



Report from the Mayors of Greater Manchester and West Midlands – an assessment by Greengauge 21

Overview

The two Mayors (Greater Manchester and West Midlands) came together in Autumn 2023 to address the implications of Government cut-backs to HS2. Their work was supported by private sector expertise (freely given) and chaired by Sir David Higgins.

The ‘Two Mayors’ are rightly determined to rescue a viable rail link for the vital corridor that links the North West and the West Midlands. They know that people and businesses in these regions need transport networks with room to grow. The M6 Motorway and the parallel West Coast Main Line are running at capacity, as foreseen when HS2 was initiated 15 years ago.

[Their report Midlands-North West Rail Link](#) provides useful new analysis, and adds weight to existing advice to Government on the need to address this particular national transport capacity crunch, brought about by the arbitrary termination of the HS2 line from London in the West Midlands, a year ago.

Today, the section of railway linking the West Midlands and North West with its speed and capacity constraints, an historic tunnel and complex junctions, is a woefully sub-standard connection between Britain’s 2nd and 3rd largest cities.

The ‘Two Mayors’ advocate using the protected HS2 alignment for a lower speed link – one that will still provide the much needed extra capacity.

Here we look at how this might go down in Government circles, where ahead of the Autumn budget, investment choices are tough. We conclude that a re-set with a two-step approach is needed.

Reality dawns

Another recent [report](#) from a group chaired by Jürgen Maier for the Urban Transport Group also looked to pick up the pieces after the decision to cut back HS2 taken by Government in October 2023.

Both reports re-affirm the value of rail investment, while suggesting that capital costs could be reduced and that private sector finance should have a role.

The ‘Two Mayors’ report looked first at whether the part of the line already approved in Parliament could be used to provide a new *road link* instead of high-speed rail. In the event, their expert (but unsurprising) answer is no: the protected rail right-of-way isn’t wide enough for a viable road scheme instead.

They were right to check this option, but the extra capacity needed should be additional rail capability. This of course means extra *low carbon* transport capacity, a good policy fit for Government.

Options north and south of Crewe

First, a word on HS2 Phases as they were:

- **Phase 1 London-West Midlands** : London-Birmingham and Handsacre (near Lichfield, where HS2 joins the existing West Coast Main Line). This is *under construction* (but the section from Old Oak Common into central London is currently *held up*, awaiting Government approval).

- **Phase 2a West Midlands-Crewe:** this *has Parliamentary approval*. It runs from the end of Phase 1 near Lichfield to the south end of Crewe, where it rejoins the existing rail network. The majority of land needed has been acquired by HS2 Ltd.
- **Phase 2b: Crewe-Wigan/Manchester** was originally specified to connect with Phase 1, pass in tunnel under Crewe with lines going northwards to both Manchester and Wigan (to rejoin the West Coast Main Line for services onwards to Carlisle, Glasgow and Edinburgh). The Wigan branch (the ‘Golborne link’) was dropped earlier, in June 2022.

The Crewe-Manchester part of Phase 2b was subject to a Parliamentary Bill process that had not been completed by the end of the last Government.

Part of this section of HS2 into Manchester was “re-envisioned” by the last Government to be part of the Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) project (which to date has neither powers nor funding). But note this amounts to only *part* of HS2 Phase 2b into Manchester and it’s also only *part* of NPR.

The Phase 2b Bill Committee that has been carried over for the new Parliament will have to accommodate a major switch of project purpose. The committee’s revised scope *excludes* the section from Crewe towards Manchester Airport, leaving a *gap with no Parliamentary approval* (and no Bill Committee in sight either).

In short: powers to provide the section of HS2 route from the West Midlands to Crewe remain available; but northwards from Crewe requires completion of re-started and new planning processes. This inevitably means longer delivery timescales. Hence the point that a two-stage approach will be needed.

Three rail options examined

The ‘Two Mayors’ report sets out three rail options, which are, from least to most expensive:

1. Upgrade existing lines *or*
2. Build a shortened HS2 Phase 2a link to minimise the length of new line needed to bypass the capacity crunch points south of Crewe *or*
3. Build the full Phase 2a link into Crewe *and* build *all of* Phase 2b into Manchester, entwining 2b with Northern Powerhouse Rail – a new railway to link Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool.

It is perhaps not surprising the report’s authors plump for the third option.

Capital cost savings

Options 2 and 3 adopt a lower line speed than in the original HS2 plans, saying that the use of ballasted track rather than ‘slab’ track offers a big cost saving.

Other savings would come from the use of the normal UK structure gauge for rolling stock. Greengauge 21 proposed just this when the wider HS2 network was abandoned some years ago. The argument is that with less high-speed infrastructure in place, ‘HS2’ services will be dependent on more extensive use of existing railways to complete their journeys. There is little point in having a facility for larger ‘out-of-gauge’ trains if, London-Birmingham aside, high-speed services need to complete their journeys on existing tracks.

Timescales and Choices

Delivery timescales for HM Treasury and for Government, we suggest, are going to be crucial.

The preferred Option 3 is both an *adaptation* of the original HS2 scheme (using lower design standards) and an *extension* of it – since the onward route into Manchester is now regarded in part as a piggy-back on an east-west ‘Northern Powerhouse Rail’ (NPR) scheme.

The wisdom of introducing of major project inter-dependencies in this way is, in itself, questionable, of course.

NPR has a poor business case. The [recently published Accounting Officer statement](#) mentions a Benefit: Cost ratio of only 0.4. In any case, it looks like being superseded by the Trans Pennine Route Upgrade (TRU) for which further record levels of Network Rail funding have recently been [announced](#).

The TRU is a much lower cost approach to improving cross-Pennine rail services. It will offer higher frequencies, faster services, paths for freight, accessible stations, and an electrified railway between Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, York and Newcastle. But TRU unfortunately leaves unanswered how key network constraints in the major cities (Manchester above all – but also Leeds and Sheffield) are to be resolved.

It is hard to see how a largely tunnelled NPR route from Manchester to Leeds *via* Bradford would improve much on the post-TRU service which is expected to provide at least 4 (and possibly 6) fast trains/hour between Manchester and Leeds with a journey time of just 41 minutes.

While it is clear that TRU alone does not provide anywhere near all that the North's neglected rail network needs, it unavoidably diminishes the case for investment in a new railway, much of it in tunnel, on a parallel route.

In any event, Government is more likely to be attracted to schemes which can be implemented sooner and which also have the virtue of being a lot cheaper. On this score, the West Midlands-North West new line south of Crewe could be delivered in a timescale similar to HS2 Phase 1 completion.

Indeed, a fast-track delivery of this 'Phase 2a' part of the Two Mayors' Option 3 offers specific benefits to HM Treasury (discussed below).

Any variation to the Phase 2a alignment (such as the shortening envisaged in the 'Two Mayors' report lower cost *Option 2*) risks *extending* delivery timescales even as it offers cost savings. This is because fresh planning powers would be needed if, instead of following the Phase 2a alignment into Crewe, a shorter line connected some way south of Crewe, in the vicinity of Norton Bridge, is preferred, in order to save money.

The reality of the 'Two Mayors' preferred Option 3 is that it is a two-stage affair. Proceeding with the first part (south of Crewe) needs to be progressed rapidly to capitalise on hard-won planning (Parliamentary) powers but which are soon to lapse – along with property purchases already paid for.

But north of Crewe, the route to High Legh has been ditched with no powers and no planning committee in place, so its ultimate price and delivery timescale is unknown.

The final part of the of route, from High Legh to Manchester Piccadilly, with a Parliamentary Bill Committee still in place although the purpose of this section of new railway has changed. No longer connected to the south, as noted, it is to be part of Northern Powerhouse Rail, with an add-on new line *via* Warrington to Liverpool.

But as noted, the NPR project overall has a poor economic case, and, unlike the railway south of Crewe, High Legh-Piccadilly would be a high-cost section of line (two new HSR stations and mainly tunnelled construction). And strategically it has limitations:

- (1) it doesn't create any journey time improvement over trains using the original 1830 railway alignment to provide the Liverpool-Manchester rail connection
- (2) while adding new terminus platforms at Piccadilly station, it doesn't tackle the key capacity problems in central Manchester; *and*
- (3) although it *could* in theory allow full-length HS2 trains into Piccadilly, without the new missing link between Crewe and High Legh, HS2 trains can't reach this section of NPR line to access Manchester.

So there remain questions to answer about plans for 'north of Crewe', including how best to operate HS2 services into Manchester over today's railway (and what upgrades may be needed to allow this to happen). This is not a new question: it arose when HS2 construction segments once were split into Phase 2a (south of Crewe) and Phase 2b (north of Crewe) several years ago.

Such questions mean a rail strategy for the North West is sorely needed. It should look at opportunities not just for HS2 services and fulfilment of Northern Powerhouse city region to city region connectivity objectives, but also the need to provide capacity for growth in railfreight, and expansion of Manchester Metrolink and the Mersey Electric city region networks. Only by looking at these challenges and opportunities together can a sound approach be developed.

Although any strategy for the railway in the North West needs to be conceived as an overall plan, it needs to be capable of delivery in stages.

To deliver the economic growth that Government seeks, investment needs to be re-set, with delivery accelerated and a clear focus on overcoming known deficiencies of today's rail network.

Delivery timescales are crucial, and so too is coordinated, regional-scale planning. The rail network, after all, is the ultimate 'system', meaning that a focus on delivery of individual mega-projects is not enough.

In order to make sound decisions on rail investment, a switch back to regional-scale planning is required in order to define wisely the role and function of specific projects, large and small alike. Ultimately, it is very hard for Governments to approve investments for which the business case is absent.

Funding

As we have pointed out in our [recent submission to HM Treasury](#), HS2 offers the scope to provide a uniquely large payback to HM Treasury through a concessioning process as was successfully used with HS1 (the Channel Tunnel Rail Link) when it was completed. This process could be run before the end of the next 5-year Government term for a London-Crewe new railway. This is realistically when private sector finance could first come into the picture. But care needs to be taken to avoid the [obvious pitfalls](#), including a belief that this offers 'new money'.

To deliver full value to the tax-payer/HM Treasury, the new line has to be capable of supporting a significant number of train paths over a geography wider than London-Birmingham. That means that a version of the West Midlands-Crewe component of the 'Two Mayors' vision for a Midlands-North West Rail Link needs to be in place. When reviewing the 'Two Mayors' ideas on how to save on capex, care needs to be taken to ensure that the value of any upcoming HS1-style concession is not compromised.

Prompt decision making now can still deliver what has long been the aim: Phase 1 (Euston) and Phase 2a (Crewe) delivered at the same time.

Surprisingly perhaps, the last Government, in taking the knife to HS2, didn't proclaim a cost saving to Treasury. Instead it proposed that the money saved should be redeployed on a hastily drawn up set of transport projects, misleadingly labelled 'Network North'. (It turned out to be neither a network of schemes and only some schemes were in the North.)

Few of the 'Network North' projects have a business case, leave alone planning consents. HS2 Phase 2a has both.

Some Network North schemes have since been quietly dropped, while others remain. At least part of the budget originally set for West Midlands-Crewe remains in limbo, with no proper use, and so potentially available for what is after all, a project that is ready to go.

Conclusion

As Greengauge 21 has argued before, a new [North-Midlands link](#) is sorely needed if HS2 is to deliver usefully for the nation, and the 'Two Mayors' report provides a huge boost to the case.

There is an efficient two-step way forward available which would use the Parliamentary powers already obtained between the West Midlands and Crewe. Here some capital cost savings are on offer (but need to be quickly proven to be wise: [they have already been questioned](#)).

This approach will overcome the key 'M6/WCML corridor' bottleneck which lies between Birmingham and Crewe, between the West Midlands and the North West.

Colwich junction, part of the rail West Midlands-North West rail bottleneck



Photo: Greengauge 21, 2015

Completing this stage of the project recommended by the 'Two Mayors' will have a positive impact on both the timing and value of a future new rail infrastructure concession as deployed successfully with HS1. The imminent lapsing of hard-won parliamentary planning consents means this should be progressed without delay.

North of Crewe (and indeed at Crewe itself) it is less clear how the 'Two Mayors' ambitions can be best achieved. A strategic assessment of the short-comings of the North West's rail network as a whole is needed urgently to work out how best to drive the growth potential of this hugely important part of the national economy.

Meanwhile, onwards to the North West, efficiently and without delay!