the first time in history) to the West Midlands as well. Manchester to Birmingham in under 45 minutes, Preston similarly. Frequently. Reliably. Sustainably. By rail. Not like now, where rail has around 4% of the passenger market.

Remember the eastern leg of HS2 being lopped back to the East Midlands? To this Yorkshireman, this was a tragedy. It removed the umbilical cord designed to connect and bind together the modern advanced manufacturing corridor of England (West Midlands-East Midlands-the reborn Sheffield-Leeds-Teesside-Tyneside), helping it to be capable of competing internationally through the synergy of skills and skilled people.

Well, at least the first section was happening, plugging the East Midlands into the ‘magic hour’ network to London and Birmingham regions, and setting up a springboard for the future extension to the North. Now that seems to have been vandalised, too.

The effect can be seen in other European countries where high-speed rail has brought city regions within an hour of each other. But because of London’s global standing, the only mega-city in Europe, the effect is even stronger.

If you think Britain is somehow different, please reflect on the effect of HS1 on the prosperity of the people of East Kent.

Towns such as Margate and Ashford, the City of Canterbury, and their surrounds were dying before HS1. Too remote to retain skilled young people or attract new ones.

Look at them now - thriving with new jobs and businesses. They

are not just about commuters. Because they are now connected in an hour or less, they are prospering in their own right.

And, as I can demonstrate elsewhere, each new business supports at least the same number of new jobs in the supporting community - from builders to baristas, and from doctors to schoolteachers. Newly invigorated communities.

That was the story which was promised to the North, and which is now being acted out in Birmingham. It just won’t happen without HS2, and it will not be triggered by a few sops from the leftovers once the cancellation charges for Phase 2A are paid.

If the analogy I use of HS2 being a tree still holds, it is being cut back to a trunk without branches. And the roots are being hacked at, too.

Without a Euston terminus in the heart of London, where people actually want to go, the tree (even the truncated one) dies.

And if those Euston roots are constrained to give a windfall to local property developers, it becomes a bonsai.

Frankly, it would become a worse position than never even starting HS2, soaking up money and resources with benefits only for Birmingham (even then only partially, given it would remain disconnected from the great cities of the North) and points south.

In what way is that starting to correct the economic and social inequalities of this country?

The HS2 network could be revived (as it surely must be) at some point in the future, by leaders with the vision of those of all political colours for the thick end of a generation from 2007 to 2022.

Our job is now twofold. In the short term, it is to seek to protect the land along the route of Phase 2a and at Euston from being lost forever. And then to identify the skills, resources, arrangements, and (above all) the construction leaders we will need to create HS2 at a justifiable cost.

If we can do that, the whole railway will benefit from that discipline. And when that happens the people of this country - the reason any of our efforts matter - will prosper. ■

An Avanti West Coast Pendolino stands at Carlisle in March. There are fears that regional disparity between the South and northern cities will grow as a result of the HS2 decision. ALAMY.



# HS2: “Increased costs, regional disparities”

PAUL CLIFTON gauges industry response to Rishi Sunak’s HS2 U-turn, discussing the effect on businesses and jobs, and the wider societal impact to levelling-up and the nation’s economy

“There is no plan for transport in England - unlike in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland,” says a leading academic on the subject.

It is difficult to model the social and economic consequences of cancelling something that has not yet been built - a rail link north of Birmingham that was going to happen, that now is not going to happen, but which could yet happen in the future.

That makes the claims and counter-claims of HS2 supporters and critics hard to challenge.

What is possible to observe is a consequence of further strengthening the dominance of London (or the area southwards from Birmingham), to the detriment of elsewhere.

We can also state that a long-standing broad political consensus on transport policy has been broken.

Post-war Britain, from 1950 to the late 1970s, is viewed by historians as one of the most equal-developed societies in the world. The gap between those with money to spare and those without was closer than it is today.

That changed with the decline of regional industrial heartlands, which coincided with the rise and rise of London as a primate city.

HS2 was, at least symbolically, an attempt to tie the nation back together. To reverse the growing disparities between the globally important capital and the rest of the UK. Politically, we called it “levelling up”.

The Sunak decision broke that. It prioritised today’s immediate economic choice over that of long-term national cohesion. Inequality has always been influenced by where people live.

HS2 accounted for 15% of total rail sector expenditure in 2022. “The reduction in work will clearly have very significant implications for businesses and jobs,” warns the Railway Industry Association.

“Sunak appears anti-rail,” says Stephen Joseph, transport policy consultant and former long-time leader of the Campaign for Better Transport.

“Other countries are not doing the same as us. Even the US is growing its railway. And Scotland and Wales are not moving in this direction - they are increasingly at odds with the Westminster choices.

“Not having HS2 will mess up rail freight. If you don’t take lorries off the motorway, on the Department for Transport’s benefit:cost analysis it will slow down road traffic and therefore have an economic impact.

“Translating that into the bigger picture, what Sunak has done is worsen conditions for motorists by clogging up the M6, in particular. Ironic, given that his pitch was about ending the war on motorists and handing some of the HS2 money to roads.

“This is a poor decision. Another is rowing back on net zero, which had a similar effect.

“Handbrake turns for what look like short-term party political reasons have long-term economic consequences. They put off inward investment into the UK.

“Pension funds and sovereign wealth funds that put money into very long-term projects don’t want to be told that the government may stop partway through. You may even see less investment in London and the South East, as global investors look to other countries instead.

“Witness the reaction from the motor industry to Sunak’s net zero reverse: overnight, we went from leader to laughing stock internationally. This will be similar.”

## Social Value

Is it a step too far to suggest the HS2 decision bakes in inequality for decades to come?

“There’s a direct measurable social value opportunity lost to the North,” says Neil Robertson, chief executive of NSAR (National Skills Academy for Rail).

“Seventy per cent of railway jobs are in the South. The vast majority of railway jobs will now continue to be in the South. That was going to change - now it’s not. This is a fundamental shift.

“The North is united against these decisions, and the North is never normally united. There’s a tangible rage that is drawn on a profound cynicism about access to investment. It’s bad to be forgotten. But to be remembered, included, and then deliberately rejected is doubly bad.”

NSAR projected how many HS2 jobs would go to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It found that HS2 followed best practice and did well. But it still could not source sufficient skilled staff, and that led to what Robertson calls “epic wage inflation”, pushing up construction costs.

“That’s an important factor in social value,” he says.

“You don’t get social value from poaching staff from elsewhere and paying them more - that’s a net loss. The social value comes in creating new jobs.

“The single biggest opportunity for HS2 to level up was in the jobs of Phase 2, because that was where it was going through the most disadvantaged areas. The prize was going to be significant social value added - possibly the highest there has ever been.” ➤



*“Handbrake turns for what look like short-term party political reasons have long-term economic consequences. They put off inward investment into the UK.”*

*Stephen Joseph, Transport policy consultant*

## Peak HS2?

NSAR has modelled the employment impact of HS2 Phase 2 changes. Head of Workforce Analytics Michelle Russell forecasts a reduction in future staff requirements.

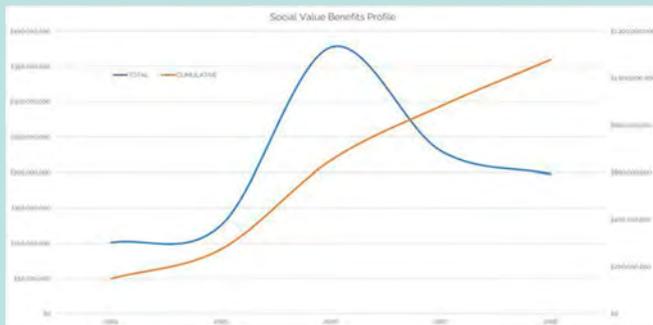
In signalling and telecoms, before Sunak's decision, employment demand averaged 2,000-3,000 a year for 2024-28. That now falls to 1,500. In electrification and plant, demand halves.

NSAR still sees a skills gap in the North, driven by both the replacement of retirees and investment such as the Transpennine Route Upgrade and Northern Powerhouse Rail. But removing HS2 Phase 2 from the modelling reduces demand by 18,000 jobs a year between 2024-33.

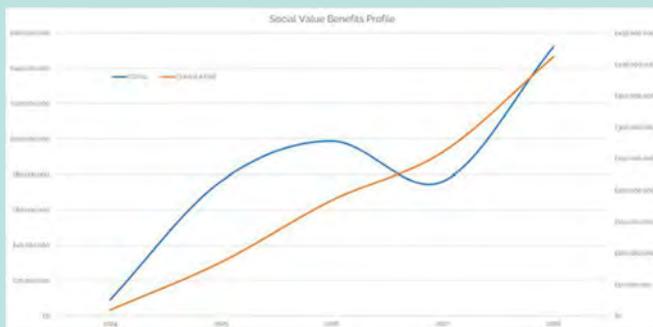
NSAR found the HS2 workforce peaked at 26,500 people in 2022-23 and declines for the rest of the decade to 1,000 in the 2030s. Rail engineering labour demand increases from 1,000 today to 9,000 in 2023-2029, before tailing off sharply.

It modelled the social value generated from one in five jobs being people from disadvantaged backgrounds. A cumulative value of £1 billion by 2028 has reduced to £400 million.

Source: NSAR.



**Social Value generated from 20% of jobs going to disadvantaged backgrounds including HS2.**



**Social Value generated from 20% of jobs going to disadvantaged backgrounds excluding HS2.**



*“The single biggest opportunity for HS2 to level up was in the jobs of Phase 2, because that was where it was going through the most disadvantaged areas. The prize was going to be significant social value added - possibly the highest there has ever been.”*

Neil Robertson, Chief Executive, NSAR

➤ Lord Andrew Adonis comments: “The main effect of the Sunak axe will be to dramatically increase costs and regional disparities until the scheme is eventually completed. The problems of HS2 result from mismanagement in execution, not from conception or design.

“Last year, the Elizabeth line came in finally at a bloated £19 billion, billions over budget and four years late. Like the M25, the Victoria and Jubilee Lines, and virtually all transport infrastructure serving highly populated areas, it is massively outperforming its original traffic projections and critics have vanished like the dawn mist. HS2 will very likely go the same way and defy its critics.”

Neil Robertson adds: “When you level up, you create good jobs for disadvantaged people. NSAR has been marketing to young people, for careers on the railway. How will this look?”

“Between the strikes and the cancellation of the headline project, talented people will not find this industry attractive. That will be to

the detriment of the whole railway.

“What are the alternative jobs now HS2 is gone? Roads, water and power have some overlap. I’m not someone who talks of roads versus rail - both are congested, so I have no problem with investing in both. I’m advocating deploying this skilled workforce while we have them, now they’re not building railways.

“The water sector is planning a large investment in resilience, above and beyond fixing leaks and sewage. New reservoirs, canals and pipes. Two hundred years ago, the canal workers moved to build railways. Could we now have rail workers moving to water? That’s beautiful symmetry!”

### Safeguarding land: no “fire sale”

“How do we stop them selling the land to Crewe, to prevent HS2 ever being completed?” asks Prof Iain Docherty, from the University of Stirling.

“That is now the single most urgent outcome from all this. Nothing else matters until that decision is reversed.



**HS2 Ltd welcomes 40 graduates and 19 apprentices in October. NSAR fears that talented young people will not find the industry attractive. HS2 LTD.**

“Let’s think about what happens if Sunak gets to build what he has announced, with HS2 ending in Birmingham.

“A six-platform, privately funded Euston built by essentially giving away half the land for development of something that isn’t a station. You would have a line with vastly more capacity than Euston could ever handle, fully serving only one of its intended destinations. The benefit:cost ratio of that scheme is never going to be good.”

Darren Caplan, chief executive of the Railway Industry Association, comments: “I’ve seen U-turns in the past on policy. But in 25 years as a lobbyist, I’ve never seen a government try to prevent its successor from taking a different view. What they’re doing here, with a fire sale of land lined up for Phase 2, is vindictive.

“It’s one thing to decide we haven’t got the budget to build it now - governments have to make difficult choices. It’s another entirely for a government to try to stop anyone else from doing it sometime in the future. That was the big surprise.”

Sir John Armit, chairman of the National Infrastructure Commission, also called the land sale a “mistake”.

He told the BBC: “I am disappointed because I think it’s what we often describe as a sort of knee-jerk, snap reaction. We had an integrated plan a few weeks ago. We’ve now lost that.” He urges the Government to have “a proper consideration about how best we can connect Birmingham and Manchester”.

The Government said it planned to sell the land “within weeks”. RIA points to analysis by the High Speed Rail Group (of which it is a member), which indicates that selling the land already purchased for Phase 2A would result in a net cost to taxpayers of at least £100m. It shows the Government has purchased 2,900 acres of land between Birmingham and Crewe, at a cost of £205m. Nearly all of it is agricultural land.

“A rushed land sale would be poor value for the taxpayer,” says Caplan.

“According to Savills land values index, a fire sale of 2,900 acres of land would achieve £9,000 an acre - £26m for part of the route.”

RIA advises that land sales should only proceed after a full consultation with local authorities, businesses and rail stakeholders. Otherwise, it says, there could be unintended consequences.

It regards Birmingham to Crewe as the most important section of the whole route. Without it, “a permanent and irrevocable bottleneck” would be created at Colwich Junction in Staffordshire, restricting the flow of services.

The HSRG found that: “The current proposal can be likened to a plan to funnel the M40 from London to Birmingham into an already overcrowded A-road, and thereafter onto a country lane.”

This would (it said) “lock in the North-South gap for generations to come”.



*“Last year, the Elizabeth line came in finally at a bloated £19 billion, billions over budget and four years late. Like the M25, the Victoria and Jubilee Lines, and virtually all transport infrastructure serving highly populated areas, it is massively outperforming its original traffic projections and critics have vanished like the dawn mist. HS2 will very likely go the same way.”*

Lord Andrew Adonis

## ► “Terrible signal to investors”

“We’ve done a survey of confidence within the sector for the year ahead,” says Darren Caplan.

“The outlook by 200 rail leaders is incredibly negative. There is a genuine feeling that the Government has turned against rail.

“The amount of people who think the sector will grow has plummeted through the floor. Even the London to Birmingham section of HS2 seems to be perceived in a negative way - it is being continued only because work has started. The implication is that the Government is not in favour of big infrastructure schemes.

“They also have a deep suspicion that any of the schemes mentioned for Network North will happen in good time.”

In its public response to the HS2 cancellation, RIA said this “sends a terrible signal to potential overseas investors that the UK simply cannot deliver large national transport infrastructure schemes”.



*“Some very basic old arguments in favour of rail for economic purposes need to be resuscitated and made afresh by the industry, in case they have been forgotten by this generation of decision-makers.”*

*Stephen Joseph, Transport policy consultant*

Two-thirds of HS2’s spend is with 2,000 small to medium-sized companies. The survey for RIA asked whether employers were confident that staff would have jobs in the future. The response: “They don’t know,” says Caplan.

Instead, they are looking to relocate teams to other sectors and in other countries - 83% of respondents believe a work hiatus is likely over the next 12 months, 42% will prioritise work outside the UK, and 44% will freeze recruitment. Morale, says Caplan, is falling.

“The country needs a decent rail network. We are being given no vision for what that rail network should look like. We have no certainty, and the outlook is poor.

“There isn’t a rail expert alive who doesn’t believe there is a capacity problem on the lines now, and one which will only get worse over the next 20 years.

“We need to keep the flame alive. We had a board meeting of the industry’s leaders - they’ve asked us to fight the HS2 decision, not concede and move on. They were unequivocal about that.”

Caplan is rarely this outspoken. Treading the Westminster tightrope, he has to represent a disparate membership with views that often do not coalesce.

“The Government specified this scheme,” he points out.

“The Government wanted all the tunnels and cuttings that cost so much. It’s their scheme, and they managed it.

“The money taken away from HS2 is not hypothecated. You can’t simply transfer that money to other transport projects, as the Prime Minister suggested. It could go to health, welfare, schools, or defence. It’s in the Treasury, and everyone has to bid for it in the normal way, developing a business case and showing a benefit:cost ratio.”

# The End of Consensus

“Has there ever been an area of British domestic public policy that has been so comprehensively ripped up, with nothing put in its place?” asks Professor Iain Docherty, Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Stirling.

“We can’t think of one.”

“Particularly one that has bi-partisan support, and has weathered for 15 years,” interjects Professor Jon Shaw, Head of the School of Geography at the University of Plymouth.

“Extend that thought,” Docherty counsels.

“One of the glorious protocols of our unwritten constitution is that no Parliament may bind its successor. What is Sunak explicitly trying to do at the moment, by forcing sale of the land bought for HS2 to Crewe? The cats that have been let out of the bag by this are unprecedented - way beyond any impact on transport.

“You cannot underestimate the sleight of hand in this. Look at the announcements for transport in the North, including promising a tram extension to Manchester Airport that has already been fully operational for years. Has a government, or a few special advisors, ever made up anything that is so misleading?”

Shaw adds: “Successive governments have not understood the importance of transport as a fundamental building block for economic development, for social cohesion, for improving environmental conditions.

“It’s not just that we lack a plan for transport in England - there is no national spatial plan. A transport plan is there to serve something bigger.

“The London Mayor has his overall economic strategy for the city, and the transport plan feeds into that. That is lacking for England as a whole.

“Ironically, HS2 was about as close to a coherent national plan as had been in place for decades. It signalled that government wanted to stimulate growth, making things a little bit better everywhere, and not about the hard choices of prioritising limited resources for greatest impact.”

Docherty explains: “There is a reasonable consensus about what UK transport policy should look like. That consensus started in the John Major government. The 1996 SACTRA report and the fuel tax escalator followed a general agreement that we could not keep on building more roads. We had to do something else. The policy hadn’t really changed since then. Now it has.”

Shaw adds: “If we had not frozen fuel duty, or if we taxed our motorway use as the French do, that would raise something like £7 billion a year on each measure. You would effectively get HS2 for free.”

They point out that transport barely registers above 2% in surveys where people are asked about the most pressing problems facing Britain.

“When you build transport infrastructure, it is much easier to move the economy around than to actually grow the economy,” says Docherty.

“If you want to grow the economy through transport investment, you have to do something highly significant in restructuring how the network functions. That’s what SACTRA (Standing Advisory’s

*“The ring of metropolitan areas in England outside London is not connected. What we are doing with HS2 is turning Birmingham into the 21st century equivalent of Croydon in the last century: a cheap, accessible place to put back-office jobs.”*

*Professor Iain Docherty, Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Stirling*



*“There isn’t a rail expert alive who doesn’t believe there is a capacity problem on the lines now, and one which will only get worse over the next 20 years. We need to keep the flame alive. We had a board meeting of the industry’s leaders - they’ve asked us to fight the HS2 decision, not concede and move on. They were unequivocal about that.”*

*Darren Caplan, Chief Executive, Railway Industry Association*

RIA has called on the Government to clarify what recent assessment has been made of travel patterns to justify the cancellation. It has asked about the short-, medium- and long-term capacity of the network to accommodate potential growth. It has asked whether HS2 contracts will be honoured, and whether the order for HS2 rolling stock will be honoured.

At the time of writing, it had not received answers.

“The Phase 2 stuff had not started. The companies involved in the Old Oak Common to Euston section are especially susceptible to job losses,” says Caplan.

“Significant numbers of people will be laid off. The problem is right now. And there is a lot of scepticism about whether private money can fund part of the route, including all that tunnelling.”

Stephen Joseph adds: “The extra local and regional services that HS2 would have allowed on the existing lines, which could impact local road traffic, are now lost. Like frail freight, they appear not to be valued. That feels like a major loss.

“Some very basic old arguments in favour of rail for economic purposes need to be resuscitated and made afresh by the industry, in case they have been forgotten by this generation of decision-makers.

“The fact that rail takes lorries off the roads. That it reduces congestion in cities and on inter-urban travel. It allows for denser development, because you don’t need so many cars and so many parking spaces. It has lower greenhouse gas emissions. Promoting the simple fact that a busier railway is lower-cost per passenger. That it is good for the UK, and not a drain on the Treasury.

“All those arguments, that perhaps we took for granted, will have to be dusted off. If not, the Sunak world may have rail as a sort of declining-use, limited-corridor niche.

“Otherwise, we are in danger of winding back the clock 50 years or more.”

■ The Department for Transport and the Great British Railways Transition Team were invited to take part in this article, but declined. ■

Committee on Trunk Road Assessment) said about building more roads 31 years ago. And there’s bags of evidence to support that.

“If you are going to really change all the places that are connected on that network, then you make interesting things happen. What we have instead now is an extraordinarily expensive incremental improvement.”

Shaw develops the theme: “Transport is an enabling factor in a broader suite of public policy interventions. The incremental improvement is London to Birmingham. But the relative connectivity you would have got between Manchester and Birmingham, and between Leeds and Birmingham, was utterly game-changing - because nothing like it currently exists. You have to go beyond merely incremental change to get more than relatively minimal accessibility improvement.

“Taking an hour and a half journey down to 41 minutes between Manchester and Birmingham would have enabled the two urban areas to act effectively as one connected entity, which at the moment they cannot do.”

Docherty: “The ring of metropolitan areas in England outside London is not connected. What we are doing with HS2 is turning Birmingham into the 21st century equivalent of Croydon in the last century: a cheap, accessible place to put back-office jobs.

“Because we have this one incremental route to move the economy around a little, rather than grow it, we have made it massively less desirable for companies to put their back-office jobs in Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, or anywhere else in the north of England.

“If there is any investment looking for a non-London location in England, it’s going to go to Birmingham. Has that done anything at all to the overall economy of England?

“You’re making the two ends of the line much more competitive than anywhere else in England. Levelling-up is now nonsense.”

Why, then, has such a decision been taken, with at least some of the money apparently to be diverted into motorist-friendly policies? Is it simply that the 77% of households with cars, and the 41 million cars in the UK, represent 41 million drivers with votes to cast at the election?

*“Taking an hour and a half journey down to 41 minutes between Manchester and Birmingham would have enabled the two urban areas to act effectively as one connected entity, which at the moment they cannot do.”*

*Professor Jon Shaw, Head of the School of Geography at the University of Plymouth*

“Look at where the MPs’ seats that are in play at the General Election are,” advises Docherty.

“They are places where the fabled nuclear family of 2.2 people, a cat and a dog can live a middle-class lifestyle in a modern house with two cars, on relatively low salaries. They are places that are extraordinarily car-dependent culturally as well as physically.

“For these people, being able to drive their car to a supermarket of their choice is a huge deal, because it is not accessible without a car.

“These places are in the East Midlands and North East, in particular. These were old, declining towns that have lots of peripheral housing at modest cost, with no public transport. These people are not only enormously car-dependent, but also hugely aspirant and solidly middle-income. HS2 does not touch their lives.

“You could argue that cancelling HS2 is not at all a bad outcome for Scotland. Because right now where is its biggest competition for investment? Manchester!

“Scotland’s Central Belt is the only economic region of the UK, other than the South East of England, that functions properly. It has the highest productivity outside London and the South East, and the highest graduate retention rate.”

Shaw asks rhetorically: “If they had started building HS2 from north to south, do you think it would have been cancelled?” ■

# HS2: the societal impact

**RUSSELL JACKSON**, Global Transit Director at AECOM, considers how the industry needs to adapt and restore confidence among project funders

**R**ail industry supply chains and strategists are still reeling from the Government's decision to cancel Phase 2 of HS2.

The programme has been part of the rail industry psyche since 2009, when HS2 Ltd was formed. Concerns around deliverability were raised by the National Audit Office in 2016, and this year in the red rating verdict by the Infrastructure Projects Authority (IPA).

Industry commentators at the time viewed the IPA's rating as something of a speed bump. In hindsight, this review was a sign of deeper concerns and foreshadowed the recent seismic responses at the heart of government.

In his speech formally announcing the cancellation, the Prime Minister highlighted the project's cost overruns and its weakened economic case.

But, as we all know, capital rail projects can exceed budget as regularly as clockwork. Indeed, all infrastructure projects now face an implacable, relentless opponent - inflation. Currently running at 5%, this is generating additional costs each year to already stretched budgets everywhere.

It could be easy for supply chains to place responsibility for increasing capital costs back at government and client decision-making. The rail industry assumes projects will always proceed - that there is an open credit card.

Cancellation of HS2 Phase 2 is the biggest possible wake-up call to that mindset. If the industry doesn't have the confidence of Treasury officials, it cannot expect government investment to be guaranteed.

There is plenty of other infrastructure investment required that's competing for the same pool of funding. Energy production, decarbonised home heating, digital backbone, electric vehicle charging, and climate resilience are all necessary elements of the UK's net zero journey and future infrastructure needs.

The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) recently published its second national assessment, emphasising the need for government to make faster decisions and noting that consenting timescales had increased by 65% in recent years.

The NIC said that to attract private investment, there must be consistency and speed in decision-making.

There is current political discussion of fast-track approval for high-density housing. But rail is a great enabler of connecting

communities, modal shift, economic growth, and housing. Surely this warrants a fast-track approach to consenting that balances the benefits of infrastructure on local communities and the environment with the best outcomes for the taxpayer over the longer term?

In the bygone era of Private Finance Initiatives in the UK, the theory was that privately financed and delivered capital projects were good value, because the increased cost of private sector capital (compared with public borrowing) was more than offset by the efficiency, cost and schedule focus that the private sector brought to delivery.

While that theory continues to be embraced abroad, it is lost in the UK rail sector. The private sector must still bring an efficient cost-focused culture into rail projects.



*“Railway capital projects are, by nature, slow in delivery. The inflationary costs of slow progress in the current economy are crippling. Exploring every possible option and alternative and slow decision-making, funding provision and consenting processes all contribute. We must understand what delay really costs a project.”*

# - costs and outcomes

There is common ground with clients - Network Rail's SPEED and PACE initiatives are aimed at achieving outcomes for passengers, minimising scope creep, and focusing on a Minimum Viable Product.

The immediate consequence of the decision to cancel HS2 Phase 2 was a commitment to re-invest the funding in other transportation projects.

The Department for Transport published Network North at the same time as the PM's speech. While this cannot be seen as a replacement for HS2, it brings (potentially) new opportunities and a government pivot towards more local and devolved rail projects.

But with some of these proposals admitted to being 'illustrative' just days after the publication, industry waits for more detail around the certainty of schemes.

The Network North report notes that all projects will be subject to business case approval. For any of these projects to be viable, industry will need to keep a strong focus on cost and outcomes, as well as making projects affordable and efficient. There must be a

culture of obsession with affordability, and the tools are there to achieve the necessary changes.

The drive to focus on outcomes is recognised in the developing knowledge bank of Systems Thinking.

The Institution for Civil Engineers has published guidance on this approach, and there is even a guide for civil servants - *Driving Improved Outcomes in Complex Situations*. Working together, clients and supply chains need to bring this mindset into project leadership teams.

Across global major rail projects, there are delivery partner roles emerging where clients and supply chain teams collaborate closely, creating an opportunity to apply systems thinking leadership in practice.

Digital design tools can help underpin this approach. Digitalisation has created a platform for digital design which means we can now progressively track cost and the reasons behind increases as designs develop, in real time. It is now possible to adopt cost and carbon tracking on all project design work, enabling informed discussion and debate with funders and stakeholders on the real cost impact of change.

Railway capital projects are, by nature, slow in delivery. The inflationary costs of slow progress in the current economy are crippling. Exploring every possible option and alternative and slow decision-making, funding provision and consenting processes all contribute. We must understand what delay really costs a project.

On NR's Project SPEED (Swift, Pragmatic and Efficient Enhancement Delivery) schemes, the approach has been to make decisions on a 'no regrets' basis, and it is working to cut cost and accelerate completion. We must articulate the opportunity cost of public funding delays that privately financed projects have always understood as critical.

An area of investment that often goes unaccounted for in the railway industry is investment in people and in learning.

Every project is an investment in the teams that deliver, in their experience and capabilities, as well as how they work together and understand how to deliver success together. Long-term programme or alliance models cleverly seek to recognise and capture that investment to drive efficiency and improved delivery.

Too often we sacrifice this investment on an altar of competitive procurement that cannot recognise the benefits of deeply held collaborative delivery experience.

A lot of the design and construction experience in client and supply chain teams on projects such as Crossrail have since been lost to the UK and benefited projects overseas.

Ten years ago, the UK built a new capability in overhead electrification, but less than 2.5km of new electrification was built last year.

While it somewhat demonstrates the UK's ability to export world-leading skills, it's unsurprising that so many major rail capital investment programmes around the world are led by terrific rail industry leaders who cut their teeth in the UK but who found future investment wanting - and so moved away.

The coming months will be critical for the rail industry to prove we can adapt. We need to bring confidence back to industry funding sources and those who benefit directly and indirectly, and show them our critical cost- and efficiency-focused role in connecting more communities with our most sustainable transport mode. ■

**Network Rail engineers carry out wiring work on the Midland Main Line. NR's Project SPEED initiative is working to cut cost and accelerate completion. NETWORK RAIL.**



# The railways will endure... but they also need to thrive

**MIKE MULDOON**, Business Development Director at SYSTRA, raises concerns about the railways' ability to recruit and retain the best talent in the wake of the HS2 setback

**I**n the 200-or-so years since the first railways came into being, the sector has faced many challenges and setbacks. From world wars to economic depressions, Dr Beeching to COVID, the railways have endured.

So, does the latest twist in the HS2 saga matter, in the grand scheme of things? Politicians (and Prime Ministers) will come and go, but there will always be railways. Surely, there will always be railways...

Endurance is a long way from thriving. Endurance is about survival, and railways will survive in some form or another. But will they survive in a way that helps us out, or holds us back?

HS2 signalled a commitment to doing things differently, to being bold and to embracing opportunities. Using technologies that have transformed our European neighbours, it was to be an object of national pride for decades to come. It would have generated huge collateral benefits to improve the network for freight and passengers in ways the public (and the politicians) never really understood.

The 21st century is not an era for detail. The media, politicians, commentators and pundits don't do detail, so it is easy to overlook the benefits of HS2 - and of rail.

It is easy to forget that while most people are drivers, we need to make a concerted effort to persuade them to ditch the car and get on the train, or we face climate disaster.

It's easy to forget that rail is the most carbon-efficient means of powered, land-based transport. Or that it could eliminate the need for the majority of domestic flights, as it has in France.

So, when we focus on headline cost, overlook the reasons for that cost, deny inflation, and ignore how and by whom the brief was set for HS2, it's easy to reach the decision to stop it early. And anyway, HS2 will still be "finished" after all.

Endurance and survival need will power. Survivors talk about the fight for survival - we admire their spirit and their tenacity.

But eventually people can get tired, dispirited and distracted. They may seek another cause, somewhere more rewarding to channel their efforts.

As the rail sector looks forward, this is the challenge that it now faces. How hard do you want to work 'just' to survive? Do we do the jobs we love to make things better or only to get by?

The sector has long battled ageing demographics, low diversity, recruiting difficulties, and poor public image. If you were 18 today, looking for your future career path, would you choose to become an apprentice in the rail sector based on what you're hearing?

Will graduates and professionals in other sectors line up to join the small and medium-sized businesses and manufacturers, the consultancies, the technology businesses? Or do we slip further down the list, like the insurance choice a UCAS application requires?

The ability to attract new talent is at one end of the resource challenge. At the other, how do we keep hold of existing expertise and encourage development?

**Work on Thameslink was prioritised because users of the service work in London and have the salaries to match, says our industry source. GOVIA THAMESLINK RAILWAY.**

If you're heading into the latter stages of your career, how tempting does it become to leave early, taking your skills to a more stable sector where you can finish your working years on a high with a project win, rather than fizzling out with yet another project delay.

Perhaps, in the current climate, surviving is thriving. But if it is, we need to be very clear with our people that that does not mean their efforts are in vain.

Rail has always played a long game (it has no choice, as its build cycles far exceed political cycles), but we live in a world where short-term gains are being increasingly prioritised.

Looking forward, the only certainty is uncertainty. And we need to cope with that, harnessing the scale and will power of the people in the sector to make the most of the hand we are dealt, and to make sure railways endure this latest storm without sustaining irreparable damage. ■

*"It's easy to forget that rail is the most carbon-efficient means of powered, land-based transport. Or that it could eliminate the need for the majority of domestic flights, as it has in France."*



# Victim of short-termism

A senior industry source, whose position requires him to remain anonymous, says that promises to level up are not being kept - with the North bearing the brunt of a political decision

**T**ransport infrastructure needs a long-term commitment to investing in a long-term asset.

It is expensive. It is therefore important to get it right, and to be absolutely content that it aligns with broader public policy priorities, again in the longer term, as far as these can be determined.

There will always be other demands for the resources committed - some long-term, some less so. It is therefore important that once the decision is made, to stick to it unless there is an overwhelming case for not doing so.

In HS2's case, although it has been pared back from the early 'Scotland to the Continent' dream, the economic need for greater massed transit and heavy haulage capability and capacity up and down the country remains undeniable.

Creaking rail infrastructure and choked roads north of Birmingham are a serious constraint on economic growth.

*"We have too many train factories in the UK because the moment of greatest political advantage is in the announcement of a new one and the connected jobs, not when thought needs to be given to how to manage a viable, profitable industry."*

The desperate lack of provision of east-west reliable rail, never mind rapid transit routes, limits individuals' opportunities for work, advancement and personal growth, while continuing to concentrate economic activity in existing over-heated areas.

This drives the costs of doing business ever higher - strangling growth, impecunious innovators and the potential for investment into productivity-enhancing skills and technology. It does not (to coin a phrase) encourage levelling-up.

The system of assessing value for money from infrastructure, especially with rail investment, is tilted towards the South East.

Great examples were the cases for traffic management system fill-ins at the southern end of the Thameslink route in Sussex and along the Castlefield Corridor towards the Transpennine route, both reviewed at the same time around 2017.

As explained by a senior Treasury official, those who used the Thameslink tended to earn City salaries, so saving time for them was much more valuable than for people in the North West "in shitty jobs earning shitty wages".

The same Treasury official said that we would have the Charles, William and George lines before a decent Transpennine upgrade was completed if decisions were driven solely by Green Book considerations.

So, the much-derided Treasury orthodoxy, left to its own devices, is never going to favour levelling-up nor infrastructure investment in the North.

This brings us back to our opening point, about taking a long-term view, being content that the decision taken fits with long-term, unarguable priorities. Back to levelling-up again (as surely no government will ever actually say it's fine to cut the North adrift), and sticking with it, accepting that there is a legitimate need to deploy the public purse here and a duty to provide infrastructure.

Developing national assets requires an active decision and determination to invest where long-term, structural economic gains are to be made, and to not be seduced by better, short-term returns such as house price growth and rateable value rises on the London periphery.

Political will and steadfastness is needed to take a strategic view and to ignore the temptation of short-term pork barrel and/or pothole politics.

Recent governments seem to be struggling with this, not helped by so many investment decisions being driven by what often seems to be a politically determined 'economic cycle', the duration and start and finish of which appear too convenient for many Chancellors of the Exchequer to be other than a device of their own making.

We have too many train factories in the UK because the moment of greatest political advantage is in the announcement of a new one and the connected jobs, not when thought needs to be given to how to manage a viable, profitable industry.

Infrastructure is even harder. The point of announcement generates hoopla, the subsequent ten to 20 years of construction, delays and cost overruns (which are inevitable, I'm afraid) make projects vulnerable to short-termism and politicians looking for a headline and a wedge issue. Rome wasn't built in a day. With the current political class, we'd have half a Forum, mismatched columns on the Pantheon (after several reviews), and no hot water in the Baths of Diocletian! ■



# HS2 timetables: back to

**WILLIAM BARTER** investigates what the new line from Euston to Birmingham, without HS2 Phase 2a to the North West, could contribute to the network

**H** S2 running from London Euston to Birmingham Curzon Street and to a West Coast Main Line junction at Handsacre might be called a 'minimum viable product' (MVP), in that anything less would not support a sensible train service, whereas something worthwhile might be run on what is largely equivalent to Phase 1 of HS2.

Phase 1 was originally promoted in its own Hybrid Bill, but really ceased to be a 'thing' once Phase 2a to Crewe was brought forward.

But that pretty much seems to be the plan once again - subject of course to confirmation of Euston as the London terminus.

However, no plan of battle survives contact with the enemy. Turning an idea into a commercial train service is no simple thing, so what sort of timetable could we run on this MVP? Fire up the graph paper and let's see.

First, do we have a Train Service Specification? Sort of (see diagram, opposite).

The first economic cases for HS2 set out a requirement for three trains per hour to both of Birmingham and Manchester, two to Liverpool, one to Glasgow, and one just to Preston - a total of ten trains per hour, and essentially the present Avanti West Coast service unplugged from the WCML at Handsacre and plugged into HS2 instead.

But the original specification missed some locations currently served by Avanti, such as Carlisle, Lancaster, Stoke-on-Trent and Macclesfield. Anticipating Phase 2a, Chris Grayling (as Transport Secretary) updated the specification to serve them:

- Glasgow service to call at Carlisle.
- Preston service to extend to Lancaster.
- Additional service to Macclesfield calling at Stafford and Stoke. To free a path for this, the Lancaster train was to run attached to a Liverpool train and divide at Crewe.

If these promises are respected, the first two can translate directly into our specification. Then, if a Liverpool train serves Stafford and one of the Manchesters calls at Stoke, the Macclesfield service becomes redundant, making a total of nine trains per hour from Euston.

Next, do we have Sectional Running Times (SRTs)? Again, sort of.

Development of HS2 assumed a set of 125mph maximum, non-tilt, Permanent Speed Restrictions (PSRs).

But the Department for Transport then declared that in order not to spend a single penny on the conventional lines, HS2 trains would have to run at 110mph, simply because that was the pre-Pendolino 'locomotive and coaches' maximum, and thus the only passenger non-tilt PSRs provided for on the speed boards. But that is completely illogical, so existing SRTs should be improved upon.

Finally, we have the most vital input to a timetable - luck.

Someone very wise once said that there are no good or bad train planners, just lucky and unlucky train planners. Like atoms in a

molecule, some things fit and some don't.

With Phase 2a running times, things did fit, very neatly - even down to Up and Down Manchesters falling in parallel at Crewe North Junction - while turnround times were adequate without being excessive.

But like a plan of battle, no train service specification survives contact with the graph paper. With Phase 1 running times, things don't fit well at all.

Putting a Stoke call in one of the Manchesters is OK. Adding Macclesfield as well is a definite maybe. Without the extra journey time reduction of Phase 2a, the Lancaster train gets a stupidly short turnround, and needs to be cut back to Preston again.

Having promised the service, the only way of providing it is for the Glasgow train to call, extending its journey time - and with only an hourly train, also presenting a choice between a stupidly short or stupidly long turnround.

The train planners' 'dirty tricks box' may help, though, perhaps by cross-forming the Glasgow and Preston services at Euston.

At Euston, a six-platform station would support nine (even ten) trains per hour. However, it will be critical to be able to choose timings from Euston that suit the rest of the railway - particularly at Handsacre and the route on via Colwich to Stafford, with its double track through Shugborough Tunnel.

The dive-under approach to one platform at least, as envisaged in the Phase 1 Hybrid Bill, remains vital to maximise choice and to allow some variation from standard turnrounds.

Deploying that much under-rated train planning tool, the back of an envelope, an HS2 service as outlined would call for 44 daily diagrams, plus up to seven more for strengthening peak Curzon Street services. The rolling stock fleet of 54 sets would not be underemployed.

Running a Preston and Liverpool train as one from Euston depends on the rebuilding of Crewe with 400-metre platforms, as planned under Phase 2a - surely something to protect, as if North Wales electrification does go ahead, the obvious move then is for the other Liverpool train to carry a Chester portion.

Without the ability to split at Crewe, the Preston train would have to run on its own from a six-platform Euston. But is that extra train at Handsacre compatible with the residual conventional service and aspirations for use of released capacity?

And Handsacre is a problem, because once Phase 2a was presumed to follow Phase 1 almost immediately (and most trains thus run direct to Crewe), the proposed layout at Handsacre was simplified, connecting into the Slow lines rather than landing between realigned Fast lines.

There is doubt (to say the least) as to whether the simplified layout would carry the full service. But could we revert to the Fast line connection? Was all the necessary land in fact bought? Were any assurances given with the change, and which now have to be broken? What is the difference in cost, including disruption?

This reworked MVP specification offers services of equivalent frequency to today, but faster - at least at the stations HS2 trains serve. The caveat is over the likes of Oxenholme and Penrith, but it is simply a choice as to whether or not calls equivalent to today's are made.

*"Someone very wise once said that there are no good or bad train planners, just lucky and unlucky train planners."*

# the drawing board

The questions are:

- What should the residual conventional service be?
- How does seating capacity compare with today's?
- How can we use released capacity?

The conventional service must feature as a minimum a Chester service more or less as now, plus a Euston-Manchester to serve intermediate flows such as Milton Keynes-Stoke and Rugby-Manchester.

Then two Euston-Birmingham trains per hour calling at Watford, Milton Keynes and Rugby before the West Midlands are a must. Although Coventry is often cited as a 'loser' from HS2, that would be a perfectly decent service for a location of Coventry's size and distance from London.

In terms of seating capacity, this combination of HS2 and residual classic services gives a potential increase of around 3,000 seats per peak hour, although a good half of this comes simply from the assumption that peak Birmingham trains would run as 400-metre formations. I struggle to make this even a 50% increase, so how the Government's Network North document can claim a "near doubling" of seats is beyond me.

Within this, if HS2 trains are worked by 200-metre units in place of 11-car Pendolinos, some flows give cause for concern.

An hourly Glasgow will have fewer seats than now, jeopardising its ability to make the Lancaster call, let alone serve Oxenholme and Penrith.

*"With a residual conventional service, the Euston-Manchester corridor would have more seats than now in total, but an HS2 train that serves Stoke and possibly Macclesfield on the way could become crowded."*

With a residual conventional service, the Euston-Manchester corridor would have more seats than now in total, but an HS2 train that serves Stoke and possibly Macclesfield on the way could become crowded. On the single biggest revenue-earning flow in the UK, there is a lot of money at risk from getting things wrong.

But is it right to stick with 200-metre trainsets?

There is no reason to expect Hitachi to be generous over variation orders. But you might get away with turning 54 x 200m units into 27 'long' and 27 'short' - especially if the 'shorts' can run in pairs.

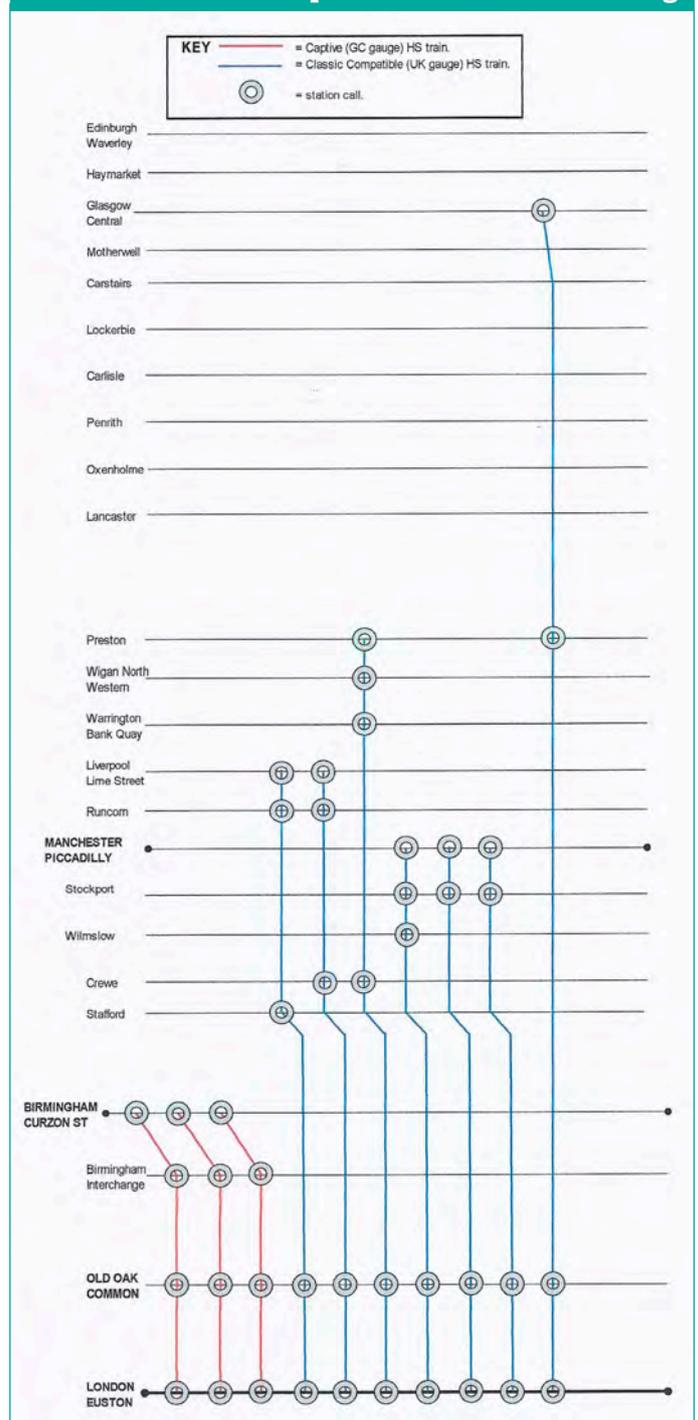
Commercially and operationally, however, this is all very messy. A problem would be the depot, where although all stabling roads are 400 metres long and could take a 'long' and a 'short', maintenance roads are just 200 metres. A major redesign would therefore be needed.

Backfilling of paths freed by the MVP is fine south of Rugby, and even south of Nuneaton, where trains can be injected. But relieving only part of a route doesn't work.

New trains originating north of Handsacre face the Shugborough bottleneck and conflicts at Stafford - potentially leaving Lichfield and Tamworth no better off than now, and possibly without their fast services (provided by peak additional Avanti West Coast trains from Liverpool and Lancaster) dropping in. Freight may be even worse off than now.

Rishi Sunak's announcement has blown away overnight four

HS2 Phase 1 HS service pattern for demand modelling



years' meticulous work by Network Rail, culminating in its recent document Strategic Advice for West Coast South, which presented options for use of released capacity assuming Phase 2A.

While professional planners will no doubt make the best of the MVP, its deficiencies are apparent now - and will become painfully so before many years of operation are up.

Phase 2a is the answer to most of them. Designing out scope to extend the MVP would be somewhere between folly and spite. ■

■ William Barter was technical author for the UK government's *Rail Technical Strategy*, published in 2007, and is now a rail operations and planning consultant.



**Each HS2 set will be shorter than the 11-car Class 390 Pendolinos that currently work most Avanti West Coast services from London Euston. A Pendolino passes Rugeley Trent Valley on August 4. ALAMY.**

# HS2: the implications for rail in the North

The consequences of scrapping the northern leg of Britain's largest infrastructure project are many and varied. **PHILIP HAIGH** takes a detailed look at some of the physical and theoretical repercussions

**H**igh Speed 2 is - or was - a game of two halves. A play in two acts. Both halves, both acts, share a connection, but they're also different. The first is Phase 1, which is all about adding capacity to Britain's busiest rail corridor, London-Birmingham, by adding two new tracks.

The second, Phase 2, repeated the same trick of adding tracks for capacity, but with greater emphasis on journey times. Thus, the line between Birmingham and Manchester would bring journeys down from 88 minutes to 41 (and to Leeds, the time was to have fallen from 118 to 49 minutes before that was axed in 2021).

That's the sort of transformation that tempts motorists from their cars, even when you add the fiddly bits at either end to reflect the fact that Curzon Street in central Birmingham and Piccadilly in central Manchester will not be the points at which people start or end their journeys.

These two parts make arguments for HS2 more nuanced than many commentators realised. Was it capacity or was it journey time? Why couldn't supporters make their minds up? In truth, it's always been both, but with different weighting across each phase.

Ridiculing Phase 1 for only 'cutting journeys by 20 minutes' is to spectacularly miss the point. It's also factually wrong, with 2020's full business case for Phase 1 noting journey times cut by 37 minutes from 82 to 45 minutes.

If halves apply to HS2's complete plan, they also apply to its Western Leg to Manchester because Phase 2a stretches for 40 miles and then Phase 2b takes (sorry, took) the line the next 40 miles into a new station built alongside Network Rail's Piccadilly station.

The boundary between the two is Crewe. Approaching from the south, Phase 2a was by far the simpler and its costs of £5 billion to £7bn (in 2019 prices) reflected that. North of Crewe, Phase 2b was to bring much bigger bills - £13bn-£19bn - in large part because it included ten miles of tunnels under South Manchester.

Phase 2a delivered a good chunk of the 40 minutes that HS2 was to cut from journey times between London and the Scottish cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. The other part came from 2b's branch that diverged a little south of Manchester's approach tunnels and joined the West Coast Main Line (WCML) at Golborne.

Unfortunately, Government dropped this Golborne Link, hinting at the time that it would prefer the WCML convergence be placed further north. This would have cut more from journey times, but all that's now gone in favour of using conventional tracks from

Handsacre Junction (between Lichfield and Rugeley) for the remaining 280 miles to Glasgow.

Instead, we have Phase 2a dropped, despite an earlier Government decision to accelerate it because it was seen as being a comparatively easy section to build and one that could deliver benefits further north.

We've also seen Phase 2b dropped, but with an offer of £12bn to political leaders in the north to build its most expensive part, that is the tunnels under South Manchester. These tunnels formed part of HS2, but also part of the Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR), which, at the moment, exists really only in the minds of politicians in Northern England as a new line from Liverpool through Manchester and then on to a new station at Bradford and then Leeds.

2021's *Integrated Rail Plan* had NPR using Manchester's tunnel to reach the start point of a new line across to Warrington before services would join an upgraded route through Fiddlers Ferry and into Liverpool on the West Coast Main Line's branch. Beyond this outline sketch, there's been no planning for this and much of NPR, which lags by a decade or more behind HS2. That means if Phase 2b was not expected to open before 2036, NPR looks to be a project being built in the 2040s for perhaps a 2050 opening.

This neatly passes the problem from Downing Street to northern mayors who, despite their vocal support for NPR, might think twice about building a set of tunnels that go, as things stand, to nowhere.

## Coming from nowhere

Cancelling a project that's been 15 years in the making leaves a gaping hole in UK transport planning. Any assumptions made recently are now worthless. As best external observers can tell, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's decision in his Conservative Party annual conference speech on October 4 came as a surprise.

The Department for Transport's replacement plan, Network North, has all the hallmarks of something thrown hastily together. This was evident in its suggestion that HS2 could be used to build a Metrolink tram extension to Manchester Airport, something that was done several years ago.

Or in its inclusion of a plan to reopen five miles of railway to Tavistock in Devon, which is about as far from any definition of the North as it's possible to get.

In general, the projects contained in Network North are those without final business cases accepted, let alone having whatever consents they need or government funding. They are, as Sunak later admitted, merely illustrative suggestions about what HS2 money might be spent on if each project's case stacks up.

One notable absentee was the £1bn section of Network Rail's Transpennine Route Upgrade (TRU), which remodels and expands ten miles of line between Dewsbury and Huddersfield. It received formal legal permission with a Development Consent Order in 2022. (So too did the project to rebuild the railway to Portishead ▶

*"The Department for Transport's replacement plan, Network North, has all the hallmarks of something thrown hastily together."*

► near Bristol, but, like Huddersfield, it didn't feature in Network North.)

It seems that only projects that were not 'shovel ready' made it into Network North, which leaves the rail network in Northern England pretty well as it is for the next ten years.

TRU is a decade from completion, but if it's funded properly then it should deliver more capacity across the Pennines using a new fleet of electric trains. Network Rail also has outline plans for improvements to the East Coast Main Line. These were revealed in 2020's strategic advice and includes things like new platforms at Darlington, an extra track for a mile or so north of York and changes around Northallerton to move stopping trains away from the fast-line platforms.

NR's work dates from the days when HS2's eastern leg would include a link onto NR's tracks at Church Fenton and this is reflected in the title of its strategic advice document - *What is required to make the rail network between Church Fenton and Newcastle ready for the 2030s and beyond?*

So, while the improvements NR suggested were clearly linked to running HS2 services, they could apply to East Coast capacity more generally. They may go some way to better linking North East England with Manchester, and with London, rather than prioritising London as happens today to the chagrin of many northern political leaders.

Network Rail also has plans for the northern part of the West Coast Main Line. It revealed its thinking in recent Strategic Business Plans for Control Period 7 (2024-2029), although the bulk of the work comes in CP8 into the early 2030s. This work is to modernise the line, replacing signalling, track and overhead line equipment installed when British Rail electrified the line in the early 1970s.

This is work that needs to be done regardless of whether HS2 reaches Manchester on dedicated tracks, but NR had been justifying the work against a requirement to deliver a reliable railway for HS2 services. But not bringing HS2 into Manchester on those tracks throws into sharp focus the city's other rail problems: it's very congested, particularly on the Castlefield Corridor, which is proving a tough nut to crack.

## Manchester's congestion

Manchester has two major stations: Piccadilly is a terminus (mainly) and points south; Victoria is a through station (mainly) and sits on an east-west axis. This makes Victoria ideal for services over the Pennines towards Leeds, but also links west to Liverpool and northwest towards Preston. Piccadilly, meanwhile, is the station for London, Birmingham, South Wales and other southern destinations. But one of the key destinations for travellers across Northern England is Manchester Airport, which is south of the city and has Piccadilly as its natural city centre connection.

Traditionally, trans-Pennine services heading from Leeds to the airport ran via Guide Bridge, reversed in one of the platforms on the eastern side of Piccadilly station and then headed for the airport. To reach it, they had to cross all Piccadilly's southern approach tracks because the airport sits west of these lines.

This caused congestion with Piccadilly's three trains an hour to and three trains an hour from London. Also crossing from east to west or the other way is the marathon Norwich-Liverpool service. From the east, it comes via Sheffield and to reach Liverpool, it uses Piccadilly's island through platforms that sit west of the main terminating train shed. So, more moves across the whole station throat.

*"It seems that only projects that were not 'shovel ready' made it into Network North, which leaves the rail network in Northern England pretty well as it is for the next ten years."*

**Manchester Piccadilly, alongside which a new station had been planned for HS2.**  
TOM McATEE.



To remove crossing moves by trans-Pennine services, Network Rail built a short chord at Ordsall to create a direct link between Victoria and Piccadilly stations. This let Leeds trains call at Victoria, traverse the new chord and arrive at Piccadilly's island platforms on the west side of the station throat, perfectly placed for Manchester Airport.

This cut congestion in the Piccadilly throat, but pushed more trains along Castlefield Corridor, making it congested instead. NR had a plan to add another island platform at Piccadilly (with two faces) and expand the corridor with more tracks, but DfT rejected this. This essentially left the job half-done by simply transferring congestion from one place to another while spending several millions.

DfT's rejection left planners scrabbling around for sticking plasters to apply to Castlefield, but HS2 Phase 2b provided a long-term answer by moving those three hourly London trains onto its tracks and into a new station alongside Piccadilly, instantly decluttering the throat for other services.

It's possible Castlefield could have soldiered on until HS2's arrival, sparing the expense of widening the corridor. It's mostly on a viaduct and at one point squeezes between two buildings on Oxford Road, so DfT might have been right to reject NR's plan in favour of holding on for HS2's arrival.

Now that it's rejected both schemes, DfT has left railway planners with no live long-term options to solve Manchester's enduring railway bottleneck.

There's a similar story at Leeds where congestion sits within the capacity limits of the station's platforms. Shifting fast London trains into a new HS2 station could have provided some relief, but the situation is less clearcut given a probably enduring need to still serve the East Coast Main Line's intermediate stations along the way to London. You could apply the same argument for WCML stations from Manchester.



that Manchester will see HS2 services, so he's dealing the city a cut in capacity - unless NR can find space for four fast London trains per hour into Manchester, which seems unlikely given the WCML's congestion - or a rise in HS2's costs as it renegotiates signed deals.

### Released capacity

The other way to look at the effect of cancelling HS2's northern section is to turn the question on its head and examine what might have been done with classic line services once HS2 was complete. This is the 'released capacity' argument and looks at what could be done with the space vacated by fast trains once they're running on HS2.

Network Rail pushed out a report looking at just this in summer 2023. It looked at different scenarios because released capacity might be used in different ways. It might find use in running more freight trains and take lorries off the roads. It might be used to give space for trains to stop at new stations and so expand overall rail use or help areas grow economically by improving their transport links. It might concentrate on existing stations for the same reasons, or it might place the emphasis on commuter trains close to major cities.

Any of those are possible. Choosing which should be something for ministers to decide because they place HS2's wider benefits at national disposal.

Curiously, and as an aside, while released capacity is widely recognised as a benefit stemming from HS2, this has only ever been in general terms and has not yet been quantified in a way that feeds into formal business cases. In great part, that's because ministers have not indicated where they feel the released capacity should be used. For HS2 supporters, that means the line's business case comes nowhere near capturing its benefits, which degrades its benefit-to-cost ratio.

Sunak's decision imposes clear constraints on Network Rail's >

### Not thought through

Axing HS2's northern half has implications beyond the physical layout of tracks and platforms. It's likely to drive major changes to the proposed train fleet for which HS2 Limited has already signed contracts with Hitachi and Alstom as a joint venture.

This contract provides for 54 trainsets, each of 200 metres. HS2's outline operating plan had these trains working as single or double sets, so the longest trains would be 400 metres and carry around 1,100 seats.

Each HS2 set is shorter than the 11-car Class 390 Pendolino EMUs that currently work most Avanti West Coast services from London Euston. An 11-car is 265 metres with 607 seats. They fit in WCML stations, but the 400-metre trains planned by HS2 do not. So, cancelling the northern leg and the new station at Piccadilly will force HS2's operator to run 200-metre trains with 550 seats.

Train for train, that's a cut in capacity and, unless NR upgrades tracks for 125mph running (it has work going on for this), HS2's trains will be running more slowly than today's Pendolino stock.

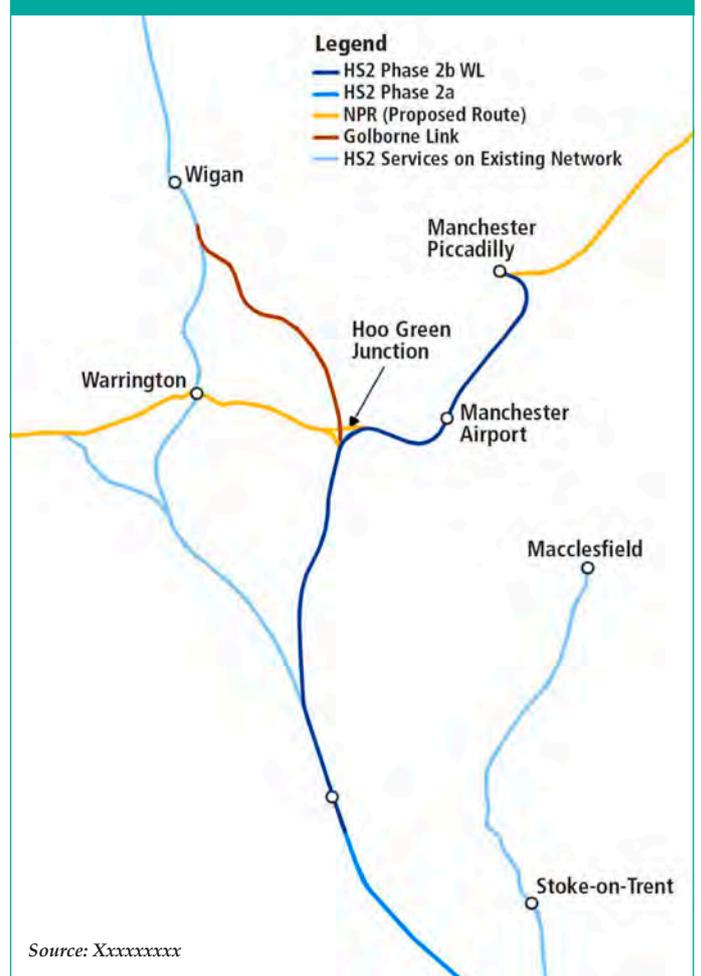
HS2 was expecting its first train in 2027 for passenger service from 2029 at the earliest. It now faces the prospect of changing its order, not necessarily to cut the number of sets, but perhaps to make them individually longer to make up for the shortfall in seats and to cope with platform lengths at Network Rail stations.

Of course, this has unwelcome knock-on effects. If HS2 makes its trainsets longer, it will very likely need to redesign its rolling stock depots to cope with the new length. That's more time and expense.

Yet if it does make its trains longer, say 260 metres to roughly match a Pendolino today, it will never be able to use the full capacity of the 400-metre platforms soon to be built at Birmingham Curzon Street and Old Oak Common. Such are the perils of changing a joined-up plan halfway through delivery.

It's detail that appears to have entirely escaped the Prime Minister and his advisors in their haste to ditch HS2. Yet the PM has pledged

### Golborne Link: missed opportunities



Source: Xxxxxxxx

► review of released capacity, chief of which is that NR makes clear that the minimum HS2 network it's considered in its work runs to Crewe. NR labels this Configuration State G - that's HS2 from London Euston to the West Midlands and then on to Crewe with a transfer point to the West Coast Main Line at Handsacre Junction.

This junction mainly provides for HS2's planned hourly service to and from Stoke-on-Trent, but will now also carry three trains per hour (tph) each way for Manchester and another 3tph each way for HS2 services further north (one to Liverpool, one to Liverpool and Lancaster, which splits at Crewe, and one to Scotland). That's if the train service specification that was assumed before Sunak's axe survives. If it does, then it's highly likely that existing plans for Handsacre will need to be scrapped in favour of a junction with higher capacity at increased cost.

Cutting HS2 back from Crewe by ditching Phase 2a clearly reduces what capacity HS2 can release from the West Coast Main Line. There's a good chance it will make matters worse.

NR's document notes: "There is a clear imperative to support intermediate markets between places on the route which will not be served directly by HS2 and the major urban conglomerations which will be. This presents an acute and specific difficulty for planning services into Manchester, where HS2 trains are planned to operate for a period on the conventional infrastructure from Crewe. This document reinforces the need to deliver the HS2 Western Leg infrastructure Euston-Manchester to generate the full benefit associated with released capacity."

The problem is at its worst through Stockport, which remains controlled by a string of signal boxes dating back to the 1880s. (Railtrack planned to modernise this signalling in 2000, but never delivered it.) Just south of the station, there's a short section of double track in an otherwise four-track railway.

The constraint comes as Stockport tries to handle the three fast London trains running via HS2 as well as trains added to serve intermediate stations now bypassed by HS2. It's the worst of all worlds. Stations generally south of the West Midlands, which today see occasional Avanti West Coast trains stopping, could, when those services switch to HS2, have nothing to replace them and so lose connectivity with places like Manchester.

It's also entirely possible that almost as many trains need to run

*"Axing HS2's northern half ... is likely to drive major changes to the proposed train fleet for which HS2 Limited has already signed contracts with Hitachi and Alstom as a joint venture."*

into Euston as today if timetable planners can't fit all the proposed HS2 services into a line terminating at Old Oak Common rather than Euston. As currently planned, OOC doesn't have the same platform capacity as was planned for Euston and this could leave trains running on classic WCML tracks rather than switching to HS2.

### Beyond theory

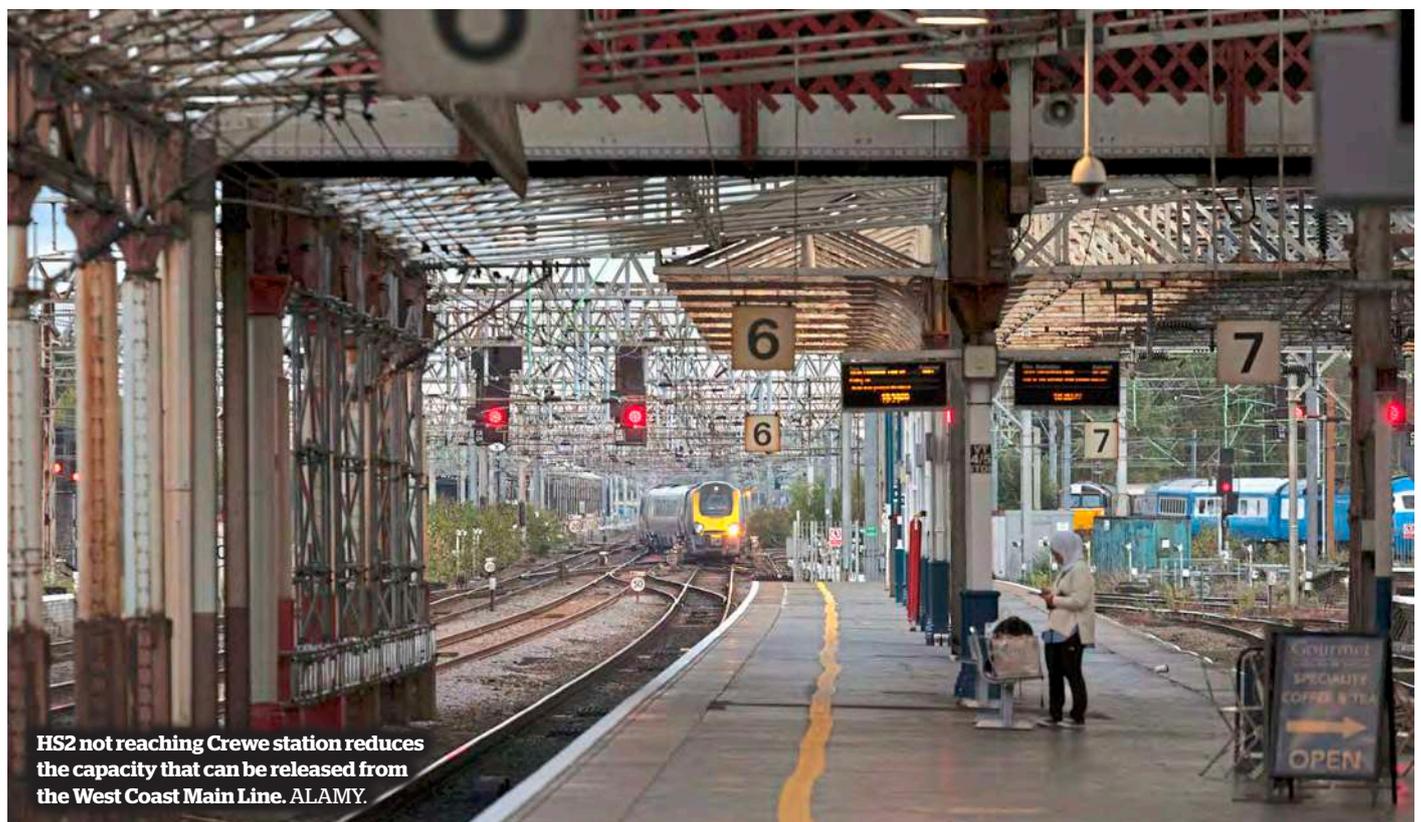
This could be dismissed as all rather theoretical. Without more timetable development, it is. But it's another consequence of ditching something that's been in the planning system for 15 years. When it suddenly disappears, all the work that was hanging from it disappears too and planners have to start from scratch.

It's too soon to know all the consequences and work through the detail of what might replace HS2. When *RailReview* approached Network Rail for this article, the company couldn't help, but one senior manager commented, not entirely tongue in cheek: "Once the DfT has worked out what all this means, they can tell us, and we can work out what to do."

That's the nub of the problem. Sunak swung his axe out of the blue. He'd said himself back in March: "We remain completely committed to HS2. It is a significant investment in our national infrastructure."

Only around 100 days before Sunak spoke at his party conference, his transport secretary, Mark Harper, was praising high-speed trains: "In Japan, I saw the benefits high-speed rail can bring - to connect communities and grow the economy. That's why, despite the global inflationary pressures, we remain fully committed to building HS2."

The benefits he saw are real, but with HS2's demise, they'll not be coming to Britain. ■



**HS2 not reaching Crewe station reduces the capacity that can be released from the West Coast Main Line. ALAMY.**

# HS2: what happens with the rolling stock?

With a shorter HS2, what are the implications for the £2 billion worth of rolling stock on order? **PAUL CLIFTON** finds questions, but no answers

“Nothing has been communicated to us yet,” advises a spokesman for Hitachi. “Until something changes, there isn’t anything to be said. We continue to work on the design and engage with the supply chain.”

That comment comes weeks after the Government’s announcement that HS2 would be confined to London-Birmingham. In fact, the guidance is that there will be very little to say for several months.

In December 2021, HS2 Ltd signed a £1.97 billion contract with a joint venture between Hitachi and Alstom. Fifty-four 225mph trains in eight-car formations are to be built.

Some construction work on a test train will start in 2025, with the first production models rolling out in 2027.

Vehicle body assembly and initial fitting out will be done at Hitachi’s Newton Aycliffe factory in County Durham. The second stage of fitting out and testing will be done at Alstom’s Litchurch Lane factory in Derby. The bogies will be assembled and maintained at Alstom’s Crewe facility.

Alongside design, manufacturing and testing, the contract includes 12 years of maintenance, with the potential to extend the deal for the life of the rolling stock (expected to be 35 years). The fleet will be maintained at a new depot built by HS2 at Washwood Heath in the West Midlands.

The trains will be 200 metres long, with the ability to couple two trains together to create a 400-metre train offering 1,100 seats.

Elsewhere in this issue, William Barter suggests there will be sufficient work for these 54 train sets on the reduced-scope infrastructure.

Under the revised plans, no more than ten trains an hour will run on HS2, compared with the original plan for 17 per hour on the full network. A single 200-metre-long HS2 train will have fewer seats than today’s 11-car Avanti West Coast service.

With cancellation of the dedicated line from Crewe to Manchester, it is unlikely that the HS2 trains could run in connected pairs to Manchester due to platform length constraints. Because they do not tilt, the new trains will be restricted to 110mph on old lines, rather than the 125mph of Pendolinos. It is therefore thought that Manchester to Birmingham journeys will be slower, and carry fewer people, than today’s services.

There are also questions about very short dwell times at Old Oak Common and a six-platform Euston. Will this require an amendment to the train order?

Meanwhile, in September, Alstom let it be known

that the future of its Derby factory was in some doubt. Existing work streams are due to complete next year. Some 2,000 people work at the factory. It supports 1,400 supply chain companies, which together employ 17,000 people.

James Gray, from Alstom, warned then: “We are coming to the end of the biggest set of rolling stock projects for a generation.”

He said the delay to the HS2 contract is “one of the main elements of the gap in workload we have for the three-year period from 2024, but it’s not the only element”.

Alstom took over the Litchurch Lane site when it bought Bombardier in 2021. It has been making trains for Crossrail, South Western Railway, Greater Anglia, West Midlands, c2c and London Overground.

Hitachi said it would not comment on speculation. But a source added that HS2 would have to decide what the implications of the Government announcement would be for the infrastructure, before making any decisions about rolling stock requirement.

The Railway Industry Association says that in the last four years, the HS2 order has been the only significant deal for new or upgraded trains.

It says that without further orders, major job losses are “almost certain” among the 30,000 people who work in the industry, and that some factories will run out of work within 12 months.

It adds: “As damaging will be the loss of skills and experience, which will be difficult to replace when they are inevitably needed again. This will result in increased costs in the long run.

“Factories may close and the capability to produce rolling stock may move overseas.” ■

**Four Class 800s are lined up at Hitachi Rail Europe’s Newton Aycliffe facility, where initial fitting out of HS2 trains will be carried out. JAMES GARTHWAITE.**



# HS2: full speed at Old Oak

**TOM EDWARDS**, BBC transport correspondent for London and the South East, follows the progress of the one bit of HS2 that is carrying on regardless... and then heads into London to where work has stalled

**D**eep under the suburbs of London, in West Ruislip, we are standing in a vast, straight tunnel that is being drilled for HS2.

The tunnels are much wider than the Crossrail tunnels. The engineers say they need to be wider because HS2's faster speeds generate more heat, which needs more space to dissipate.

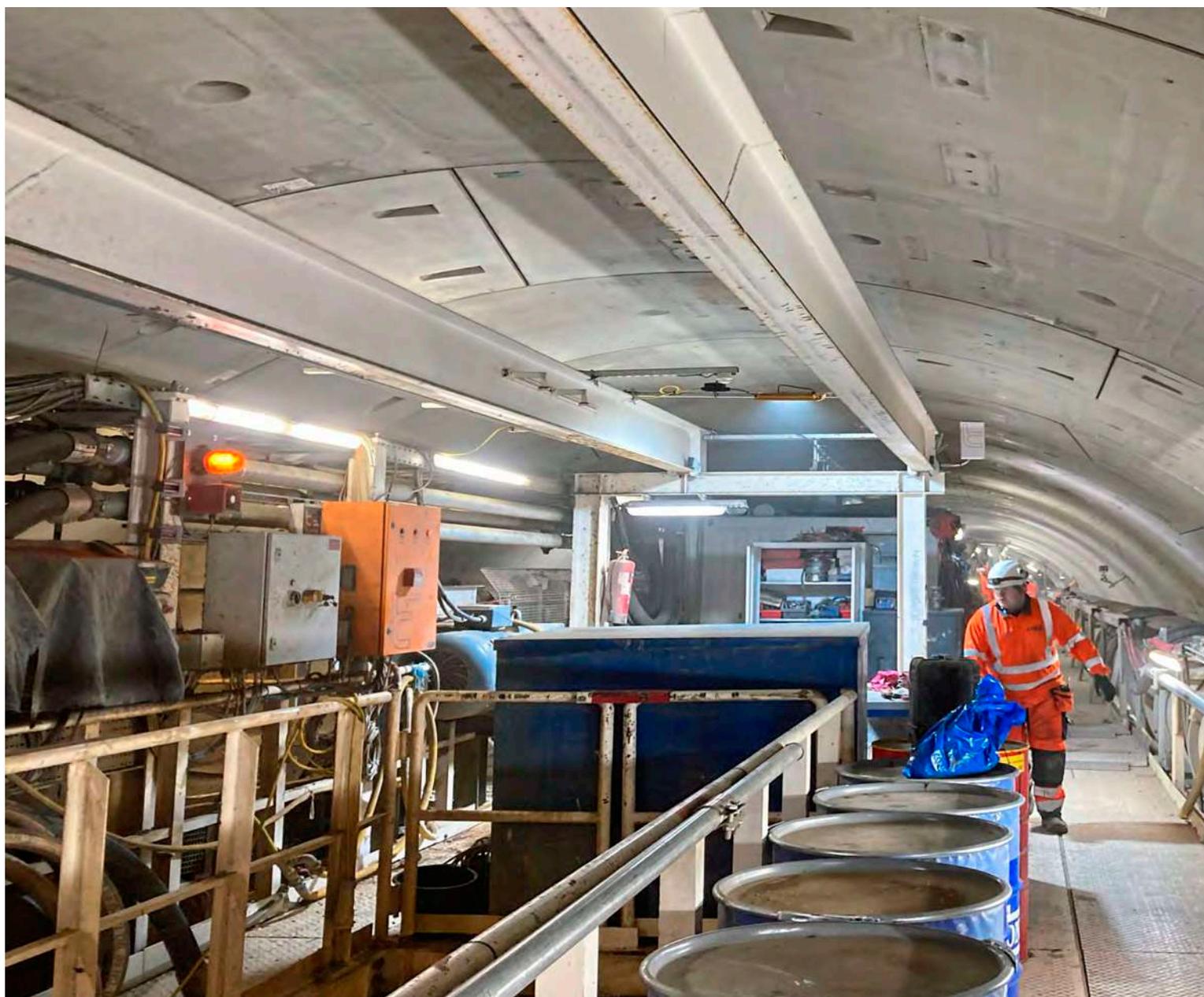
The tunnel boring machines are crawling along at 55mm a minute. We are two miles into the tunnel at the boring machine, and pigeons have found their way into the tunnel. It is noisy, hard work.

The tunnel route is heading towards Old Oak Common in north-west London. It will reach its destination next year. Eventually, trains to and from Birmingham will use these tunnels.

Away from all the politics and the rethinks around HS2, this part of the scheme is continuing full steam ahead. The TBMs run 24/7... and they are not stopping.

James Richardson is the managing director for Skanska Costain STRABAG Joint Venture, the company creating the tunnels. He is still optimistic about the scheme, even though the link to Manchester has been cut.

"For me, the construction follows the politics. It follows the



# ... full stop at Euston

economic benefit of infrastructure. There's obviously a real balance the Government is trying to find.

"It's disappointing that we can't really take it all the way to Manchester. But it still benefits as we are still taking a lot of traffic off the West Coast Main Line.

"I think there's two parts there - a better commute into Birmingham, and more capacity between the cities."

But elsewhere, there are parts of London's HS2 project that remain uncertain.

## Old Oak Common

Old Oak Common is a key part of HS2. It is billed as a meg-hub in Acton, in north-west London.

HS2 trains will terminate here for years before the line reaches central London at Euston... if the line makes it to Euston.

Old Oak Common will be huge. HS2 promises it will be one of the biggest and best-connected stations ever built in the UK. It is hoped that retail and 24,000 homes and 65,000 jobs will follow.

At the moment, the station box is halfway through being excavated.

The station will have six high-speed platforms for HS2 in the box and eight conventional platforms built over those, with the station expected to be used by 250,000 passengers per day.

Changes to the whole project hasn't affected engineers here.

Huw Edwards is project client director for Old Oak Common. He says the focus is on delivery: "There is minimal change brought about by any decisions made in recent days and weeks. We have always been a terminus, a temporary terminus. That doesn't change.

"It was always government intention to go into Euston. It was a matter of funding, and that will be resolved by others."

HS2 Ltd says six platforms means it will only be able to cope with eight HS2 trains an hour.

At the moment it isn't designed as a permanent terminal, with HS2 saying there will be limited facilities for catering, cleaning, maintenance of trains, and staff.

If Old Oak Common does become the terminal permanently, and the line doesn't reach Euston, HS2 says that would result in further changes to the Old Oak Common station design. It would also result in a delay to the opening of HS2.

Services on the eight conventional platforms will mean that passengers will be able to change onto trains to Wales and the South West and Paddington via the Great Western Main Line. Heathrow Express will also stop there.

There were also proposals to build two new London Overground stations at Old Oak Common Lane and Hythe Road. As it stands, they won't be built.

Transport for London says that Common Lane doesn't have funding, while Hythe Lane isn't planned to be built owing to a change in the land use.

To link to the Overground, passengers will have to walk about a mile to Willesden Junction. It is feasible that they could also walk about the same distance to North Acton on London Underground's Central Line.

Great Western Railway Managing Director Mark Hopwood has reservations about even stopping GWR's services there: "Old Oak Common has a lot of railway lines near it. But there has not been any willingness to look at fully developing the interchange potential.

"You've got London Overground whizzing across twice... you've got the Central Line passing pretty much underneath... you've got the opportunity to develop the Chiltern interchange to serve Old Oak Common.

"Currently, none of those things are happening. Interchange opportunities for my customers are pretty limited. That calls into question the need to stop the trains."

It would seem the expectation is that most people changing to or from HS2 will use the Elizabeth line.

However, there are serious concerns about the capacity of that service and how it will cope with thousands of extra passengers.

Already, London residents in places such as West Ealing >

*"Old Oak Common has a lot of railway lines near it. But there has not been any willingness to look at fully developing the interchange potential."*

**Mark Hopwood,**  
Managing Director, Great Western Railway



**Tunnelling work continues underneath West Ruislip. TOM EDWARDS.**

► complain that the trains are full in rush hour, and that they can't get on. The service is popular with Heathrow travellers, but there are no luggage racks, so services are regularly full with passengers with their luggage on the floor.

West London residents have also complained regularly about service disruptions, caused recently by (according to TfL) "failures of points, axle counters within the signalling system, and problems with the overhead line electrification on the Network Rail Western surface section".

Transport for London is also looking for government funding to procure five more Elizabeth line trains, to ease overcrowding.

In the latest TfL Board papers, TfL Commissioner Andy Lord writes: "With Old Oak Common becoming a temporary terminus for HS2 services for up to a decade, we have made the case to the Government to procure additional Class 345 Elizabeth line trains to ensure sufficient capacity for passengers coming from HS2 services to continue their journey into central London.

"In addition, we have engaged with HS2 Ltd, Network Rail and the Department for Transport to resolve the issues of level boarding for Elizabeth line rolling stock."

It's far from clear if the request for more Elizabeth line trains will be forthcoming. Relations between the Mayor and the Government have been strained recently.

And if the Elizabeth line can't cope with the extra passengers, waiting for a space on a train could negate any time benefit of HS2.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan has written to the Prime Minister highlighting the concerns over unsafe overcrowding.

"As a result, the plan risks serious crowding on the Elizabeth line, with HS2 passengers facing a wait time of well over ten minutes on platforms, as multiple trains reach capacity before they can board," Khan writes.

"This would erode the journey time and passenger experience benefits of HS2, impair the attraction and reliability of the Elizabeth line, including for passengers from and to both Heathrow and the Home Counties, and lead to potentially unsafe conditions for passengers."

## Acton to Aston Express

Critics have dubbed the shorter (culled) HS2 route the 'Acton to Aston Express' and say that no one will want to use HS2 if it is slower than existing services on the West Coast Main Line from Euston.

The works at Old Oak Common have also caused disruption to surrounding residents. Many complain about the noise and the dust. That was a common theme in Euston as well, until it was mothballed for at least two years.

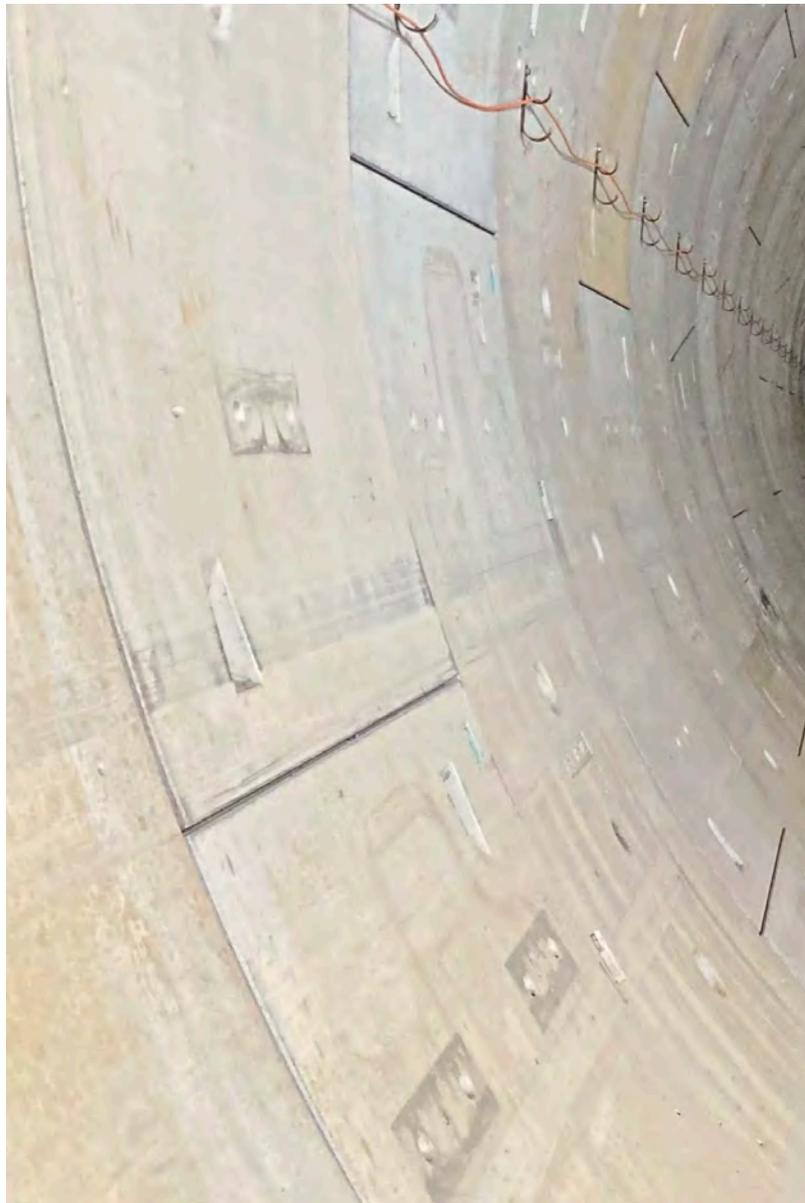
## Euston

Strikingly, what is happening under the suburbs is in stark contrast to what is happening at the supposed terminal.

Euston is the area that has arguably had the most disruption along the whole of HS2.

Some 215 homes have been demolished. 153 homes have been deemed uninhabitable. 70 businesses were displaced. A pub - *The Bree Louise* - was knocked down. St James Gardens, a burial ground and open space, was destroyed.

At the moment, the area is split in two by the huge construction site, surrounded by blue hoardings where nothing is happening.



Work had been going on for years... and there has been a lot of disruption.

The local traders at places such as Drummond Street are in despair. Passing commuter trade has dropped to a trickle.

Chris Georgiou runs *Speedy's*, a local cafe: "We have been through a pandemic, we have been through the strikes. We are in central London. Just when you think things can't get any worse, then you get HS2 stopping this project and holding it back from finishing. We are on the verge on closing - we are just trying to keep open."

The Government says it will set up a development company for the area, with the aim of using private money to fund HS2 Euston and the surrounding area. The Prime Minister said someone had to be held accountable.

What that means is unclear, apart from the fact that private money will now be used to develop most, if not all, of the site.

It could even pay for the tunnel to Old Oak Common, although TfL Commissioner Andy Lord recently told the *Guardian* newspaper: "I think we're still trying to fully understand the implications ... I can't really see a scenario where the private sector is going to pay for the tunnelling from Old Oak Common to Euston."

The local council is concerned that it will lose planning controls over any development. The council fears targets for affordable homes will be cut.

Georgia Gould, leader of Camden Council, says: "We have avoided the worst-case scenario of Euston being left abandoned in its current state. However, we now must ensure that Camden, our



*"I can't really see a scenario where the private sector is going to pay for the tunnelling from Old Oak Common to Euston."*

*Andy Lord, Transport for London Commissioner*



TOM EDWARDS

partners, and the local community shape its future.

“Our residents and businesses have endured years of disruption and blight. Homes have been knocked down, businesses lost, and open space destroyed.

“The Prime Minister’s proposal to take £6.5 billion from Euston must not lead to the promises made to our community on affordable housing, jobs and investment locally being broken.”

Lord Hendy CBE of Richmond Hill, chair of the Euston Partnership, strikes a more positive note: “This is a real opportunity to create a transformative Euston quarter with as many as 10,000 homes, echoing the regeneration success stories of Battersea and nearby King’s Cross.

“I am sure the partners will work collaboratively with the Government to work through the financial and other mechanisms to make this work.”

A DfT spokesman said: “As has always been planned, the line will finish at Euston. This is a world-class regeneration opportunity and there is already extensive support and interest from the private sector to invest.”

But even if Euston does become the terminal, there are concerns. A tunnel link between HS2 Euston and the nearby London Underground stations has been scrapped.

Presumably passengers will now be required to exit the HS2 station and make their way to either Euston or Euston Square Tube stations on the surface, via pavements.

The latest TfL Board papers show the decision to switch to private

funding was made without consultation with TfL.

Sadiq Khan has concerns about the viability of using private money, and has called it wishful thinking. In his letter to the Prime Minister, he wrote:

“Given current challenges in the British economy, asserting that the £6.5bn cost of a terminus at Euston and potentially more for the tunnel link to Old Oak Common will be covered by the private sector seems wishful thinking. Similarly, it is not clear how the decision was taken to do away with the link between Euston Square and Euston LU station, which is a vital part of the HS2 scheme.”

The Mayor also says that HS2’s own figures show 85% of passengers arriving at Euston will use the Underground to continue their journey. TfL and the Mayor maintain those numbers will overwhelm the existing LU connections.

As yet, Khan has not received a reply.

HS2 Euston will also be reduced to six platforms. This will again reduce the number of HS2 trains to eight an hour, from the previous ten.

A six-platform station as a terminal would also (according to HS2) require a full redesign, although some of the work already done may be able to be repurposed.

Currently in London, HS2 is travelling at two speeds.

Work is progressing quickly in the tunnels underneath the suburbs and at Old Oak Common. But at Euston, it’s at a standstill and likely facing a full redesign.

Many questions remain unanswered. ■



# What will the HS2 decision mean for rail freight?

The West Coast Main Line is, without doubt, the most important railway line for rail freight in the country.

Linking the UK's largest cities, freight trains convey consumer goods, retail products, construction materials, finished cars, waste, industrial products, post and parcels, and more besides.

The route runs through the 'golden triangle' of freight distribution in the English Midlands, links the Peak District quarry cluster to its customers, and supports Scottish exporters bringing their goods to market.

Little wonder, therefore, that the projections and forecasts of rail freight growth show a high demand for future services on this route.

While the Government has yet to publish its long-promised rail freight growth target, industry forecasts show the potential for a significant step-up in freight traffic right across the route, driven in particular by an increase in containerised goods serving the Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges which have sprung up in recent years.

These forecasts show a need for additional capacity for freight, increasing from the current four trains per hour (tph) at the busiest section up to around 7tph by the mid-2040s.

However, the recent decision to cancel HS2 north of Birmingham now brings the delivery of this ambition into doubt, and leaves a real headache for the rail freight sector, its customers and the economy.

It is quite difficult to know exactly what the impact of the cancellation will be, because there are still significant uncertainties.

■ The work undertaken to date by the West Coast Partnership on the passenger service proposition has not been published, and it will undoubtedly need to change now without Phases 2a and 2b in the plans.

■ It remains unclear if, when and how the route will get to Euston, and thus how many HS2 trains can actually operate in practice.

■ It's unclear what will happen at Manchester Piccadilly.

■ We don't know how long the HS2 trains will be. If they are shorter than those they replace, there will need to be more of them. If they are too long for conventional platforms, extra trains will need to cover the intermediate stops.

There are choices about the routes via Stoke or Crewe. And that's before decisions on the Midlands Rail Hub and Northern Powerhouse Rail are factored into the mix. The impact of these choices will dictate how much capacity remains available for freight, and thus how much the industry can grow on this vital corridor.

Despite this uncertainty, it is clear that some particular bottlenecks will be created by the cancellation of Phase 2a.

Colwich Junction seems a likely candidate. Today, there are around 11 hourly paths over the junction. Previous work suggests that a realistic maximum would be in the order of 13tph, before operational and performance issues intervene. That isn't enough for freight or passenger growth, let alone additional HS2 trains that must now run that way.

What's more, Colwich wasn't listed in the wider Network North proposals, so funding for any upgrades is going to be hard to find.

There is a real risk that both freight and passenger funding will be capped at close to the current levels, and a potentially greater risk that existing freight and passenger services will be expected to 'budge up' to make space for HS2 trains, actually reducing capacity from today's level.

Colwich is unlikely to be the only bottleneck created by HS2 trains, but it is

symptomatic of the problem.

The two-track sections in the Trent Valley, Handacre and Stockport all look like potential issues. And at the same time, there were already known problems created by HS2 even with the complete programme in place.

Capacity north of Crewe to Scotland remains unresolved, with significant constraints on the route. There is continued uncertainty over the replacement for the previously cancelled Golborne Link. And although funding remains for a new line from Manchester to Liverpool, there is little in the way of detail.

Understanding and resolving these challenges is going to take time and money, and require difficult choices and trade-offs.

In cancelling the project, Rishi Sunak was clear that long-distance passenger travel to London was no longer a Government priority, with passenger traffic still below pre-COVID levels and with business travel particularly diminished.

We are equally clear that the ambitions of the freight sector should not be hampered by the fallout of this decision.

The previously articulated mantra that Government would be a 'loser' if it did not get its way with HS2 trains has been shot to bits by its own decision to cancel, and the case for squeezing capacity from others.

So, the work to assess the trade-offs and find a way forward must be done with care, and be more transparent and open than previously, with full involvement of the rail freight operators, Network Rail's System Operator, and the Great British

*"There is a real risk that both freight and passenger funding will be capped at close to the current levels, and a potentially greater risk that existing freight and passenger services will be expected to 'budge up' to make space for HS2 trains, actually reducing capacity from today's level."*



**A drone shot shows where containers will be stored at the new Northampton rail freight terminal, and its main line connection. The case for such structures has been built around the benefits of using rail freight carried on HS2. NETWORK RAIL.**

Railways Transition Team.

Nor is the potential loss of capacity the only impact of this decision, as critical as it is.

Rail freight has been playing a key role in the construction of Phase 1, bringing inbound materials such as stone and tunnel linings and moving out tunnelling waste for disposal.

While this has been concentrated from the facility at Willesden in the south, the HS2 work has also supported new construction terminals in Birmingham and increased demand for stone and cement in the West Midlands.

Although the Phase 1 work will continue as planned, the anticipated future work for Phases 2a and 2b will be a major loss for the industry.

Operators have invested in wagons and facilities, as well as trained drivers and staff, in anticipation of the future demand from HS2. These will now need to find alternative uses.

This might not be so much of a challenge if other infrastructure work wasn't drying up. But with the Government's road building programme seeing major cuts and housebuilding and commercial construction on its knees, there is much less certainty over future projects.

The wider Network North proposals

might offer some potential, but it is far from certain when, how and where these will come to fruition - if indeed at all.

The impact of this is to damage investor confidence in UK rail.

And it is not only freight operators, but also those who have invested in new terminals and Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges.

Large-scale rail-linked warehousing developments such as that at Daventry, Northampton Gateway and elsewhere are billion-pound private sector investments, and they have built their strategic case around the benefits of using rail freight. That in turn has relied on the capacity that HS2 should have delivered.

And while the private sector cannot expect to always rely on government ideas and proposals, it is perhaps reasonable to expect that once an Act of Parliament has been passed (as it had for Phase 2a), investment and construction might follow.

Given the vital need for inward investment in the UK economy, there needs to be a hard look at how the relationship between the public and private sectors is working when it comes to aligned investment of this nature.

The only shining light in this situation is the inclusion of Ely Junction in the Network North Command paper.

This is a key project for freight and passenger growth across East Anglia and beyond. The project has already been developed to Outline Business Case and has a strong Benefit:Cost Ratio, so it is welcome news to see the scheme authorised to proceed further.

However, as yet we have not heard when this will be released, and there is an urgent need for clarification on next steps.

Ely aside, the damage has been done with this decision, and what is important now is to find a way to resolution. The capacity analysis must be done, strategic decisions taken, and investment choices made.

The opportunity now is to do this in a better way than before. This means a more open and transparent process, and one where HS2 services are treated on an even footing with other network users. ■

## About the author

**Maggie Simpson is executive director of the Rail Freight Group. Previously she worked in a range of passenger and freight roles at the Strategic Rail Authority and Office of Passenger Rail Franchising, including freight strategy development and franchise management. She has also worked in consultancy.**

# HS2: living alongside two

BBC South TV reporter **BRENNAN NICHOLLS** lives close to the point where HS2 crosses East West Rail. Following the cancellation of the northern arm of the route, he canvasses local opinion...

**W**elcome to North Buckinghamshire, halfway between London and Birmingham.

It is here where HS2 and East West Rail (EWR) cross. That means perpendicular construction routes, two lots of delivery lorries, and double the potholes and road closures, alongside the ravaged cuts through rolling countryside.

Claydon's former railway station closed in 1968, a victim of the Beeching report. EWR brings a new one to nearby Winslow. HS2's station is much further afield.

It's hard to find anyone here who backs HS2, but that's not to say there aren't any (although they are now even fewer following the cancellation of the line through to Manchester and the North). Nor are they all NIMBYs - they're more ITYSs (I Told You Soss).

Frank Mahon is one of them. The publican from the Prince of Wales in Steeple Claydon stood in the way of the diggers when they moved in to begin work cutting down trees.

"The white elephant's going nowhere. We always said at the beginning - start in the North where it's badly needed. We knew, three years ago, what was going to happen. And lo and behold, it's come to pass."

Mahon's anger at the impact of the projects has driven him to become a local Conservative councillor in Buckinghamshire.

"I would describe HS2 as neighbours from hell. Road closures, lack of information, no consideration of residents, no compensation for local businesses."

One of the main roads to his pub, between the villages of Steeple Claydon and Calvert, has been closed by EWR since February 2023, having previously been shut for eight months in 2022.

Addison Road should have reopened this summer, but delays - caused in part by the collapse of construction firm Buckingham Group - means that it looks set to open again in January 2024.

Now HS2 has closed the Calvert Road rail bridge for the next two years, severing that same route until summer 2025.

The closure is to enable construction of a new green bridge over the high-speed tracks. A Victorian Station Master's cottage and a pair of more modern semi-detached houses have already been demolished in preparation.

What was a two-mile trip from Calvert to the GPs, supermarket or post office in Steeple Claydon now warrants a four-mile diversion each way - along the same route as the construction lorries.

"The roads can't take it anymore," says Mahon.

Calvert knows a thing or two about heavy industry.

The village was built over the past 20 years on the site of former brickworks, where bricks were produced from 1900 until it closed in 1991. Part of the site became a now-capped rubbish dump, and one of its former clay pits transformed into a nature reserve. Where the

kilns once stood is the village green and community hall.

Calvert's local neighbourhood plan from 2020 lists the main reason the residents enjoyed living here as the peace and quiet, and beautiful countryside.

In 2023, the parish council is at loggerheads with HS2 and East West Rail. Its chairman described HS2's communication as "desperately lacking", citing concerns over road closures, road works, traffic delays, increased traffic, and road disrepair.

Noise is also an issue. Residents often wake to the sound of the building work, while others near the line's construction are carrying out structural surveys after cracks appeared in their properties.

Local Conservative MP Greg Smith brought members of the Transport Select Committee here, to see for themselves what living alongside the construction is like. Since the cancellation of Phase 2 of HS2, the Buckingham MP has repeated his calls for the whole line to be scrapped. Meanwhile, construction continues.

HS2 Ltd has taken thousands of lorries off local roads.

It has used an existing railway line, which previously brought in rubbish from London and elsewhere to be buried in the former rubbish tip at Calvert. That has been superseded by an energy-from-waste plant at Greatmoor, whose shadow casts itself over the HS2 rail line route.

Tens of thousands of tonnes of construction materials make their way to site by rail. In 2021 alone, HS2 reckoned that meant 12,500 fewer lorries, saving around 30,000 tonnes of carbon in the process.

Calvert will also be home to the main Infrastructure Maintenance Depot (IMD) for HS2. The IMD's final design has green roofs and a low profile, to try its best to blend into the local environment. There will also be wetlands and pools, which may help reset the environmental damage done to the local Wildlife Trust's nature reserve (part of which was razed as it was in the line's way).

The IMD will house HS2's inspection machinery for the entire 194 miles of track on the London to Birmingham line. It will carry out work on overhead power cables and tunnels. There will also be a training centre for maintenance staff, and it will provide incident support. Much of that work will take place overnight when trains aren't running, with maintenance machinery leaving and returning to the IMD at all hours.

With the scrapping of the line beyond Birmingham, some now argue that this could be the time for a radical rethink. If the economic argument of HS2 has been undermined, why not bring more intrinsic value to those who live here?

Come 2030, anyone living in Calvert or Steeple Claydon who wants to board an HS2 train will currently have to get to either Birmingham or London. Some argue that building a station at Calvert to link HS2 with East West Rail could deliver more benefits than currently expected.

Frank Mahon thinks things should go one step further...

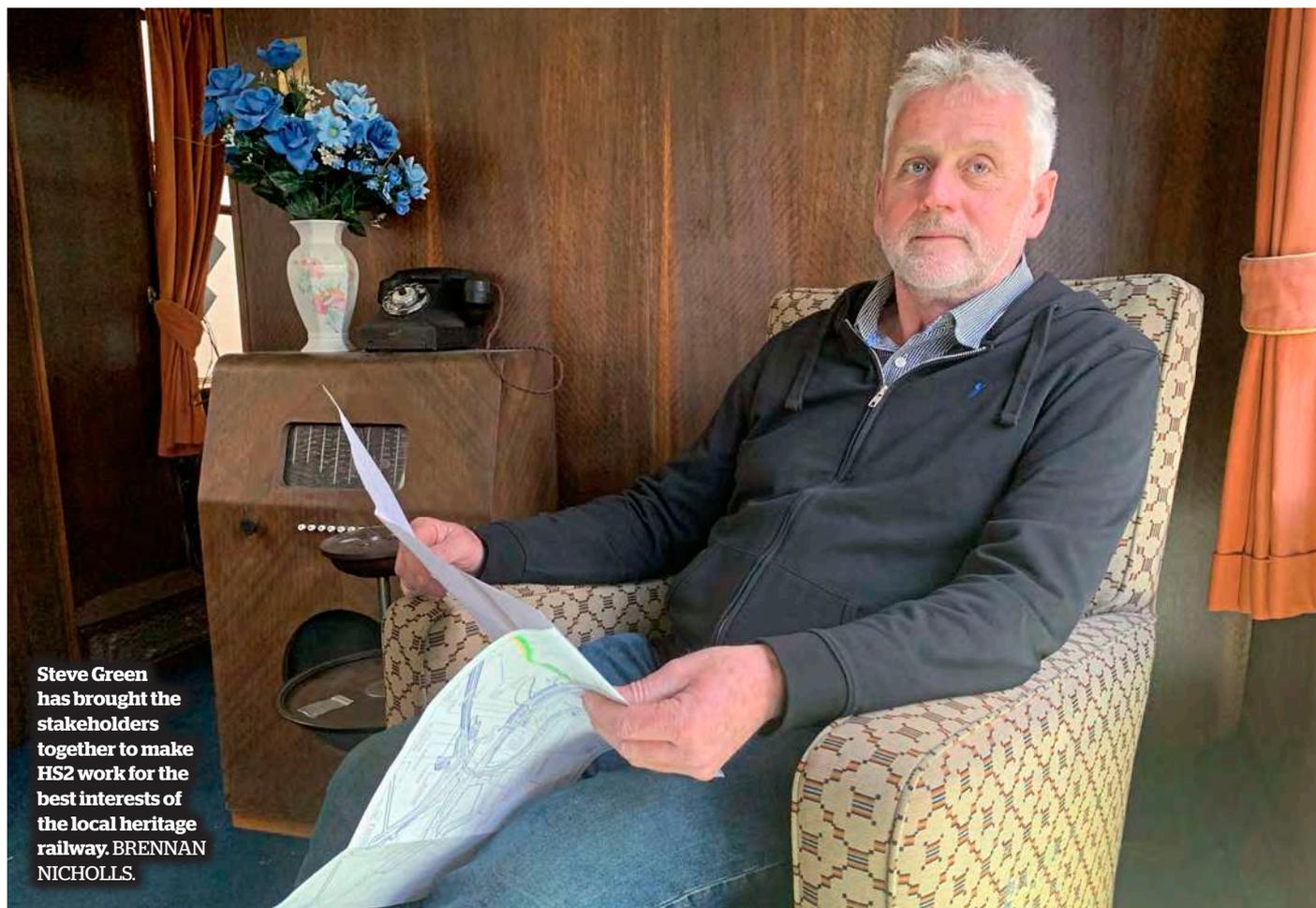
"If you save 20 minutes getting from Birmingham to Old Oak Common, then you lose those 20 minutes getting into the centre of London.

"So, if we cancel HS2, how do we get our money back? Put solar panels along the whole track, you don't destroy any more of our agricultural land, and you have the perfect vote winner from here to Birmingham."

*"Now people think a lot more before they do things, through a process of learning to work together. We don't fight them - we only work with them."*

*Steve Green Buckinghamshire Railway Centre*

# new railways...



**Steve Green has brought the stakeholders together to make HS2 work for the best interests of the local heritage railway.** BRENNAN NICHOLLS.

One minute and 23 seconds (at full tilt in a high-speed train) towards London lies the sleepy village of Quainton, home to alea-side windmill and to Buckinghamshire Railway Centre - a heritage steam attraction which includes the original Oxford railway station building from Rewley Road, which was dismantled and rebuilt here for prosperity.

The bridge on the main road into the Railway Centre has been shut since August 2022, on safety grounds. That has meant lengthy and somewhat confusing diversions for visitors.

Originally, the plan was to close all access to the centre for at least two months.

"It's frightening. We would have run out of money and closed forever," says Steve Green, trustee of Buckinghamshire Railway Centre.

We are sitting in Winston Churchill's railway carriage. It lives here at the centre. Churchill used it to entertain General Eisenhower during the Second World War.

Green has now turned it into his own war office. It is here, three days a week, that the former self-employed builder plots and plans ways of making HS2 work for the best interests of the heritage railway charity.

HS2 is building its new line alongside the heritage tracks. The affected carriageway, Station Road, was originally part of the Victorian-built Brill Tramway, which at one point became a north-west outpost of London Underground's Metropolitan Line

London-bound services from Quainton ended in the 1930s. Passenger services northwards finally stopped in 1963, before its station became the tourist attraction it is today. *Thomas the Tank*

*Engine* days here regularly attract 2,000 visitors alone.

Green has agreed with HS2 a protected 'golden route' into the centre. Those roads can't be shut off while Station Road remains closed. He has brought HS2, Network Rail, contractors and councillors around the same table, to come up with ways of making HS2's construction work for all parties.

"We all work as a stakeholder group. It translates into making life better for the village. HS2 was making decisions on road closures without consulting properly with other people. They were thinking of people travelling to work from the village, but they weren't thinking of people actually trying to run a business."

The impending line has not been without impact on the charity's funds, though. It saw a huge drop in wedding bookings last year, due to HS2 works next door. That equates to a loss of around £80,000.

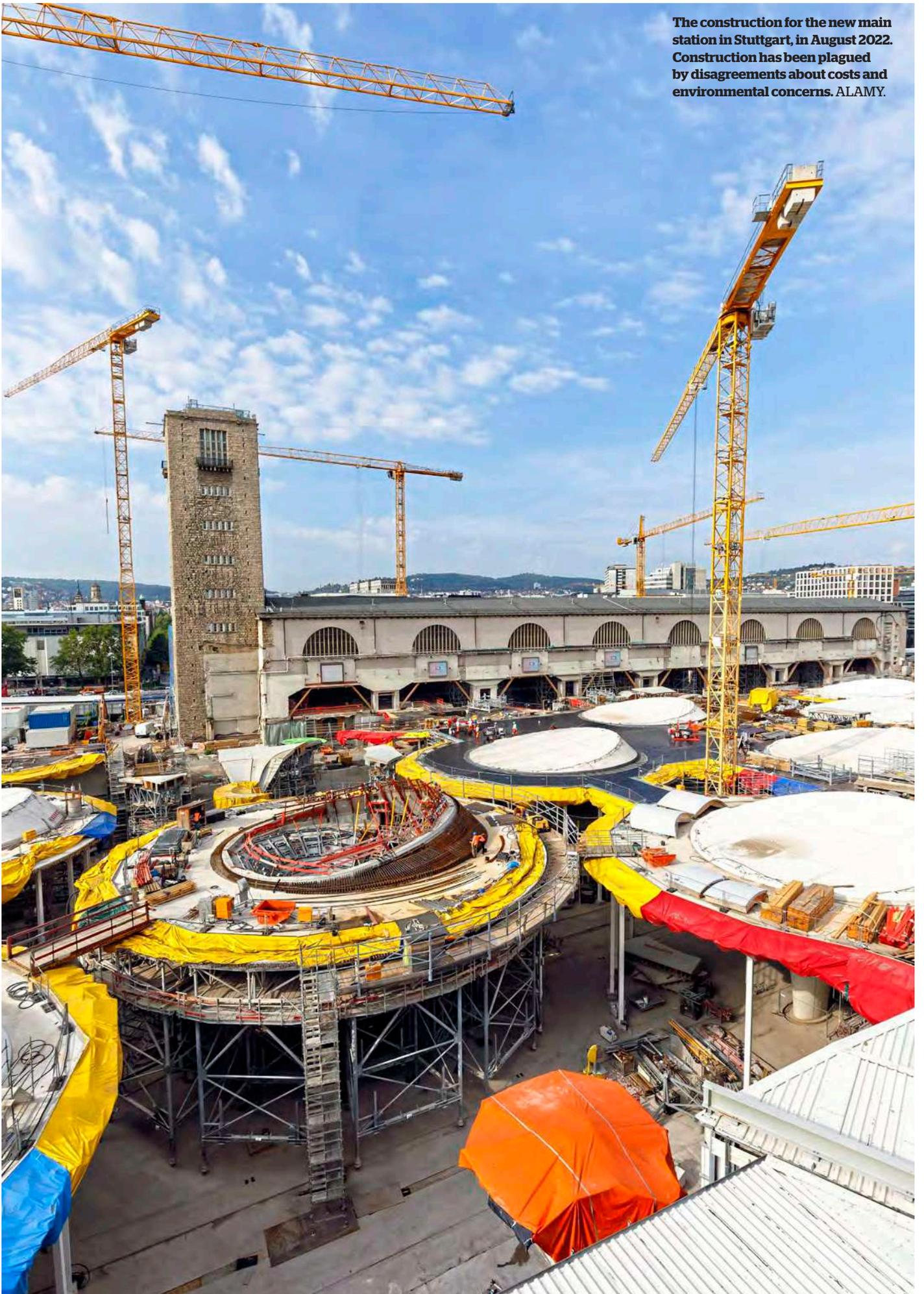
However, working closely with HS2 means that Carter Jonas, the appointed compensation contractor for the project, is providing forensic accountants to determine financial reparation. It is a service the charity could not afford itself.

Buckinghamshire Railway Centre and HS2 are also working together on the charity's five-year plan to expand its offering. That's helping to mitigate losses, while HS2 provides construction skills such as footpaths and fencing in return.

"They don't want us to close, because if a brand new railway closed a heritage railway centre that would be like the worst scandal you could have," says Green.

"Now people think a lot more before they do things, through a process of learning to work together. We don't fight them - we only work with them." ■

**The construction for the new main station in Stuttgart, in August 2022. Construction has been plagued by disagreements about costs and environmental concerns. ALAMY.**



# Why are UK rail projects so expensive?

While governments across the world invest billions to deliver vital new infrastructure, the UK is slashing budgets and axing key projects. **BEN JONES** examines what makes the UK so different to its competitors

**E**very major rail project of recent years - HS2, Crossrail, East West Rail, Great Western Electrification Programme and others - has blown its budget and timetable, reducing trust in the industry's ability to deliver its promises.

But it's not just railways - energy, utilities, roads, sports stadiums and myriad other industries take longer and require more money to deliver in the UK than elsewhere in Europe.

The obvious (and often asked) question is: "How come they can do it when we can't?"

However, the reality of major infrastructure projects is inevitably much more complicated than that simple question. Controversy, delays, political interference and cost overruns have been common for as long as humans have been building transport networks.

And it can be just as prevalent abroad. Major infrastructure schemes in most other countries also encounter fierce opposition, political meddling, eye-watering cost overruns, delays, policy U-turns and all the other difficulties encountered by UK projects. Yet few descend into the kind of chaos and vitriol currently surrounding HS2 and other rail projects in this country.

In recent years, the saga of Berlin's new airport has provided a classic example of how not to deliver a project. First mooted in 1991, construction took 14 years - nine years longer than planned - as a result of poor construction planning, execution and project management. Originally priced at €2.83 billion, the final cost topped €6.5bn (£5.6bn) and put a huge dent in Germany's reputation for organisation and efficiency. But it was, at least, completed.

Likewise, the controversial Stuttgart 21 project to replace the German city's terminal station with underground through platforms, releasing a huge tract of prime city centre land for redevelopment. First proposed in 1994, the rebuilding has been plagued by disagreements about the stated benefits, environmental concerns and changes of priority that have contributed to the ballooning of costs by €5bn to more than €9.1bn and a delay of six years at current estimates.

A 2020 audit of eight major European infrastructure projects - worth €54bn (£46.6bn) in total - raised concerns about six schemes and identified an average delay of 11 years. Differing national investment priorities and squabbling over routing and planning

*"Better strategic planning can enhance system integration, allow stakeholders to evaluate different service concepts and identify associated infrastructure and equipment to improve performance."*

*Eric Cosandey, Chief Executive Officer, SMA*

rules were of particular concern to cross-border projects.

Despite this, many countries continue to support and deliver major projects. Austria, Switzerland and Germany have a long-term commitment to public transport investment rarely seen in the UK.

That's not to say that there are no disagreements, but there is less of the confrontational, partisan and short-termist approach that blights UK politics and makes the delivery of long-term investment so difficult. Generally speaking, there is broad public and political support for investment in high-quality public transport, which is seen as 'a good thing' for society.

Eric Cosandey, chief executive officer of Swiss company SMA, which delivers consultancy and software to optimise railway planning and operations, believes that lessons learned elsewhere in Europe could bring huge benefits to the way Britain's rail network is planned, specified and operated.

He says: "Rather than seeing the public timetable as merely the end product, what if we put the service offer - as the ultimate promise to the end customer - at the heart of the decision-making process instead?"

"Better strategic planning can enhance system integration, allow stakeholders to evaluate different service concepts and identify associated infrastructure and equipment to improve performance."

Clear goals lead to agreed outputs and allow stakeholders to follow and interrogate projects to ensure they meet agreed milestones and deliver the promised benefits. This approach is well established in Switzerland, where upstream infrastructure and timetable planning looks 15-20 years ahead.

Stakeholders promote the environmental and societal benefits of public transport improvements, and investment in public transport is more likely to be seen as a generator of economic activity - as new roads and airports are in the UK - rather than portrayed as a drain on public resources.

Diego D'Elia, UK region manager at SMA, explains: "We believe these methods are transposable to the UK, but this kind of planning requires real commitment from all parties. A common understanding of needs must be built and all stakeholders, industry and political, have to work together and that cannot be taken for granted.

"It's important to accept that it is a process, not a single shot. Time is needed to bring everyone in, but once they see the benefits the process can bring, reservations can be overcome."

Cosandey adds: "A change like this can't be made overnight. In railway terms, 2030 is tomorrow, so service levels and infrastructure planning have to be phased in over 15-20 years. Setting an agreed strategic horizon like that doesn't stop anyone achieving intermediate goals, as long as they are compatible and aligned with the long-term development path. New ideas can pop up too - it's an iterative, open, round-table process.

"Swiss service quality today is the result of the quality of planning five, ten or even 20 years ago. It's not rocket science - it's about ►

*“A common understanding of needs must be built and all stakeholders, industry and political, have to work together and that cannot be taken for granted.”*

*Diego D’Elia, UK Region Manager, SMA*

► putting people at the same table and putting the service plan at the centre of all discussions.”

Strategic planning tools allow many European countries to maintain a consistent pipeline of projects between governments, which reassures supply chain industries, allowing them to retain specialist staff, skills and equipment. Debates on strategy and investment tend to be more serious, focusing on what needs to be done to deliver affordable improvements that will benefit everyone, rather than scoring cheap points over political rivals.

This in turn makes projects easier and cheaper to deliver than the UK’s traditional stop-start approach, under which companies are constantly having to ‘reinvent the wheel’. Significantly, the Department for Transport’s Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP), intended to provide the UK supply chain with a consistent flow of projects, has not been updated since October 2019. As a result, many international companies have turned away from the UK to focus on more vibrant rail markets.

In an open letter to Transport Secretary Mark Harper on October 20, Railway Industry Association Chief Executive Darren Caplan said: “Failing to give businesses clear and consistent commitments can only increase industry costs and deliverability risks, which is ultimately bad for the taxpayer and for rail customers, both passengers and freight.

“There is, of course, a solution. A number of the rail schemes within Network North - which the National Infrastructure Assessment says requires clarification - could be brought forward quickly if the Government chooses to firm them up. It could also now announce the timing of delivering the RNEP projects. And an update on its thinking on the timing of delivering the *Integrated Rail Plan* for the North and Midlands would also be helpful to rail businesses.”

“None of this requires extra funding, as we are told all the work is provided for from existing budgets. So, it is simply a matter of communicating with the rail supply sector - we urge the Government to announce which rail projects it wishes to progress with as soon as possible.”

Looking across Europe, governments are putting their faith in rail investment as the backbone of their carbon-reduction and clean-air commitments, despite the obvious difficulties of delivering projects in a volatile environment. Poland, Czechia and the Baltic States look set to join the high-speed rail club currently dominated by France, Spain, Germany and Italy over the next decade, while hundreds of billions of euros are promised for rail improvements across the continent.

Europe aims to double high-speed rail use by 2030 - just six years away - and triple the current levels by 2050. Only a massive - and accelerated - expansion of the high-speed network can achieve these hugely ambitious targets. The sheer scale of the proposals also means that it will take many years to deliver the necessary work, even if things go as planned. Meanwhile, the UK will only deliver 140 miles of HS2 Phase 1 by the mid-2030s.

## Cultural

It’s perhaps no coincidence that similar questions about the high cost and difficulty of delivering major infrastructure schemes are being asked in the US and UK. The US is the most expensive country in the world for infrastructure projects, with the UK close behind.

Countless theories have been put forward by commentators to explain this, but certain common characteristics can be identified on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Politically, the two-party systems

in each country have traditionally engendered a more adversarial approach than in mainland Europe, where consensus through proportional representation is more common. Two-party systems can often be detrimental to the kind of consistent long-term planning and investment required for vital infrastructure.

In addition, Americans are renowned for their love of the automobile.

“Many Americans have no concept of high-speed rail and fail to see its value. They are hopelessly stuck with a highway and airline mindset.” says William C. Vantuono, editor in chief of *Railway Age*, North America’s oldest railroad industry publication.

He adds: “Most American politicians are clueless and lack long-term vision. They are incapable of seeing past the next election cycle and are more concerned about trashing the opposition and creating further division in an already dangerously divided country.”

Sound familiar?

## Challenging

But there are other issues in the UK that make delivering new infrastructure more challenging. Infrastructure planning in many European countries aims to ensure projects meet clearly stated criteria. Once authorities accept that a project meets these rules, it can be approved and delivered without deviation from the agreed plan.

In contrast, the British system does not consider adverse effects in advance, but instead seeks to mitigate every possible effect from a project as the plan evolves. An average planning application for a nationally significant infrastructure project in Britain can involve the submission of more than 1,000 documents. HS2’s environmental impact assessment for Phase 1 ran to 50,000 pages.

Legal costs alone can range from around £10 million for a large solar farm to a reported £260m for the Lower Thames Crossing in London - the latter more than the cost of actually building a similar tunnel elsewhere.

All that material takes time to read and digest, and even simple planning applications can take up to two years to process and are



open to judicial challenge from opponents, extending the process for years.

The planning process requires a complete overhaul.

Another significant factor pushing up costs in the UK is the widespread replacement of in-house specialist experience with armies of expensive external consultants. Since the 1980s, in-house expertise has been significantly reduced, driving costs up, but also hollowing out the capabilities of infrastructure managers, railway companies and government departments.

Everything from initial feasibility studies to planning, auditing and management of specialist activities is contracted out by delivery organisations such as HS2 Ltd, who lack the internal expertise to deliver it.

This lack of experience also makes it more difficult for organisations to be 'good customers', leading to a lack of clarity about overall aims, project drift and design changes, which also contribute to delays and spiralling costs.

Since the 1980s, this trend has been particularly marked in the English-speaking world, where engineering expertise has largely been lost from local and national government, reducing their ability to spot errors or opportunities to find savings.

Equally, the 'feast or famine' approach to investment seen in the UK forces suppliers to take a short-term view, pricing contracts to cover their costs in the good times and see them through the lean periods. Inadequate planning from the outset, coupled with poor project management, political interference and contractors keen to ensure they make a handsome return has caused costs to spiral on major infrastructure schemes.

Perhaps the closest comparison to HS2 outside the UK is California High-Speed Rail (CHSR), which should eventually link the sprawling city regions of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Like HS2, CHSR has been repeatedly criticised, pushed back and modified, massively increasing its costs while reducing its scope to a shuttle through the San Joaquin Valley between Merced and Bakersfield.

CHSR was first mooted as far back as 1996, but its implementation

*"Failing to give businesses clear and consistent commitments can only increase industry costs and deliverability risks, which is ultimately bad for the taxpayer and for rail customers, both passengers and freight."*

*Darren Caplan, Chief Executive,  
Railway Industry Association*

has been controversial. Disagreements over the route, management issues, delays in land acquisition and construction, cost overruns and inadequate funding for completing the entire system have plagued the project, despite the very obvious economic benefits it will deliver, as well as reducing pollution and congestion.

Costed at an eye-watering \$63bn to \$98bn, depending on the final extent of the scheme, CHSR should eventually connect six of the ten largest cities in the state and provide the same capacity as 4,200 miles of new highway lanes, 91 additional airport gates and two new airport runways costing between \$122bn and \$199bn.

With California's population expected to grow to more than 45 million by 2050, high-speed rail offers the best-value solution to keep the state from grinding to a smoggy halt. But, despite construction of the first phase progressing well, CHSR remains subject to the USA's partisan politics, which could ultimately see its vital city centre links go the same way as HS2's northern phases.

Rishi Sunak's reported disappointment at the lack of a 'bounce' in the opinion polls after his cancellation of HS2 Phase 2 in October perhaps gives some clue of how senior UK politicians view public transport investment.

His recent pro-car, pro-fossil fuel and anti-climate change policy statements target a very specific section of the electorate as he seeks to exploit another 'wedge' issue and tempt voters away from a resurgent Labour Party.

Whether that approach will be successful at the next General Election remains to be seen. What is certain is that abandoning vital long-term national infrastructure investment to fight a short-term 'culture war' is not conducive to strong economic development, levelling up or to making the UK a more productive, prosperous, competitive and mobile country.

So, what's the solution? Is it possible to overcome the UK's prevailing political culture and decades of short-term decisions that have left the country's transport networks lagging far behind our neighbours? As things stand, it looks like a distant prospect, especially without reform of planning laws or further clarity on the future shape of the rail industry.

The creation of Great British Railways offers some hope. As the much-demanded 'guiding mind', it will be in a unique position to develop an overview of the British rail network and its future requirements. Armed with that information, it should become a passionate advocate for UK rail and the massive economic, social and environmental benefits it is uniquely placed to deliver.

If the next government and its successors commit to GBR and allow it to operate at arm's length as outlined in the *Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail*, it could be possible to build a more confident, better prepared industry structure and create an informed strategy for UK rail that will shape more positive long-term developments over the coming decades.

Big civil engineering projects will continue to suffer delays and go over budget, as they always have and continue to do so elsewhere in the world, but long-term, cross-party commitment to infrastructure spending and the creation of stronger, better-informed organisations to plan and deliver them would undoubtedly help the UK to move away from its current troubles. ■

**In February 2016, the supports for a 1,600ft viaduct to carry high-speed rail trains across the Fresno River are under construction near Madera, California. The California High-Speed Rail Project, as with HS2, has courted controversy, and been pushed back and modified over the years. ALAMY.**



# Calling all stations... and ticket office consultations



In the last edition of *RailReview*, I could only provide an outline of the ticket office proposals by 13 train companies, as we were still in the midst of the consultation process.

Now that the process has concluded, it gives me the opportunity to explain our reasoning in objecting to the proposals - informed by both the criteria we set out at the start of the consultation process, and by the unprecedented level of responses.

Together with London TravelWatch, we received 750,000 responses to the consultation from individuals and organisations. Those responses contained powerful and passionate concerns about the potential changes.

If the maxim "you can only really enjoy life when you're extremely busy" is accurate, then the past four months have been the most enjoyable of my Transport Focus career.

In all seriousness, the time, effort and commitment put in by my colleagues to handle the passenger responses, to meet the exacting timescales, and to produce a detailed evaluation of each individual proposal, was a truly magnificent achievement.

As I step down shortly from Transport Focus, I can safely say I have never been prouder of the people in the organisation and our independent role.

### **Weight of numbers**

When the train companies announced their proposals on July 5, publishing details on their websites and on posters at stations, it's fair to say we expected a large response.

But the level of response from the public was astounding. The responses to

the consultation came in thick and fast, resulting in additional resources being dedicated to handle the correspondence by email and post.

Concerns were expressed by passengers and stakeholders about the length of the consultation window (21 days) and accessibility to the proposals in different formats.

Listening to feedback (following continued engagement with stakeholders, accessibility groups and Transport Focus), train operators agreed to extend the consultation period by five weeks until September 1.

We also subsequently reached agreement with operators to extend the period to consider the responses received, with a final date of October 31 for our response.

We have reputedly received the largest response to any public consultation.

### **Ticketing and Settlement Agreement - a short history**

The Railways Act (1993) created a new regulatory regime for the railways, with the establishment of the Rail Regulator (dealing with the monopoly and dominant elements of the industry - principally Railtrack, and now Network Rail), and the then Director of Passenger Rail Franchising.

Under the new Act, ticket retailing received a considerable amount of attention. Passengers needed the certainty that they would continue to have easy access to ticket retailing facilities, and that ticket retailers would continue to offer a full range of tickets (including through tickets), so that they could take advantage of the journey opportunities the railway network offers.

A baseline was established in 1995 (for the first time) of retailing facilities at staffed stations, including opening times for ticket offices and the range of tickets capable of being sold. This provided a certainty of provision that never existed before.

This baseline was set out in a new Ticketing & Settlement Agreement (TSA), which was approved by the regulator and to which all relevant train operators are signatories. At the time, the TSA was widely received as a positive step which offered a degree of consumer protection in the newly privatised rail network.

Since 1995, the TSA has largely remained unchanged. However, ticket buying behaviour has changed due to technological changes.

In Easier Fares for All (2019), the Rail Delivery Group envisaged a reform and modernisation process whereby industry and government would work together to reform the way that fares are worked out, with government replacing the TSA with a new set of system regulations.

RDG argued that the current fares system, designed in the 1990s, had not kept pace with the evolution of technology and how people work and travel today. Working together, train companies made improvements where possible within the constraints of the system, but real reform requires regulatory change.

Our role is clearly defined by the TSA. Under clause 6-18 (1) of the TSA, changes to ticket office opening hours may be made under the major change procedure if:

■ The change would represent an improvement on current arrangements in terms of quality of service and/or cost effectiveness.

■ Members of the public would continue to enjoy widespread and easy access to the purchase of rail products, notwithstanding the change.

An operator wishing to make a major change must display details of the proposed change at affected stations and invite people to make representations to Transport Focus

*"It is important to acknowledge that the presence of staff at a station plays a key role in the railway meeting passengers' expectations in many of these areas, so station staffing would be a key consideration in our assessment."*

A record number of responses were submitted in the ticket office consultation. NICK BRODRICK.



*“The top three themes in responses were concerns over the ability to buy tickets in future (including difficulties in using Ticket Vending Machines), the provision of information needed to plan journeys (including during periods of disruption), and how passengers requiring assistance would receive help and support.”*

(or to London TravelWatch for stations in the wider London area).

The TSA specifies a 21-day consultation period.

Transport Focus and London TravelWatch may object to a proposal on the grounds that the change does not meet one or both of the criteria above.

If we object, the train company can either withdraw their proposal or refer it to the Secretary of State for a decision.

The Department for Transport has published guidance setting out the approach the Secretary of State would take in these circumstances. If we make no comment on the proposed major change, that is deemed as having no objection.

It's difficult to go back to 1995 and understand the thinking about the above clause. I suspect, however, that it was written with the view that it provided the opportunity for an individual operator to propose a major change - not for all operators to submit proposals simultaneously for

almost every staffed station in England.

We may not like the playing surface, but it's the only one we have.

### Our criteria

We believe it is important that there is as much transparency as possible surrounding the process and Transport Focus's role within it.

To that end, we set out the broad criteria that Transport Focus used to assess proposals received, and published those criteria on July 5. Any proposal must set out how these passenger expectations will be met in future.

■ Passengers can easily buy the right ticket for the journey they want to make. This will include the product range available at the station, what support is available to advise/help with a purchase, and access for people who need to use cash or do not have a smartphone.

■ Passengers requiring assistance to travel receive that assistance in a timely and reliable

manner. This will include arrangements for providing booked assistance (using the Passenger Assist process), assistance provided on a 'turn-up-and-go' basis, the support available when buying a ticket, and the ease of requesting assistance.

■ Passengers can get the information they require to plan and make a journey - including during periods of disruption. This will include the information channels available at the station and the support available to help passengers who need assistance.

■ Passengers feel safe at a station. This will include perceptions of personal security and how train companies will provide reassurance for passengers wanting to travel.

■ Passengers are not penalised if they cannot buy the ticket they require from the station. This will include arrangements for issuing Penalty Fares or prosecutions for fare evasion.

■ Passengers can continue to use facilities at a station. This will include access to facilities such as waiting rooms, toilets, lifts, and car parking.

The criteria were based upon evidence received from passengers and stakeholders during recent individual operator ticket office consultations (LNER - 2021, ScotRail - 2022) and evidence gained from our own programme of insight (including Rail Passenger Priorities for Improvement - Station Priorities).

These were intended to give an ►

► outline of the broad areas that would be considered. Transport Focus focused its assessment on the impact of the proposals on passengers and whether, in accordance with the terms of the TSA, they represent “an improvement on current arrangements in terms of quality of service”.

It is important to acknowledge that the presence of staff at a station plays a key role in the railway meeting passengers’ expectations in many of these areas, so station staffing would be a key consideration in our assessment.

We would also take into account any specific circumstances surrounding a station, as well as issues raised by members of the public during the public consultation stage.

When we have completed our analysis of the proposals and the comments received from members of the public, we will publish our response. This would include an overview of the number of representations we have received, and the main issues raised in the consultation.

### It’s good to talk

Once the consultation was launched on July 5, we held regular meetings with train operators to gain a better understanding of the detail behind their proposals that would allow us to reach an informed view.

When the consultation closed on September 1, we commenced an initial sift of the responses. This informed clarification letters that we sent to all operators (September 6), seeking further information and asking questions relating to our criteria, and requesting a response by September 27.

There then followed a further series of meetings in early October, as many operators amended their proposals to take account of the consultation feedback received. It must be noted that all operators were willing to engage in a positive and constructive manner throughout the process.

Transport Focus’s discussions with train companies led to significant amendments and revisions to the original proposals, demonstrating the value of this independent review process.

Many revised train company proposals reinstated existing staffing hours, identified new and innovative solutions, and promised extra facilities to sell more tickets and all ticket types and to cope with cash payments and refunds.

However, serious overall concerns remained about how potentially useful innovations such as ‘Welcome Points’ would work in practice.

We also have questions about how the impact of these changes would be measured and how future consultation on staffing levels would work.



### What the people said

During the consultation period, we received a total of 585,178 responses by email, webform, freepost and phone.

Some were specific to individual stations, some were specific to train companies as a whole, and some were at a national level - for example, objecting to the proposals by all train companies. In addition, we also received a total of 257 petitions.

The top three themes in responses were concerns over the ability to buy tickets in future (including difficulties in using Ticket Vending Machines), the provision of information needed to plan journeys (including during periods of disruption), and how passengers requiring assistance would receive help and support.

The common theme running throughout the responses was the role, and value, of staff in delivering all of these.

*“Myself and my wife use the ticket office to make sure we have the right ticket. We used it today for a trip to Hebden Bridge as the information provided online about tickets available from different rail companies was confusing and very unclear concerning restrictions. I simply do not believe that staff will still be available to help if the ticket office is closed...”*

*“The machine apparently offers a confusing choice of tickets and does not always produce*

*the best results - ie, a rail card cannot be used on an open return ticket. This I found out when a kind person helped me recently with my one and only encounter with said machine. Fortunately, the ticket office resolved the problem.”*

*“Expecting travellers to roam around a station trying to find staff to help them or advise on tickets is not realistic or acceptable. How will those staff respond to passengers with visual or hearing impairments or neurodiverse conditions who are trying to find staff and communicate with them on a busy platform?”*

*“I have always bought my ticket at the ticket office. Not everybody has a computer to buy tickets online. And not everybody can cope with the ticket machines (myself included), quite apart from the fact that at times the screen is totally invisible when the sun is reflected in it. Even more important: Machines can’t answer questions - even an online ‘helpline’ hasn’t got all the answers (always assuming that one knows how to ask the question in the first place).”*

### Decision time

Ongoing dialogue with operators, measuring the proposals against our set-down criteria and listening to the passenger feedback, led to concerns about individual operator proposals and broader generic concerns.



**Concerns were raised over queues and waiting times at ticket vending machines. ALAMY.**

*“Welcome Points were not explained as part of the consultation, so passengers have not had the opportunity to comment on these plans or to highlight potential concerns.”*

people and representative groups on the concept, design, and implementation of Welcome Points.

The Welcome Point concept is a fundamental change for passengers, especially disabled passengers, so it is important that they work in practice and that passengers have confidence in them.

These proposals must be piloted to establish what works best at different types of stations, and how passengers react to them. Proposals on ticket offices would need to await the outcome of these pilots.

**■ New formal measurement to monitor and assess queuing times at ticket machines**

We recommend train operators introduce a robust measurement and reporting regime for queuing times at Ticket Vending Machines (based on the existing standards at ticket office windows).

If queues exceed the targets, then action would need to be taken (such as issuing staff with handheld ticket devices so that they can ‘queue bust’ and/or installing extra Ticket Vending Machines).

The introduction of a new measurement would ensure there is a formal mechanism to review the number of sales and, if projections were wrong, to increase retail capacity.

Queuing time targets, monitoring and reporting for Ticket Vending Machines (based on that currently in use at ticket windows) must be implemented at all stations before any changes could take place.

**■ Future regulation - staffing protections and means for consultation**

The public consultation feedback highlighted widespread concern that if ticket offices are closed and existing ‘Schedule 17’ regulation for ticket offices no longer applies, there will be no ongoing requirement to consult on any future changes.

Many passengers fear that train companies will make further cuts to staff if existing regulations are removed. Transport Focus recommends an alternative mechanism is put in place for any future material changes in staffing at a station. This commitment needs to be in place before changes to ticket offices can go ahead.

The rail industry has suggested that the existing Accessible Travel Policy process, which is formally regulated and enforceable by the Office of Rail and Road as part of

an operator’s licence, could provide an alternative.

**■ Product range**

Currently, ticket offices provide access to a full list of products and services. Ticket Vending Machines do not provide that same range of products and services.

For example, some TVMs do not sell products such as Railcards, Advance Purchase fares, Ranger/Rovers and national concessions for disabled people (for wheelchair and visually impaired passengers plus a companion). Nor do they provide seat reservations, allow you to change tickets/bookings, or provide a means of obtaining a cash refund.

**What happens next?**

Once we published material communicating our objections to the proposals, operators were advised to withdraw them.

We have since had meetings with the operators confirming that the proposals would be withdrawn. However, there is a willingness to engage with us to discuss our objections in detail and take forward some of the concerns raised in the consultation, with a view to addressing them positively for passengers.

We note that many people are describing the outcome as a victory/success. However:

*“Each success only buys an admission ticket to a more difficult problem.”*

The change in recent years on how passengers buy tickets, leading to a decline in sales at ticket offices, is here to stay. With ever-changing technology, that trend is more than likely to continue.

Perhaps the starting point for ‘Calling all stations - part three’ and future consideration about station retail is the recognition of what our insight has consistently stated regarding passengers’ top priority at stations:

*“A fares system that’s easy to understand and use” and “a visible and helpful staff presence”.* ■

**About the author**

**Anthony Smith is chief executive of Transport Focus. He has held the post at TF (and in its previous guise of Passenger Focus) since July 2005.**

A wealth of detail regarding each individual operator proposals can be found at [www.transportfocus.org.uk/ticketoffices](http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/ticketoffices).

The overarching concerns related to:

**■ Welcome Points**

Following concerns about the potential accessibility impact of proposals to move staff out of ticket offices and onto station platforms and concourses, train operators proposed to introduce new Welcome Points at stations.

A Welcome Point would be an initial focal point on entering a station that provides any customer who needs support and/or advice - a place to start their journey and get help from staff.

It would be a consistent and common location at stations to offer reassurance to those who need it - a clear and obvious place to get help and support.

While there is potentially merit in the concept of Welcome Points, there is much that still needs to be developed in terms of how the arrangements would work in practice. As it stands, there is a lack of clarity and detail on this proposal.

Welcome Points were not explained as part of the consultation, so passengers have not had the opportunity to comment on these plans or to highlight potential concerns. Further engagement is needed with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee and with disabled

# Rail has never been so sig

**MARK WALKER** considers how the sector has become an important topic at Westminster

**W**hen I was asked to contribute to this edition of *RailReview*, the premise of my invitation was: 'Why is rail slipping down the political agenda?' But I'm going to argue that the opposite phenomenon may in fact be occurring.

Indeed, my contention is that there is not a direct linkage between the present UK government losing interest in its much-vaunted 'rail reform' programme (first announced two and a half years ago) and the actual importance of the rail industry to either the political world or the wider public.

For the first time that I can remember, the centrepiece of the speech by the serving Prime Minister to his own autumn party conference concerned a railway - HS2.

Moreover, even though the delivery of that speech (and an unprecedented level of anticipation in the media before it) related to the cancellation of the unstarted sections of this hitherto flagship project, Rishi Sunak was still required to balance this news with the publication of a compensatory list of transport schemes (mostly rail-related) packaged up as 'Network North'.

Rail reform's abysmal failure and the prominence of infrastructure investment decisions highlights the paradox in the attitudes of the UK's political leaders and the wider public to our railways.

Despite all the controversy over the desirability (or otherwise) of its line speed, the volume of land take, and its perceived negative environmental impact, HS2 as a once-in-a-generation prestige scheme might have come to define Britain in the new Carolean age, much as Concorde did for the new Elizabethans.

In truth, the project never won that battle for hearts and minds. But conversely, the list of rail and other transport projects bundled into Network North boosts deeply yearned-for schemes sought by communities (in some cases) over many decades, such as electrification, junction improvements, new stations, and reversals of Beeching-era closures.

Although enthusiasm for the list was tempered by the crass inclusion from its Downing Street authors of schemes already delivered, and a general doubt over the degree to which its pledges can be trusted, there was a genuinely celebratory mood among campaigners. They welcomed the trashing of the excruciating business case development processes of the rail industry and the Department for Transport, which are widely seen as obfuscation mechanisms of which Sir Humphrey Appleby would be proud.

The Prime Minister probably has little love for trains and wished to use his Conservative Party Conference speech to push those pesky railways out of sight, freeing him to dabble in Artificial Intelligence as the UK's first genuinely 'tech bro' leader.

Instead, my thesis is that he may have merely raised the expectations (and the propensity to campaign) of people wanting to see his alternative railway project list turned rapidly into reality.

Recent changes to the structure of government in the UK will increase this tendency.

While Scotland enjoys almost complete devolution of rail powers, with Holyrood controlling two franchises and setting its own



budgetary framework for infrastructure renewals and enhancements, Wales has only secured the first of these components through the Wales & Borders franchise.

The Welsh Government is increasingly pressing the UK administration for additional main line rail infrastructure investment west of the border, as this is still controlled by the DfT on an England & Wales basis.

Whereas Scotland and Northern Ireland received what are known as 'Barnett Consequentials' from the UK Government's expenditure on HS2 (essentially extra money to spend as they wish), Wales was denied such funding by what many even in the Conservative Party regard as a sleight of hand, as HS2 was said to bring direct benefits there.

With HS2 now terminating in Birmingham, this is certain to lead to demands for additional rail investment over and above the £1 billion pledged in the Network North programme for electrification of the North Wales Main Line.

In England's city regions, with their ever-increasing number of directly elected Combined Authority Metro Mayors, pressure will be exerted on the UK government to provide additional investment resources for expansion of local rail networks.

Such energy was already being mobilised following the curtailment of the eastern leg of HS2 in the *Integrated Rail Plan* of November 2021, when West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire lost their promised direct high-speed connections.

The most recent contraction of HS2's scope means that Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and (to a lesser degree) the West Midlands are disappointed. But, in addition, the East Midlands will hold its first Metro Mayor election in May 2024.

*"Labour will have to develop and vigorously campaign on a set of proposals for public transport and active travel, with the unbeatable capacity of rail to move large numbers of people and tonnages of goods more sustainably at its heart."*

# nificant on the hustings



Derby is at the heart of the UK's rail supply chain. And with the East Midlands holding its first Metro Mayor election in May, the region will be at the centre of a more prominent role for rail and transport in the forthcoming General Election. EMR.

With Derby hosting the heartland of the UK's rail supply chain business which stands to lose most from the curtailment of HS2, and with East Midlands Airport no longer to be served by high-speed trains, we can expect to see the Prime Minister's actions featuring in this region's mayoral campaign.

Metro Mayors have come to realise (just as the first Mayor of London did almost a quarter of a century ago) that heavy rail networks are priceless assets as they seek to bring investment, employment and prosperity throughout their territories, while avoiding generating unsustainable levels of road traffic with intolerable levels of congestion and air pollution.

The present UK government trumpets the funds it has already released to some of these authorities through bids into competitive funding pots, but the seeming liberation of £36 billion of HS2 funding will only serve to increase the expectations of regional mayors and other local authority leaders.

And with the majority of mayoralities in the hands of the Labour Party, there is an expectation on Sir Keir Starmer and his shadow ministerial team to make promises on the possible restoration of HS2 and investment in rail more widely.

These pressures are interwoven with the Labour Party endeavouring to work out how to implement its commitment to restore all of the remaining privately operated rail franchises to the public sector as their contracts end, along with developing a response to the *Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail* and its Great British Railways proposition.

Some industry lobby groups live in hope that Labour will abandon its public ownership pledge for rail operations as the General Election approaches - just as it did in the weeks before Tony Blair's 1997 victory, and as it already has for other privatised utilities this time around.

Others pray that Labour's own desire for a single guiding mind for Britain's railways will lead the Party to adopt the GBR proposal in its entirety, ensuring longevity for the GBR Transition Team and

the domination of Network Rail's personnel and culture within it.

All of these lobbyists will have been disappointed by the reappointment of Louise Haigh MP as Shadow Transport Secretary, and her strong reiteration of Labour's rail policies (clearly with the backing of Sir Keir and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves) in her speech to the Party's October Conference.

Indeed, Louise Haigh's pledge that as Transport Secretary she will be the 'passenger in chief' may signal a continuation of much more direct control over the railways from the DfT high command (as embodied in the last Labour Government's 2005 legislation) than some industry leaders would have wished to see.

For the aspiring alternative government, there is a serious strategic campaigning question as to how relevant to voters the railways are when compared with previous General Elections.

In 1997, Tony Blair's New Labour inherited heartland seats in the North of England, the Midlands, Scotland and Wales while needing to win constituencies in London and the South, where commuting into the capital by rail was a way of life.

As 2024 approaches, Labour already dominates London's political landscape and is seeking to recover the so-called 'Red Wall' constituencies in the Midlands and the North that were lost to Boris Johnson in 2019.

In the medium-sized cities and towns which proliferate in these areas, the bus can be a far more significant means of commuting than the train. Hence, we have heard much more from Labour's leaders about the Party's plans for regulation of buses, and legislating to allow for the establishment of municipal operators, than the potential of local rail.

Staying off the subject of rail also avoids the need to make spending commitments on just what a Starmer government would do about restoration of the HS2 programme and other costly investment schemes, while having to dodge commenting on the industry's long-lasting trades union disputes (with which the Conservatives try to associate Labour in the public mind).

Yet Labour will not, in my opinion, be able to stay silent on rail. This is precisely because of the announcements made by the Prime Minister during the summer and autumn, of which the cancellation of HS2 north of Birmingham was just one.

Latching onto his party's surprise holding of Uxbridge and South Ruislip in the parliamentary by-election held on July 20, and with resistance to the Mayor of London's proposed extension of the Ultra Low Emission Zone seen as central to this success, Rishi Sunak decided to weaponise transport as a campaigning issue by diluting commitments to net zero in road transport, declaring an end to the so-called war on the motorist and publishing his own 'plan for drivers'. It begins with the phrase: "There's nothing wrong with driving."

Although Labour has made pledges around the margins on improved conditions for motorists on petrol prices and insurance, it cannot simply follow the Conservatives down the path determined by the Prime Minister without losing its environmental credibility.

Also, even in a post-COVID Britain, there are still plenty of people in the South and elsewhere using the train to commute and for business travel, as well as increasingly large numbers of leisure and tourism customers.

Therefore, Labour will have to develop and vigorously campaign on a set of proposals for public transport and active travel, with the tonnage capacity of rail to move large numbers of people and tonnages of goods more sustainably at its heart.

Far from dropping down the political agenda, the next General Election may be the one at long last where policies on transport overall - and rail, in particular - move the dial of voting. ■

■ Mark Walker has worked in the rail industry since 1977 and is currently the chief executive at public affairs company Cogitamus.



# Wanted: clarity on the future of our railways

Are ministers still committed to the railways? **PETER PLISNER** has been assessing recent events and finding out what scope there is for devolved regional government to fill the policy void

There were plenty of rumours swirling around the Conservative Party conference about HS2.

In the days leading up to the event, and indeed during it, officials made it clear that no final decision had been made. But there were no surprises when Prime Minister Rishi Sunak finally announced his plans to scrap the northern leg of HS2 to Manchester during his speech on October 4.

Despite the denials, many now find it strange that, along with the announcement on HS2's future, came a 40-page document entitled Network North.

Its publication was accompanied by a promotional video posted on social media in which the Prime Minister promised to transform roads, rail and buses. The video made it clear that every single penny saved by scrapping HS2 north of Birmingham would be reinvested into transport projects across the North and the Midlands.

Bizarrely, the document contained a variety of schemes that weren't actually in those regions, such as improvements to the A259 from Bognor Regis to Littlehampton on the South coast and another scheme on the A2 in Kent.

In addition to the issues with the geography, readers would be forgiven for thinking that there has been a shift in emphasis, away from rail and towards road transport instead.

The Network North document did commit to funding things such as the Midlands Rail Hub and parts of the Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme, and a clutch of stations and electrification schemes, but there were also scores of road projects including bypasses and other improvements.

The Labour Party's analysis of Sunak's promises found that around 85% had already been previously promised or committed to during the Conservatives' 13-year reign. There were also several corrections made to the document in the hours and days that followed, suggesting that it had been hastily put together. Indeed, a commitment to reopen the Leamside Line in County Durham, closed in 1964, mysteriously disappeared from the Network North prospectus the day after the Prime Minister's speech.



*"We welcome the renewed commitment to Great British Railways as a guiding mind and arm's-length body, but it is not clear why this is a draft Rail Reform Bill rather than a commitment to legislate."*

*Norman Baker, Director of External Affairs, Campaign for Better Transport*

Then-Transport Minister Richard Holden is reported to have told the local democracy reporting service that the Government was now only "committed to looking into it".

There have also been rumours that early drafts of the Network North document were almost entirely made up of road schemes, and other public transport offerings were only added later in the review process.

That's led to one seasoned transport observer to accuse the Prime Minister of being "pathologically anti-rail". Another suggested that the Government had effectively "thrown the railways under a bus".

It's not just recent events that are making people feel like the railways are not seen as a priority anymore. We have had the *William-Shapps* review, which should have led to the creation of Great British Railways. Although the recent King's Speech promoted a draft version of the Rail Reform Bill, many were still left disappointed.

Norman Baker, from the Campaign for Better Transport, says: "We welcome the renewed commitment to Great British Railways as a guiding mind and arm's-length body, but it is not clear why this is a draft Rail Reform Bill rather than a commitment to legislate, given this has already been subject to extensive discussion and is largely non-controversial across all the political parties."

On the scrapping of HS2 to Manchester, former Transport Secretary Lord Patrick McLoughlin says: "I deeply regret the stopping of HS2 where it is. I think that is wrong. But I do accept things related to how much it is costing should be looked at."

And he cites the recently opened Elizabeth line in London as a good example of where investment in infrastructure can help economic growth. But he also points to the billions of pounds that the project overran before it finally carried its first passengers.

On the perceived U-turn by ministers on rail spending, he's quick to defend the Government, instead suggesting that it's spent billions keeping trains moving during the COVID pandemic, when patronage levels fell drastically and still haven't yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

He says: "I occasionally travelled by train during that period, and you were literally on empty trains. Yet the Government carried on running them and put lots of money into the railways."

But has that ultimately led to less money being invested?

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, says: "What we have seen in the post-pandemic period is an attempt to put the railways into a managed decline with unacceptable cuts to services."

It's also interesting to note that despite its importance, when it was published in 2022, the *Integrated Rail Plan* (IRP), which mapped out rail improvements in the Midlands and North, only gets one mention in the Network North prospectus - and that's in one of the footnotes.

Some feel that it all adds up to a not-so-well-planned face-saving exercise and one which has been designed to win votes at the next election at the expense of well-thought-out plans to not ►

► only improve the railways, but also help the UK meet its climate change targets by encouraging more rail travel.

There are also real concerns that current policy, including scrapping the HS2 northern legs, could result in more congestion on the roads as more cars and HGVs take to the motorway network. The car once again seems to be king.

Former Labour Shadow Transport Minister Lord Peter Snape says: "It's blatant populism, isn't it? They've tried everything else. So, this mythical war on the car. It's some war when petrol tax has been frozen for 14 years at a cost of about £85 billion. But rail fares have gone up by 28% and bus fares about the same amount. And rail fares are subject to an RPI plus increase every single year. It's some war on the motorist, isn't it? Not many casualties is all you can say to that!"

So, the big question is, what happens next and how will rail fair in the planning and funding stakes going forward?

Could there be a bigger role for the devolved nations and regions around the UK?

That's certainly something favoured by the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) in its recently published Second National Infrastructure Assessment. It stated that more needs to be done to address significant deficiencies in the UK's economic infrastructure and ensure it can meet the challenges ahead. It's recognised that good transport infrastructure is vital for unlocking economic growth.

One of its recommendations stated: "Government needs to move faster in devolving powers and funding for local transport to local authorities. By the next Spending Review, government should have agreed single multi-year financial settlements for existing mayoral combined authorities to invest in local priorities, and then continue to roll these out to new mayoral combined authorities."

It suggested that all county councils and unitary authorities that remain responsible for strategic transport planning should be provided with devolved five-year transport budgets by the end of 2025, sufficient to cover maintenance, renewals and small-to-medium enhancements.

"Government should ensure that £8bn a year is available for devolved transport budgets for local authorities outside London, consisting of a combination of central government grants and locally raised funds."

The report from NIC has been welcomed by the Urban Transport Group, which lobbies on behalf of city regions across the UK.

Director Jason Prince says: "If we really want to harness the economic value our city regions offer, it is important that they get the clarity and certainty to deliver. Clarity provides the ability to plan, and certainty provides the confidence to invest."

"City regions are already at the forefront of providing public transport in their local areas, and through devolution, are the ones who should make the decisions that deliver the best for their local communities."

Prince was also highly critical of the decision to scrap the northern leg of HS2 to Manchester.

"Many of our member city regions have designed local transport schemes around the promise of larger infrastructure projects, whether HS2 or otherwise. Our members need the confidence that once schemes are announced, they are delivered."

"The same logic applies to the raft of transport projects unveiled by the Prime Minister. Fundamentally, transport is about more than



**Devolution of transport assets has helped Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham deliver the Bee Network. ALAMY.**

simply moving people from A to B. It is about creating economic growth and thriving communities for people to live and work in. This can only happen through certainty of long-term investment."

Although Wales and Scotland already have legally devolved powers over the operation, planning and investment in the railways, the same hasn't happened in the devolved regions.

However, some progress in that direction has been made. One announcement that was lost in the headlines surrounding the scrapping of HS2 was confirmation of several new City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements (CRSTS). Transport for West Midlands welcomed a package worth over £1bn to invest into the region's transport infrastructure.

Separately, there was also a commitment to fund the £1.7bn Midlands Rail Hub project. It's been developed to improve capacity for new services and improved journey times on lines linking Birmingham and a range of key locations, including Bristol, Cardiff, Leicester and Nuneaton.

A key feature is the construction of new links, known as the Bordesley Chords, to open up more platforms at Moor Street station. It should help to unlock further capacity through the busy New Street station.

West Midlands Mayor Andy Street says: "The near £3bn worth of transport investment we have secured is really significant and will help to turbocharge our plans to improve public transport in the region and better connect our communities."

It's welcomed devolved funding for future projects, but when it comes to having a say in rail services running now, the West Midlands seems to differ slightly from Greater Manchester.

There, under the old, franchised rail network, it was a co-signatory of the Northern franchise. Under the new National Rail Contracts, that arrangement is continuing through the Rail North Partnership,



*"I deeply regret the stopping of HS2 where it is. I think that is wrong. But I do accept things related to how much it is costing should be looked at."*

**Lord Patrick McLoughlin, former Transport Secretary**



an arm of Transport for the North, which helps to manage both the Northern and TransPennine contracts.

Transport for the North Chief Executive Martin Tugwell says: "We continue to jointly, with the DfT, oversee their implementation. That means we are involved in the business planning process every year for those contracts. It gives us a voice and the ability to go into what it is we need to see prioritised in a way that perhaps we wouldn't otherwise."

Meanwhile, Malcolm Holmes, the former executive director of the West Midlands Rail Executive, now general manager of the Great Central Railway, says: "The underlying principles of rail devolution are that regional areas can self-determine how rail supports local transport needs.

"In city regions, such as the West Midlands and Greater Manchester, rail is one part of an integrated transport system that includes light rail, buses and sustainable modes such as walking and cycling. To consider different modes in isolation (and rail centrally by Westminster) misses the opportunity to create a transport system that is truly integrated."

Holmes maintains that additional powers need to be appropriate for the area concerned: "It's horses for courses. The West Midlands, where much of my devolution experience was gained, lends itself neatly to deep devolution, where regional political governance has been created to match that of the rail network. In this instance, power for letting contracts for local rail services seems to me to be a no-brainer, especially given the success of London Overground and Merseyrail."

In Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham is another big supporter of having more powers over the railways.

He says: "The greater devolution of stations into our regional areas would mean greater control of these key transport assets at the heart of our places and would bring direct benefits to the people using them.

"We have the knowledge of our areas and the problems that



*"We have the knowledge of our areas and the problems that blight the railways, so the more control we can have over them, the more we can do to improve performance."*

*Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester*

blight the railways, so the more control we can have over them, the more we can do to improve performance.

"The devolution of the rail service to the local people it serves is a must to ensure we can deliver our Bee Network ambitions of a fully integrated public transport system that unlocks growth and opportunities for all."

Meanwhile, in the West Midlands, Mayor Andy Street disagrees with the premise that the Government has turned its back on the railways: "I've been utterly consistent in saying that HS2 should be built in full. I regret the fact that it is not."

But he maintains that turning its back on HS2 is different to a commitment to rail overall: "It is telling that the biggest use of concession money, as it might be called here, is for Midlands Rail Hub (MRH). It's a scheme that will be really important. Unlike some optimistic Network North schemes, this is real. This scheme will happen and will deliver real benefits to rail users across the West Midlands."

Although mentioned in the *Integrated Rail Plan* back in 2021, the Government hadn't committed to funding it in full at that point. That was until Andy Street's intervention at the Conservative Party conference. Street adds that through its investment in MRH in the West Midlands, at least, there's no U-turn on rail funding. Street also makes it clear that, despite recent announcements, what he terms as "intra-city" routes, those within a city region, are still being funded by the Government.

But he adds: "The intra-city improvements in rail do not substitute for the (long distance) inter-city improvements. You actually need both, but with regards the intra-city rail network, categorically they are not turning their back on it."

And when asked what additional powers he might like, to help improve the rail network further within the West Midlands, Street highlighted three main areas: "If you look at the devolution deal, there was a lot in there about rail and its basically 'dual key' responsibility, so it's building on everything that the West Midlands Rail Executive has done and we have to follow through on all of that, including timetable and fares.

"All of that was agreed with us. They are not at the point where they are going to hand it all over to us."

Although the West Midlands Rail Executive is having talks with the Great British Railway transition team and collaboration is already taking place on several levels, Street also wants a role in delivery of projects like the Midlands Rail Hub.

He says: "I want to be fully in the room where that's being planned and controlled. I'd actually like to chair the delivery body for that."

The third area that Street wants to influence is the long-term planning of the railway. Lord McLoughlin suggests that it's all about accountability and getting it right in each area, and that's where regional strategic transport authorities can play a role.

"They can be there to say it's fine, but actually this Manchester route, for instance, has also got to serve Sheffield or areas into Cheshire that are outside the Manchester directly elected area. You've got to get the accountability right," he says.

He is still very much of the view that a guiding mind for the railway is still an important function. And not surprisingly, Richard Bowker, the former head of the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), has similar views.

"There needs to be some overarching leadership in terms of ►



*“The near £3bn worth of transport investment we have secured is really significant and will help to turbocharge our plans to improve public transport in the region and better connect our communities.”*

*Andy Street, Mayor of West Midlands*

► thinking about the framework, and then there's got to be some actual empowerment within that for people to get on and do things. It's easy to say, but a little harder to do in practice,” he says.

“It's not beyond the wit of man because we've been there (with the SRA) and there is probably a nice balance to find. But whatever you call it, it needs something like that.

“With great respect to the DfT, they are good at policy, but not good at planning and doing. So, set the policy and then instruct and empower whoever it is that has all the professional people in it to do what needs to be done within that policy framework. That's kind of what we had with the SRA and if we don't have that again, I don't see how this gets fixed.”

There are clearly still issues with devolving too much power and funding to one area. To start with, not all rail corridors start and finish in one particular region.

Take the West Coast Main Line. It passes through almost every nation and region apart from Wales, the South West and the North East.

“You can devolve certain aspects of railway transport planning to the regions, but will never get over the fact that it is a fully integrated network,” says Richard Bowker.

“The West Coast Main Line couldn't be a better example. The

route couldn't be more interwoven. You cannot say to someone like Andy Street, you've got responsibility for all the railways in the West Midlands and it not have an impact on what you're running up and down on the West Coast Main Line.”

However, some would make the point that that's precisely what's been done in London by TfL. It now runs the Overground network, formally part of the conventional rail network. TfL now has transport planning powers for a network that is interwoven with other railways, including the busy main line routes into and out of London.

Bowker makes the point that TfL has been running the trains for several years and that there were established arrangements in place. “It's always been done a bit that way, but now they effectively have their name on the doors. I just think when you start getting into places like Birmingham and Manchester it's so interwoven, and the challenges are so great. In both those regions, you've got massive capacity issues, and you can't have a plan to fix that, that isn't multi-stakeholder.”

Bowker also maintains that it's logical, given the amount of money that's required to do a job properly, that there should be a joined-up approach with national and regional authorities involved.

“Absolutely, regional authorities should have more say in what goes on in their area. But you can't just say it's your problem now, because it will not work like that.”

On funding, some point to the possibility of having revenue-raising powers by raising money locally through a special transport tax on employers. It's something that's been done in France for many years. In the UK, Nottingham has a Workplace Parking Levy, with money being hypothecated into transport schemes such as new tramlines and rail station improvements.

But are even more powers for regional bodies a sledgehammer to crack a nut?

Some are keen to highlight the power of working together. In the West Midlands, the Grand Rail Collaboration (GCR), set up by the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE), seems to be working well. It's a group that includes all train operators in the region, as



well as other bodies such as Transport Focus and Network Rail. Its priorities include the provision of a safe regional rail network and a need to assess what happens in the future, along with making sure that timetables meet customer needs.

Malcolm Holmes says: "Collaboration, in my experience, works best when everyone has something to gain. So, the starting point has to be an alignment of goals/outcomes, where support for delivery needs input from more than one organisation."

But Holmes suggests that egos need to be left at home. When that happens, relationships develop well and that can open the door to resources that can help to achieve more: "The GCR in the West Midlands made the delivery of rail outputs for the Commonwealth Games in the summer of 2022 much easier to achieve, as the relationships already existed, and there is much more potential for similar work in this way, especially in a region as complicated for rail as the West Midlands."

And a similar type of collaborative approach worked in the Manchester region after the introduction of the infamous May 2018 timetable. There, bodies including Transport for the North joined the Manchester Recovery Task Force, which helped to sort out the problems by getting everyone into the same room.

Martin Tugwell says: "We had ourselves, TfGM, Network Rail and the operators all working together recognising that we had a problem, looking at the evidence, working together with the system operators, ourselves with the public sector and working through what was possible within the budget available. We've now got to a point where we've got a commitment to further investment to be made in the Manchester area now."

Working together to sort out a timetable issue has helped to identify crucial investment too.

"We've got to invest even more in the North, so the investment that we've got through Manchester to date is probably just a part of what we would need for the longer-term," says Tugwell.

"The point I'm making is that you've got an example of collaborative working between the public sector and the railway to address the problem and identify what needs to be done and then



*"To consider different modes in isolation (and rail centrally by Westminster) misses the opportunity to create a transport system that is truly integrated."*

*Malcolm Holmes, former Executive Director, West Midlands Rail Executive*

get remedies into delivery. I think there's a model there that we can perhaps build upon with experience to show how you could move things forward faster, using the systems and structures that are already in place."

And according to Andy Burnham, things are happening already. He says: "Steve Rotheram [Metro Mayor of the Liverpool City Region] and I both recently had our own visits from the Rail Minister [Huw Merriman] to talk about how we bring forward a new railway for Liverpool to Manchester following the Network North announcement. The Minister and DfT have now offered to work together with us to shape how that might look, which is a far more positive way to proceed."

Burnham also suggests that there is now a willingness to work with the northwest around a place-based regeneration approach that the right railway could bring to Liverpool, Warrington, Manchester Airport and Manchester Piccadilly.

"It signalled a very different way of working that we had with HS2, which was often a one-way conversation, to a chance now as a northwest region to bring forward a modern railway for a 21st century led by the two city regions working with Cheshire and Lancashire, which is an exciting opportunity."

Although the Government is continuing to invest in the railways, most would admit that it's not enough, particularly after the scrapping of the HS2 northern legs. Many suggest the new policy is about the Treasury wanting to pull in as much revenue from the farebox, but not invest in the railways for long-term growth. And for some, the continuing industrial disputes also help to prove that point.

Lord Snape says: "The Government controls the bulk of the time at Westminster and, of course, they've lost interest in the railways. It suits them, in fact. And that's why they've not done anything about the ASLEF and RMT strikes. They just won't meet the unions. We still haven't seen any legislation go through Parliament to bring forward Great British Railways either."

And Lord Snape maintains that Government can't plead lack of Parliamentary time for their failure to bring forward legislation. He said: "A few weeks ago, the Commons rose on a weekday at 1420 due to the lack of Government business."

And on devolving more powers to the nations and regions, Richard Bowker adds: "What you don't need is what we have today, which is civil service direct control. Everything is micro-managed by people who have a risk-avoidance mindset, and you have a disaggregate between cost and revenue. All the revenue goes to the Treasury, all the costs go to the Department for Transport, and nobody thinks about it as a business."

Lord McLoughlin concludes: "I very much hope the government continues to invest in the railways. If we are going to be serious about decarbonisation, although electric cars are wonderful, longer journeys need to be made more and more by train."

But there are concerns that devolved government will struggle when it comes to long-distance intercity and freight traffic. And there will still be competition from air travel and motorways.

This sort of travel needs to be overseen in the context of a national UK objective and strategy. While there is definitely a place for regional involvement in the railways, either through more devolution or more formal collaboration, there's still a need for Great British Railways or another form of guiding mind to oversee the railways. ■



More investment is called for in the North. On April 23 2021, Northern 331010 stands at Manchester Piccadilly. SEAN GALLAGHER.

**Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves at the party conference in October. ALAMY.**



# Labour, railways, and the General Election

While it's unlikely to be a defining election issue, Labour's approach on transport - and its lack of clarity over key issues - is still of huge concern to the railway industry. **CONRAD LANDIN** looks for answers

**T**here are few certainties in present-day British politics, but one thing is non-negotiable: before the end of next year - a General Election will have been called. Most likely to take place in the autumn, polling currently indicates a comfortable Labour majority after more than 13 years of Conservative government.

That's certainly the basis on which many in the rail industry are working, opening up channels of communication with the lead opposition party on a level not seen since the run-up to the election of Tony Blair in 1997.

Labour's headline policy on rail, reiterated at this year's party conference in Liverpool, is to end the franchising system and reinstate public operation on a rolling basis, as each contract expires.

However, dig deeper than that and the picture becomes cloudier. Former Shadow Transport Secretary Andy McDonald, who held the role under Jeremy Corbyn, published the *GB Rail* Green Paper shortly before leaving the job in 2020, but enquiries as to how much of this vision still stands have been met with a mixture of contradictory messages and plain evasion. Although the railways have rarely been a deciding factor in elections, they appear to have slipped lower than ever before in terms of political priorities.

And although ownership matters, many in the industry are equally (if not more) concerned with attitude.

Rishi Sunak's record as both Chancellor and Prime Minister suggests a particular hostility to the railways. And despite successive smoke signals over rail reform, the King's Speech all but confirmed there will be no legislative change this side of a General Election.

But Labour has struggled to get beyond structural questions to offer any kind of vision. So, what attitude will Labour take to a sector that appears to be waiting on its election in order to move forward?

Anyone hoping for a vision to emanate from the party's structural change is likely to be left disappointed. McDonald's *GB Rail* report set out the minutiae of how vertical integration and public ownership would work in the 21st century railway, including provisions for rolling stock ownership, freight and open access.

Speaking to *RailReview* last year, then-Shadow Rail Minister Tan

Dhesi confirmed that certain aspects had been dropped: track and train would no longer be under a single company; a public freight company was no longer a priority; nor was public rolling stock procurement.

Louise Haigh, who succeeded McDonald as Shadow Transport Secretary, has regularly spoken of bringing rail "back into public ownership", and her team has indicated that the majority of GB Rail will stand. She has also repeatedly referred to delivering "HS2 in full" as well as "Northern Powerhouse Rail".

But others on Labour's front bench have not consistently echoed these positions.

Last year, Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves told the BBC's *Today* programme that the public ownership of energy, water and rail "just doesn't stack up against our fiscal rules".

The party swiftly clarified that Reeves had not intended to lump rail in with the other utilities, all of which party leader Sir Keir Starmer had once promised to nationalise before dropping the commitment.

Then, at this year's Labour Party Conference, the Shadow Chief Treasury Secretary Darren Jones told a fringe meeting that "the state will compete for renewal" upon the expiration of franchises under Labour. This suggested a reversion to the party's previous policy (under Ed Miliband's leadership) of the government bidding against private operators. However, when this was reported by *Private Eye*, Haigh swiftly clarified that renationalisation would be automatic.

Nor is that vision likely to stem from an investment strategy. Following the decision in October to scrap the Birmingham-Crewe leg of HS2, the party's national campaign co-ordinator Pat McFadden refused to commit Labour to reversing the decision. Starmer said he would not "stand here and commit to reversing that decision, [the Conservatives have] taken a wrecking ball to it".

Asked by *RailReview's* sister publication *RAIL* whether Haigh was being undermined by her shadow cabinet colleagues, Labour's Shadow Minister for Nature and Rural Affairs Toby Perkins said it was a "very unfair question" and that the party line had shifted because "the circumstances have changed very dramatically".

On HS2, the party's line appears to have been guided by the fiscal prudence of Shadow Chancellor Reeves.

"Labour doesn't want to put clear red water between its policies and the Conservatives' policies," a transport industry consultant told *RailReview*.

"They're so scared of the Conservatives saying 'you are going to spend the £36 billion that we've just saved on projects that don't help the majority'."

At its conference in October, North of Tyne Mayor Jamie Driscoll called for Labour (which he quit after being blocked from standing for the expanded North East mayoralty) to publish a "draft bill" setting out how the party could "force you to sell [sold-off land] at the same price we bought it originally for HS2".



*"We've got to be intergenerational in our vision. We can't go from parliament to parliament anymore - you've got to look ten, 20, 30 years in advance."*

*Mick Whelan, General Secretary, ASLEF*

► Railway Industry Association Chief Executive Darren Caplan suggested the party “be bold” and “just commit to taking HS2 forward”.

As both general secretary of drivers’ union ASLEF and a member of Labour’s National Executive Committee, Mick Whelan will have a front row seat as the party’s manifesto is formed. His union has also been behind a campaign called Invest in Rail, which has sought to make the sector a priority for government spending. Is he frustrated with the party’s lack of clarity over HS2?

Whelan believes this environmental commitment will keep Labour’s plans for rail on track. He is more reticent about setting out a detailed plan for the route in opposition.

“We’ve seen the level of spiteful vandalism they’re willing to undergo to stop people doing HS2. Why would you tell them all the things that you’re going to do so they can do other things to frustrate your wishes and your ambitions?”

However, he sees the danger of a lack of clarity, too: “There is a bit of a reserved nature around the party in terms of not wanting to tell people what our offer is, so there’s not a head of steam built up against it before the next election.

“I don’t think that worked for Ed Miliband in 2015, and there’s a real risk when you don’t tell people what you’re doing that you don’t get what you want. So, I understand what you’re saying, but I also understand the reticence of not allowing other people to make your ambitions unworkable, particularly in an industry like the railways.”

He certainly doesn’t believe Sunak values the railways, but does he think Starmer does? “Well, he uses them. I think he does. I think talking to the devolved mayors and the shadow transport team, they do. And you have to remember that the one key word in all the proposals is green.”

Whelan believes this environmental vision will necessitate investment in the railways. But following our interview, briefings emerge that Labour is unlikely to reach its target of £28bn a year in green investment, even by the end of the next parliament.

The report in the *Daily Telegraph* was denied by Labour, but Starmer’s abandonment of previous pledges has undermined confidence in his pronouncements on rail.

Another question which could shape Labour’s approach is whether Haigh would remain in the transport brief after an election victory. One party source said the odds were stacked against her, while another suggested that the extent of public ownership could be significantly watered down if she was removed from post.

Asked if he is confident that she will remain, Whelan says: “I’m very happy with her as Transport Secretary. It’s not in my gift to give her the job full-time, but if it was, yeah.

“She has stood by the policy of electrification, renationalisation, HS2 in full, has continued to articulate it. She has a group of people working with her to [determine] how we make that proposal fit for the 2010s and the 2020s. The basic work of how to renationalise was already done by the party, but it needs updating... Now, they’re not spending that money and taking that opportunity not to try and drive it forward, so yeah, I’m hopeful.”

Whelan is referring to a consultation being carried out on Haigh’s behalf by Lodestone Communications. Seeking responses from

**Merseyrail 777009 pauses at Kirkdale with a Liverpool Central-bound service. The delivery of public transport on Merseyside is championed by unions and campaigners who have traditionally called for public ownership. PAUL BIGLAND.**



stakeholders, the agency said it was “currently looking at how we will bring the railways back into public ownership, what the benefits and challenges might be and how we can structure the governance of the railways in order to best serve the passenger interest”.

This would suggest that the party could make significant alterations to the proposed structure set out in GB Rail. Of course, if progress is made before the election towards establishing Great British Railways, incorporating parts of that structure into Labour’s vision will be an attractive prospect, compared with starting from scratch.

Great British Railways Transition Team Chairman Lord Hendy has indicated that the body will be set up in a way that makes it adaptable to changes of government, able to accommodate either a largely private sector railway or a railway that is increasingly publicly owned.

He believes it is more important that railway finances are brought together as a single profit-and-loss account, instead of the Treasury handling revenue and the DfT handling expenditure.

But industry seems to be growing in confidence over the potential for continued private sector involvement under Labour. At the 2022 Labour Party Conference, fringe events sponsored by rail industry bodies were dominated by questions over the future of open access. This year, there was a different message to Labour.

“We do need to harness train operators, including private sector operators, within that more coherent public control,” Rail Partners



*“Train operators bring a downward focus on cost, and an upward focus on revenue. They have the commercial expertise that will really drive revenue growth, which will really help the railway with the finances.”*

*Andy Bagnall, Chief Executive Officer, Rail Partners*



saying 'we must take full control of these services'. They've said that we want to direct services and may have them provided by the private sector," says the industry consultant.

"It's closer to the TfL model, but the precise model they come up with may depend on the strength of the unions in writing the manifesto. They will be after a stronger, fully publicly owned brand."

However, Whelan takes a rather more pragmatic approach than the consultant anticipates.

"I'm not totally against there being outsiders running the railway if it's done for a public good," he says.

"I'm not totally against the Elizabeth line - MTR have done what's on the tin. MTR delivered the trains, they've delivered the training, they delivered the recruitment, they delivered the depot, they worked in partnership with us for the past seven years, and we were ready for the original opening date of the Elizabeth line on the operational side."

Once Lodestone reports back to Haigh, it seems unlikely that Labour will publish a GB Rail Mark 2 - the current party leadership seems determined, on most counts, to keep its cards close to its chest until the election campaign begins. The frustration currently felt by much of the industry about Labour's lack of clarity is unlikely to abate.

A continued role for the private sector - at least in engineering and supply chain functions - was envisioned in GB Rail, and that role is only likely to be expanded in any updated plan.

"There are always going to be some roles, some expertise that we don't have in the industry," says Whelan.

"Even under British Rail, they brought in various people at different times to do specialist things; to grow the railway or change the systems or adapt signalling, or do things that you just don't do as part of the day-to-day running. The day-to-day running should be under a national body and a national railway."

Public ownership and operation of rail continues to garner significant support in opinion polls, but despite significant citizen engagement with the issues facing the railway - thanks to strike disruption and the now-withdrawn ticket office closures plan - it is likely that the election will be dominated by questions such as the economy and migration.

Then again, both industry figures and union leaders would rather see long-term planning for the railways rather than repeated structural shake-ups.

"We've got to be intergenerational in our vision," says Whelan.

"We can't go from parliament to parliament anymore - you've got to look ten, 20, 30 years in advance."

Bagnall speaks of "trebling freight by 2050" in order to take 20 million HGVs off the road.

The persistent failure of the railways to become a defining election issue could be a blessing in disguise, but that would still require a government to take the initiative, and turn around a toxic cocktail of political deprioritisation, Whitehall micro-management and Treasury restraint. Whether Labour is up to this task remains to be seen. ■

Chief Executive Officer Andy Bagnall told one fringe meeting.

"And train operators bring a downward focus on cost, and an upward focus on revenue. They have the commercial expertise that will really drive revenue growth, which will really help the railway with the finances."

Bagnall cited a recent research paper produced by Rail Partners, *Track to Growth*. It includes research that makes the case that "a public-private partnership and the commercial incentives placed on operators up until the pandemic led to a vibrant and growing railway".

However, more persuasive to a Labour audience was Bagnall's appeal to the record of "very successful Labour mayors, like Sadiq Khan in London, Steve Rotherham in Liverpool and Andy Burnham".

All have embraced a franchised or contracted model for the delivery of public transport, from the Elizabeth line to Merseyrail to Transport for Greater Manchester's Bee Network of franchised bus services.

In both Merseyside and Greater Manchester, both projects have been championed by unions and transport campaigners who would traditionally call for public ownership, because they see franchising under municipal regulation as a stepping stone towards full public ownership. Ironically, the success of these schemes could now be deployed to defang Labour's commitment to full public operation of the railways.

"At no point have you had Andy Burnham or Steve Rotherham

# PR23: keeping on track during uncertain times



On October 31 2023, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) published the final determination for the next Control Period (CP7, 2024-29).

This marks an important milestone for how we, as the independent regulator, will hold Network Rail to account for delivering value, performance and efficiency for passengers, freight users and taxpayers over the next five years.

Through PR23, we have been dealing with the unique and challenging circumstances of recent years. It is not every Periodic Review that is conducted with inflation at a 40-year high, during industrial action and rail reform, and with a sector recovering from the shift in passenger demand and revenue reduction following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Against this backdrop of change and uncertainty, the value of a stable five-year funding and regulatory settlement has never been more important.

### Evolving and adapting to change

Despite the challenges that have emerged during recent years, our regulatory framework has adapted well during the current Control Period (CP6). This means we have not needed to fundamentally overhaul the framework.

Nevertheless, adaptation and evolution has been necessary in light of anticipated rail reform, challenges with forecasting train performance, and uncertainty created by inflation volatility and climate change.

To make sure we get this evolution right, we have held discussions and consulted with the industry, funders and other stakeholders for more than two years to help understand their priorities, pressures and expectations for CP7.

I very much welcome the positive and frank engagement we have had with all who have contributed to PR23 - through consultation responses, workshops and other discussions.

This has helped us to develop robust decisions, surface the important trade-offs, and ultimately come to a balanced set of

decisions that will deliver for current and future users of the network.

### Five-year funding and holding Network Rail to account

Network Rail is in a privileged position by having a committed and stable five-year horizon for planning and funding.

Between 2024-29, Network Rail will have £43.1 billion (in 2023-24 prices) for the operation, maintenance, renewal and support functions for the railway in Great Britain. Enhancements to the rail network are funded outside the Periodic Review.

Our focus since the start of PR23 has been on four objectives: safety, performance, asset sustainability, and efficiency. Ultimately, we want to make sure Network Rail is a customer-focused company that delivers for passengers and freight across England & Wales and Scotland.

In our draft determination earlier this year, we found that while Network Rail's plans largely delivered against our objectives, as well as the UK and Scottish Governments' priorities, a greater focus was needed on train performance and renewing core assets.

It is evident to any passenger or freight customer that better train performance is needed, and that core assets such as track, structures and earthworks need to be resilient - especially with the challenges presented by climate change. We challenged Network Rail to deliver more for current and future customers in these areas.

Through PR23 we also set the charges paid by train operators to use Network Rail's track and stations, as well as over the next five years.

Furthermore, we specified the financial incentives for Network Rail and train operators to limit the disruption they cause - and therefore to improve network performance.

### Performance, performance, performance

Train performance for passengers and freight has been a source of significant discussion with stakeholders. We have listened to all sides and, taking account of the latest evidence, set stretching yet realistic performance targets.

This includes setting targets which require Network Rail to work effectively with operators to ensure that cancellations are reduced, and that punctuality is maintained, even as passenger numbers increase.

Our final determination recognises that currently the planning and budgeting cycles for Network Rail and publicly contracted train operators are not aligned, which makes it challenging to set whole-industry performance targets over a five-year period.

Whole-industry performance is also affected by changes in passenger demand following the pandemic.

In response, we have adapted our approach for CP7, and we will reset passenger performance targets for England & Wales partway through the Control Period.

However, recognising the importance of regulatory stability for freight operators, this mid-Control Period reset will only apply to passenger performance and not to freight train performance measures.

Another part of our focus on customer

*“Our final determination recognises that currently the planning and budgeting cycles for Network Rail and publicly contracted train operators are not aligned, which makes it challenging to set whole-industry performance targets over a five-year period.”*

## PR23 final determination

In response to ORR's review, Network Rail will be increasing spend on core railway infrastructure by approximately £600 million compared to initial plans. This will bolster asset sustainability, safety and performance.

Network Rail needs to work with operators to ensure cancellations are reduced and punctuality is maintained across Great Britain, even as passenger numbers increase.

Network Rail needs to work with the rail industry to deliver the conditions for freight growth of 7.5% in England and Wales and 8.7% for Scotland.

Network Rail needs to build on the success of recent efficiency initiatives. Our targets set efficiencies of at least £3.2bn in England and Wales and £0.4bn in Scotland.

We require Network Rail to deliver environmental improvements, reducing carbon emissions by more than 20% and improving biodiversity.



outcomes centres on freight growth. In PR23 we set freight growth targets across Great Britain for the first time, and we have supported Network Rail's plans to upgrade its structures to better support freight.

This includes £72 million worth of investment in high-priority structures for heavy axle weight trains. We now call on Network Rail to work with freight operators and ensure that its delivery plan supports freight growth.

### Asset sustainability and efficiency

One of the biggest questions I have had is whether there is sufficient funding for the work needed to sustain the rail infrastructure in the next five years.

It is a fact that the funding available has to reflect wider fiscal conditions and requires Network Rail to prioritise its expenditure. Nevertheless, at £43.1bn, the available funding is substantial and provides a stable platform for planning and delivery over the next five years - even if inflation has somewhat reduced the real value of this expenditure (by approximately 1% compared with CP6).

One important way of ensuring that

During CP7, Network Rail will conduct fewer renewals but will undertake more refurbishment, life-extending repairs, and maintenance in comparison with CP6. Having scrutinised and challenged Network Rail's plans in this area, we consider it now has a suitable framework to understand and manage the change in risk from carrying out fewer renewals and a move to greater maintenance of existing assets.

In response to our draft determination, Network Rail also committed to redirect expenditure towards renewals of core assets such as track, structures, and earthworks by approximately £600m.

Our final determination welcomes this additional expenditure, which will support asset sustainability and help deliver the better safety and train performance outcomes that we want to see.

Finally, like most companies, Network Rail needs appropriate provisions in place to efficiently manage the financial risks it faces - such as inflation, cost shocks and adverse events, such as flood damage.

Our final determination sets risk funding allowances at £1.5bn for England & Wales and £225m for Scotland, as well as new

available funding meets the needs of current and future customers on the network is through a continued focus on efficiency. We therefore require Network Rail to build on the success of recent efficiency initiatives, and our final determination sets stretching but achievable efficiency targets of at least £3.2bn in England & Wales and £0.4bn in Scotland.

principles governing the use of this funding. Well-managed and adequate risk funding provides greater certainty in what can be delivered over the Control Period, and is important for the supply chain which is integral to Network Rail's renewals programme.

### Environmental sustainability

As well as ensuring that core assets are robust to the effects of climate change, Network Rail needs to play its part in contributing to the reduction in carbon emissions and improving the biodiversity that our environment needs.

The environmental targets we have set for CP7 include a more than 20% reduction in scope 1 and 2 emissions (these are the emissions which are directly caused by Network Rail and indirectly through the generation of electricity it purchases), and a more than 4% increase in biodiversity units.

### Looking ahead

Our final determination has set a challenging but achievable five-year settlement for Network Rail. It provides stability and a platform for the industry to plan and invest, which is important not just for Network Rail, but also for passenger and freight operators and the supply chain.

Network Rail must now concentrate on refining its plans, and work with suppliers, passenger operators and freight operators to hit the ground running from day one of CP7 - starting on April 1 2024. ■

### About the author

Will Godfrey is the Office of Rail and Road's Director of Economics, Finance and Markets. ORR is the independent safety and economic regulator for the railways in Great Britain, and Will leads the Periodic Review of Network Rail, PR23.



# The King's Speech and the Rail Reform Draft Bill

As this Parliament enters its final year or so, the Government is setting out how it is moving forward on a number of pieces of rail legislation.

Ultimately, how fast they progress, and when and in what form they come into effect, depends upon political priority and available time.

There has been (and will continue to be) speculation concerning that. In the interests of clarity, a legal explanation of where those pieces of law sit, and what would need to happen for them to become law, is outlined below.

### Recap of legislation

To help with the terminology, the following are rough explanations or reminders about pieces of law:

■ Legislation is a catch-all term for laws made by Parliament.

■ European law no longer applies directly in Great Britain. To a limited degree, it has been maintained in Northern Ireland.

However, there is a lot of European law (particularly in transport) which was already implemented using UK legislation (in which case the UK legislation continues in effect to require the European requirements), or was carried over at Brexit (it 'became' UK law in the same terms as the European laws at the time).

Carried-over law included some 'European Regulations'. The best known are probably European Regulation 1370/2007 (the public contracts regulation under which National Rail Contracts - and previously franchises - are awarded) and 1371/2007 (the Passenger Rights Regulation). These remaining European Regulations are being gradually replaced by specific UK legislation (see below).

■ 'Acts', 'statutes' and 'primary legislation' are all essentially the same thing - the top level of UK laws made by Parliament (for example, the Railways Act 1993). There is some complexity here with Public Acts and Private Acts, which is usually irrelevant.

■ An Act becomes law when the King signs

it. However, it may not take effect until a later date (usually when a minister brings it into effect).

■ Bills are Acts which are proceeding through Parliament but have not yet been approved by Parliament/the King. Both houses of Parliament generally have to approve bills.

■ (UK) 'Regulations', 'statutory instruments' and 'secondary legislation' are, again, largely the same thing (although lawyers might argue about that). They are the lower level of UK laws and can often be made by ministers using delegated powers from Acts (for example, the Railways and Other Guided Transport Systems (Safety Regulations 2006 - ROGS).

### The Rail Reform Draft Bill in the King's Speech

There has been much debate about whether the Government would introduce a Railways (or similar) Bill, and if so whether it would become law (an Act) before the end of the current parliament.

Key to this debate is the need to change the Railways Act 1993 (and, likely, other Acts including one or more of the Transport Acts), to give full effect to any policy which involves founding and giving powers to Great British Railways.

Generally speaking, you cannot change an Act using a statutory instrument alone, because an Act is superior to a statutory instrument. Hence the Railways Act 1993 cannot be amended by ministers - Parliament as a whole must do it, and find time (and consensus) to do so.

While there is a lot of detail and opinion around how far changes to the 1993 Act

would need to go, arguably a substantial change or repeal would ultimately be required to implement the Plan for Rail.

The 1993 Act set up and assumes a very different industry structure to that envisaged by the current rail reforms, and is therefore drafted entirely with different (ie, the current) industry roles and parties in mind.

By way of illustration, the Railways Act does not envisage a role for GBR and requires governments to procure public services by way of franchise agreements (which has been interpreted to include National Rail Contracts).

Therefore, to achieve rail reform long-term, it is generally considered that a new Act is required to revise or replace the Railways Act 1993.

However, the King's Speech on November 8 included a 'Draft Rail Reform Bill' rather than announcing a Railways Bill.

A Draft Bill is not a Bill. A Bill is something which will be introduced to Parliament for debate. A Draft Bill is something which will be put to Select Committees to consider, before a bill is Drafted and put to Parliament. A Draft Bill is therefore best seen as a precursor step to a full Bill (which in turn is the precursor to an Act).

This does not mean that a Rail Reform Bill will fail to become law. But it does mean that legislation on this point remains at an earlier stage than other legislation on other topics.

Given that any legislation would be required to complete all stages in both Houses of Parliament before the end of the current session (likely to be when an election is called), there is a long way for a

*"It is not uncommon that towards the end of a parliament, governments try to push through remaining legislation as quickly as possible to get it on the statute books before going to a General Election."*



Draft Bill to go and limited time.

However, it is not uncommon that towards the end of a parliament, governments try to push through remaining legislation as quickly as possible to get it on the statute books before going to a General Election. A lot of distance could, in principle, be covered in a small number of days at the end of 2024, if there is political will at that time.

### What does the Draft Bill contain?

The text of the Rail Reform Draft Bill had not been published at the time of writing. It's timing remains uncertain. However, the Government's background notes on the King's Speech said it would feature the following:

■ **More accountability.** This relates to the formation of GBR and the transfer of franchising functions to it.

■ **Better Service.** This concerns simplifying fares and ticketing, although the examples given are adjustments rather than wholesale reform (single-leg tickets and pay-as-you-go extension).

■ **Smarter Growth.** This is aimed at harnessing private sector skills, investment and innovation to attract more customers, and illustrates an ongoing private sector role.

■ **Greater Efficiency.** This relates to GBR at the heart of a simplified industry structure, liaising with stakeholders with aligned incentives.

■ **Focus on Customers.** This concerns duties in the GBR licence focused on accessibility and growing freight (although it is widely expected there will be other general duties).

The Government does note that: "Given the scale and complexity of the changes being made to the sector, it is right that the draft Bill undergoes pre-legislative scrutiny to provide Parliamentarians and experts across industry the opportunity to review and test the legislation in draft."

Such pre-debate is intended to make passage through Parliament quicker when a Bill is ultimately introduced. As the government website notes: "It allows examination and amendments to be made to texts and made more easily - before their formal introduction to Parliament as a bill proper."

The fact that government envisages further scrutiny being necessary in advance, in this case, may suggest that despite long-running public debates on the policy, the proposals still require a wider consensus.

### What happens to a Draft Bill?

UK Parliament's website explains: "A Draft Bill is published to enable consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny. After consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny has taken place, the Draft Bill may be introduced formally in House of Commons or the House of Lords."

"Most Draft Bills are examined either by select committees in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords or by a joint committee of both Houses of Parliament."

In this case, the most likely route is for the Draft Bill's text to be put to the Transport Select Committee, which is made up of members of the House of Commons.

In the words of Parliament's procedural

guide (known as *Erskine May* - a book, not a person): "When a draft bill is referred to a select committee, the committee does not formally go through the bill clause by clause, but inquires into the merits of the bill, or takes the proposals contained in the bill into consideration in the same manner as proposals embodied in any other document."

In other words, the Draft Rail Reform Bill, as prepared by the DfT, can expect to be debated and its objectives and proposals evaluated by a number of MPs (11, comprising 6 Con, 4 Lab, 1 SNP), who are likely to report their views on it to the DfT before the Secretary of State finalises the text to introduce to Parliament formally.

Previous Draft Bills have completed this process. For example, the Draft Victims Bill introduced in the Queen's Speech on May 10 2022 (but actually announced in 2021) was published on May 25 2022 and became the Victims and Prisoners Bill in March 2023. That Bill was then carried forward and included in the recent King's Speech.

The fact it has taken 18 months (and counting) from publishing the text illustrates the typically longer gestation of Draft Bills compared with Bills.

### HS2 legislation

It is also worth noting that, unsurprisingly, the King's Speech did not take forward the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill, which was before Parliament at the end of the last session and was required to extend HS2 to the North.

The fact that it was not included in the King's Speech implements Government's change of policy on this extension. However, strangely, the Government has published that Bill anyway and listed it among the current bills before Parliament.

### Other legislation

Separately to the King's Speech, it is worth noting generally that the DfT continues in the process of revising former European law.

Among other things, this currently includes proposed new (UK) regulations to repeal and replace the European Regulation 1370/2007 (award of public contracts) which were published on October 17 2023. This is part of a longer-running change to legislation to a more UK focus. ■

### About the author

Ian Tucker is a Partner at Burges Salmon. A specialist rail lawyer who has acted for sector clients for over 15 years, his background is in UK and EU rail regulation and industry dispute resolution.

# Behind the mask... Mark Hopwood

## PAUL CLIFTON fires the questions at Great Western Railway's Managing Director - a big fan of Class 50 locomotives

### When you were growing up, what did you want to be?

I wanted to work on the railway.

### What is top of your bucket list?

Another transatlantic flight on a Boeing 747.

### Morning or night person?

Night.

### What annoys you the most?

I don't get annoyed easily.

### What food do you most like?

I eat too much food, but I can't think of one type in particular.

### How long does it take to get ready in the morning?

20 minutes. But it's longer by the time I've dealt with all the overnight messages.

### What are you most proud of?

Raising my five children.

### Prized possession?

My share in a Class 50 locomotive (below).

### If you could make one change to the railway, what would it be?

Get the politicians out of the delivery, and let professionals make the decisions.

### What book are you reading?

Christian Wolmar's latest, *British Rail*.

### What is the one thing you've always

### wanted to do?

I've done a lot of them. I'd like to see Australia - and I'm going this month.

### If you were stranded on a tropical island, what two things would you want with you?

An iPad and lots of water.

### Your hidden talent that would surprise people?

I present shows on hospital radio, and occasionally on local radio. Just for fun - something different to do.

### Best childhood memory?

Travelling on Class 50s around the network.

### First record you bought?

I didn't spend any money on records. I spent it all on trains.

### Favourite film?

I enjoy the James Bond films. If I had to pick one, I'd say *The Living Daylights*.

### Who is the person who has influenced you most?

Chris Green. He's an inspirational chap.

### What's the best advice you've ever had?

My boss at Thames Trains, Nick Illsley, said you should always play the long game.

### Career high point?

Running the Great Western.

### Career low point?

The Ladbroke Grove crash.

### Would you like your children to follow your career choice?

Only if they really wanted to. I wouldn't push them in that direction.

### Last time you shed a tear?

When my dad died in 2010.

### Introvert or extrovert?

Both.

### Beer or wine?

Beer.

### Cats or dogs?

Cats.

### Adventurous or cautious?

Adventurous.

### Saver or spender?

Spender.

### What car do you drive?

A Ford Mustang convertible. It's got a 5-litre engine but bizarrely it's ULEZ-exempt. I'm occasionally allowed to drive my wife's Volvo XC90 as well.

### Favourite place in the UK?

London.

### How would you like to be remembered?

As someone who tried his best.



DAVID CLOUGH

GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY.



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