

West Midlands – Crewe: the key choices



Shugborough Park: courtesy National Trust

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1. Overview

"I never plan, because I don't like the thought of failure. I think that's why I don't want to think too much about tomorrow."

Michelle Keegan actor, *The Observer*, 31 December 2023

Government's decision in October 2023 to scrap the section of HS2 between the West Midlands and Crewe – Phase 2a – drove a coach and horses through the rail sector's long term plans.

But a 2015 report commissioned by the Department for Transport looked in detail at this part of HS2 and possible alternatives to it. It shows how using just ⅓ of the planned Phase 2a high-speed alignment could offer capital cost savings without sacrificing capacity gains. A key bottleneck on the West Coast Main Line would be overcome, just as would happen with the full version of Phase 2a.

In this short contribution, we look further at the aftermath of the Government's policy U-turn in October 2023. This ended a 15-year period of cross-party consensus on HS2 – a consensus that is surely desirable to re-establish, if the country wishes to progress large-scale infrastructure development successfully and maximise rail's contribution to regional economic growth and tackling climate change.

We are not alone in thinking that the U-turn on HS2 is a serious miss-step. £1bn has already been spent on Phase 2a. The exam question is this: what should the incoming Government do? Re-instatement of Phase 2a would be good, but are there other options? Here we look at the evidence.

An incoming Government needs to address the most immediate challenge created by the October 4th decision which is insufficient transport network capacity between the West Midlands and North West England.

Here the West Coast Main Line is most constricted, down to two tracks from four tracks both to the north and south. And here too, the national motorways from the south (M6, M6 Toll and M5) converge and create huge pressures on the M6 Motorway.

We consider it was wrong to jettison the Phase 2a scheme and it should be re-instated. All other approaches face the disadvantage that in comparison with Phase 2a, their delivery would take several years longer, given the arduous route that must be followed to gain planning consent. But the reality is that other approaches now need to be looked again in re-stating the case for Phase 2a.

Reviews galore

Already three reviews are underway as a consequence of Government's October 4th 2023 decision to scrap HS2's second phase between the Midlands and the North.

- First, there is a review being led by the *Metro Mayors of the West Midlands and the North West* (Andy Street and Andy Burnham). "It may mean going back to the drawing board. A private sector consortium will re-examine the operating model, design specs, governance, financial models, and economic case for high-speed rail to Manchester", as Andy Street has outlined¹. A first stage report is due March 2024, with a final report to Government in summer 2024;
- Second, *Network Rail* has begun a review, this one to examine how best to avoid congestion on the West Coast Main Line² – a problem that it had assumed for the last decade would be solved by HS2;

¹ <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/west-midlands-mayor-vows-never-27873423>

² *The Observer*, p8 24th December, 2023

- Third, the *Labour Party* has established its own independent review, led by Jürgen Maier, former Chief Executive of Siemens UK and Vice Chair of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, with the Urban Transport Group (formerly PTEg) providing technical support. Its panel of transport experts will examine how a future government could accelerate connectivity within and between the UK's key urban areas, and how to improve the delivery of large infrastructure schemes.³

Each of these reviews will no doubt look at what has been lost by the curtailment of HS2 Phase 2, in particular at the lost connection between the West Midlands and North West England, the wider economic consequences, and what to do about it.

And each review will need to note that rail is a system, a (partly-electrified) national network. Conclusions for one geography can have wider implications elsewhere. What is decided for North West England, for example, has an impact on Anglo-Scottish rail service provision, potentially over both east and west coast corridors.⁴

That's why it made good sense for Government and the Department for Transport to set out its own longer term programme, the *Integrated Rail Plan for the North and the Midlands* – the 'IRP' – in November 2021. Prepared by DfT, this plan drew on support from the National Infrastructure Commission to address the critical question of affordability and budget-setting. Although greeted at the time by calls for funding at levels even higher than the £96bn budget the IRP provided, establishing a budget for the IRP was a crucial step forward, and an essential one if transport investment is no longer to be skewed in favour of the south east.

But the IRP was also abandoned by Government's October 2023 decision. It will surely need to be replaced, as Sir John Armit, Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission has already suggested.

Over the last two years, the Great British Railways *Transition Team* has been busy preparing its *Whole Industry Strategic Plan* ('Wisp'). While not yet published, this too will have presumed the long-standing staged delivery of HS2, and it too will now need to be re-created from scratch. Another review.

Looking back to look forward

Dropping a decade of cross-party commitment to Europe's largest infrastructure project has huge consequences. These express themselves first in terms of the challenge of trying to make operational sense of a half-built HS2, but in reality the impacts will be felt much more widely across city and regional economies. It is the beneficial impact on development and productivity across the regions that is at risk.

Here we look back at the work by DfT and HS2 Ltd prior to selecting the Phase 2a design for submission to the Parliamentary Bill process. The conclusions reached then were very clear:

1. No better *high speed alignments* than the one selected as Phase 2a/2b exist, a conclusion reached after a broad consultation and consideration of alternatives, including routes that didn't serve Crewe
2. A Phase 2a alternative that would involve *widening the existing route* instead of creating a new high-speed alignment could also be ruled out. This was considered to be infeasible.

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/labour-louise-haigh-siemens-hs2-conservative-b2463700.html> (14th December 2023).

⁴ Anglo-Scottish and England-Wales rail connectivity was addressed in another review to which Government has only recently responded – the Union Connectivity Review of November 2021 (to which a Government response was published 25 months later)

2. HS2 Phase 2a: the Will of Parliament

On 17 July 2017, the Government introduced the High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) Bill into Parliament. This hybrid Bill would authorise part of the HS2 railway, between Fradley in the West Midlands and Crewe in Cheshire.

The Bill secured its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 30 January 2018 *with a huge majority*: by 295 votes to 12.

Following detailed scrutiny, Phase 2a was granted Royal Assent in February 2021, providing HS2 Ltd with the powers to build this section of the railway. Its implementation reflects the will of Parliament. Preparatory works duly commenced. Land acquisition was started.

Government has chosen, in its policy reverse of October 2023, not to seek to rescind the Phase 2a parliamentary powers. They will remain on the statute books (along with the land acquisition powers) until 2026.

Greengauge 21 (and many others) have pointed out that scrapping Phase 2a is extraordinarily damaging to the national rail network:

*“It would be criminal to allow this section of HS2 to be lost. It already has its Parliamentary Powers, it can be opened around the same time as Phase 1, and it has the lowest cost/mile of the various parts of HS2, and – most important of all – **it relieves the biggest bottleneck on the national rail system between Scotland/the North West and the Midlands/South.**”⁵*

It remains astonishing that the bottleneck that Phase 2a would bypass seems not to have been brought to the attention of Government before its decision to jettison much of HS2. It means that operating the national rail system gets harder not easier with HS2 cut-back to its first phase only.

The Phase 2a part of HS2 is marked in purple in the plan below. It is a relatively simple stage of HS2, to be built across a very largely rural area, so with lower capital costs/mile, yet delivering very significant benefits: more capacity (where it's most needed), greater service reliability, shorter journeys and a significant contribution towards the transport sector's decarbonisation target. It is the low cost part of HS2's second phase (West Midlands – North of England). Its implementation was fast-tracked following decisions taken in 2014, in order to obtain better value from the much more substantial investment in HS2 Phase 1.

⁵ <http://www.greengauge21.net/hs2-curtailed-the-regional-fall-out/> (October 18th 2023)

3. Other HS2 phases

Along *Phase 1* (blue section, in the map below, London-West Midlands), construction continues apace, although with changed priorities at London Euston, and possibly a re-design of the HS2 station there.



Meanwhile, northern stakeholders have been invited to contemplate whether to try to re-purpose the Manchester Piccadilly-Manchester Airport section of HS2 Phase 2b (the northern part of the orange section) which otherwise Government would also abandon: it is suggested it could form part of a new east-west Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) line.⁶

But even if it is decided that building this part of Phase 2b represents good use of funds available – and this seems unlikely since yet further new build would be needed to achieve meaningful enhancement of northern connectivity – the section of line between Crewe and Manchester Airport would remain unbuilt, not figuring in NPR plans. So north of Crewe, all HS2 services would need to travel on the existing rail network.

Phase 2 East (shown in green above) is now simply abandoned, although Mayor Andy Street is known to be keen to seek its retention, so it (and alternative ways of improving connections east-west across the Midlands) may figure at least in the Street/Burnham review.

⁶ Phase 2b powers have not yet been granted, and the Bill Committee may continue to try to accommodate a revised scope and purpose. But the Manchester Airport-Crewe section has been abandoned as of October 2023, as has the cross-Midlands HS2 East route (shown in green above).

4. The Strategic Alternatives to Phase 2a

In May 2015, the Department for Transport (DfT) commissioned Atkins to develop and assess potential alternatives to building the Phase 2a section of HS2. This is standard practice in preparing a strategic case prior to seeking Parliamentary Powers.

The remit excluded development and analysis of options that provided *alternative high speed alignments* for Phase 2a, as they had already been examined (and rejected as inferior) by HS2 Ltd.

The Department specified that “consistent with the HS2 Strategic Case, [alternative] solutions should:

- improve connectivity and journey times for cities north of Birmingham
and
- deliver benefits to northern cities *earlier* than originally planned under [the full] HS2 Phase Two [scheme].”

Any alternatives would also need to:

- minimise disruption to the existing network
- be affordable and represent good value to the tax payer; *and*
- minimise impacts on local communities and the environment – and, specifically, with an environmental impact no worse than Phase 2a.

The key network challenge to be overcome

The main design objective for all the alternative options centred on avoiding capacity and journey time constraints that would remain on the West Coast Main Line (WCML) between Handsacre Junction at the northern end of HS2 Phase One and Crewe.

This meant taking into account the partial relief to be gained from the *Staffordshire Area Improvement Programme* which was then due for completion in 2017 (it opened in 2016, ahead of schedule). This provided for:

- Stafford re-signalling
- increasing maximum speeds on the slow lines from 75mph to 100mph between Norton Bridge and Crewe, allowing their use by fast services to operate without network capacity reduction; *and*
- grade separation of the junction at Norton Bridge, allowing services to run between Stoke/Manchester and Stafford without constraining capacity for services running to and from Crewe. In practice this turned out to be of greatest benefit to scheduling longer distance Cross Country services.

Norton Bridge junction upgrade

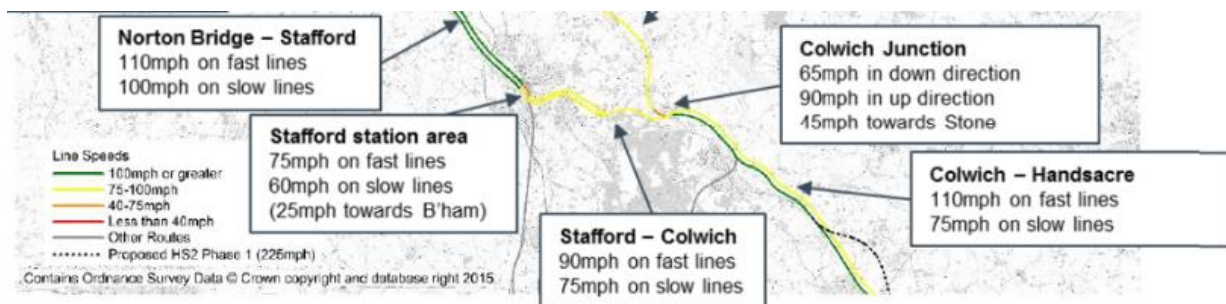


Photo: Network Rail, March 2016

As a result, the key remaining network capacity constraints impacting HS2 services running on the WCML in 2026 between Handsacre and Crewe were identifiable as these, to the south of Stafford:

- the 3½ mile two-track section of route between Colwich and Whitehouse *via* Shugborough Tunnel; and,
- at Colwich Junction itself where northbound services running *via* Stoke conflict with southbound services coming from the Stafford direction towards London.

This curved section of route with junctions at either end of the 2-track section has lower line speeds than the 110/125 mile/h* available on much of the rest of the West Coast Main Line, as shown below.



Source: Atkins Strategic Alternatives to Phase 2a, report to DfT, 2015

*110 mile/h applies to non-tilt trains but tilting trains (Pendolinos) are generally allowed to travel at 125 mile/h over these sections of the West Coast Main Line.

Selecting Strategic Alternatives

To design alternatives to Phase 2a, with its 64 km section of new high-speed line, Atkins developed a long list of options designed to try to overcome the remaining capacity and journey time limitations of the WCML, bypassing the most constrained sections of the WCML through Colwich Junction and Stafford.

Many of the routes for these sections of new alignment were either developed from proposals considered as part of the West Coast Route Modernisation Programme delivered in 2009-11, or by using elements of the proposed HS2 Phase 2a alignment. But widening the existing route – as had been carried out successfully to the south (“Trent Valley 4-tracking”) was expressly ruled out (see panel).

Adding extra tracks (‘widening’) ruled out

“Extensively upgrading the existing route entirely within the existing rail boundaries was **not** considered a feasible option, as the nature of the existing alignment would likely make it very difficult and costly to develop suitable alternatives that could deliver the necessary improvements to capacity and journey times, as well as avoiding disrupting existing services during construction.”

Source: Atkins, Strategic Alternatives to Phase 2a report, November 2015

Three shortlisted options were chosen, with a wide range of costs.

(i) High Cost Alternative Option: 44km of new high speed alignment

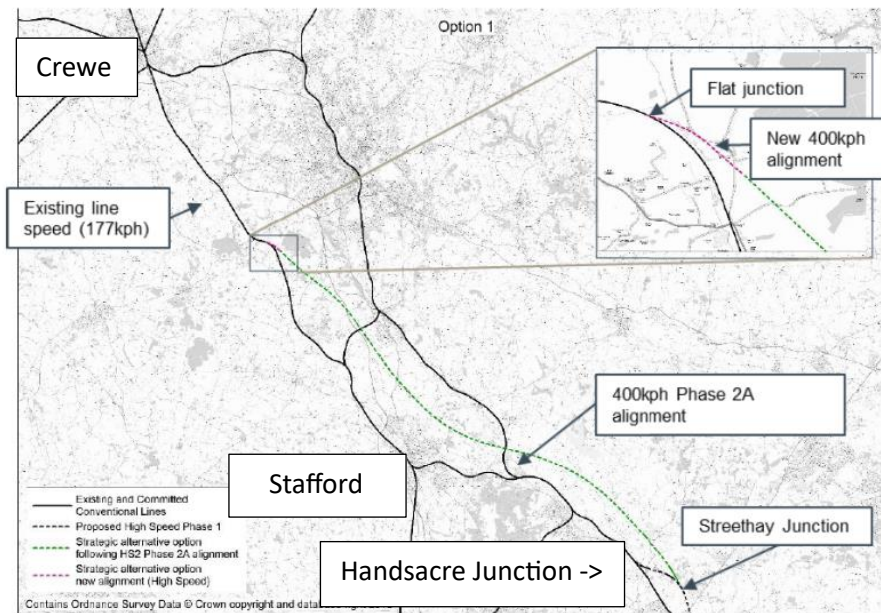
The high cost alternative option involved *constructing roughly two-thirds of the Phase 2a high speed alignment* as proposed by HS2 Ltd, from Streethay Junction in the south (where the line would connect with Phase 1) to a point where the Phase 2a alignment comes within less than 1km of the WCML near Baldwin’s Gate, 19km south of Crewe. Here a short extra length of high speed alignment would link the Phase 2a route to the West Coast Main Line, which then provides a (near-straight) four track railway all the way to Crewe.

The key elements of this option were:

- 42.5km of HS2 Phase 2a alignment (from Streethay Junction to near Baldwin’s Gate)
- 1.4km of new high-speed alignment to link with WCML, with a new junction onto the WCML fast lines
- 18.3km running on existing WCML tracks from Baldwin’s Gate to Crewe.

This last section would allow HS2 services to operate over the WCML fast tracks, probably at 125 mile/h – and even possibly at 140 mile/h (although the project appraisal assumed operations here conservatively at only 110 mile/h).

Figure 2-3 High Cost Alternative Option: 44km of new high speed alignment



(ii) Low Cost Alternative Option: 18km of new conventional speed alignment

This low cost option was originally developed for inclusion in the West Coast Route Modernisation programme delivered between 2000 and 2009, pre-dating the emergence of HS2. So the design speed of the alignment was limited to 140mile/h, consistent with the potential top speed of the West Coast Main Line (WCML) Pendolino train fleet at the time.

While the Strategic Rail Authority had sought to obtain funding for this scheme in the Network Rail’s periodic review of 2003, this was declined at the time by the ORR, and so the project could not proceed. But the existence of this key network weakness and the need for this project was recognised as long as 20 years ago.

The Atkins low cost option was designed to bypass the capacity constraints of Colwich Junction, the two track section through Shugborough Tunnel, and the flat junctions immediately to the north of Shugborough Tunnel and at Stafford, as well as the speed restrictions over what is known as the “Stafford wheel” curve.

In this low cost alternative, the new section of conventional speed (140mph) alignment would leave the current WCML *via* a new grade separated junction north-west of Rugeley and form a new alignment to the Colwich-Stone line near Hixon, bypassing the problem junction at Colwich. The alignment onwards from Hixon as far as Sandon is relatively straight and lightly used, and an initial assessment by Atkins found no significant impediment to upgrading this section of the WCML to 140mph.

The key elements of this low cost option were:

- 6.8km of new 140mph alignment from Rugeley to Hixon
- upgrade of 6.5km of existing WCML (Stoke on Trent) line between Hixon and Sandon to 140mph
- 10.8km of new 140mph alignment from Sandon to the WCML near Norton Bridge.

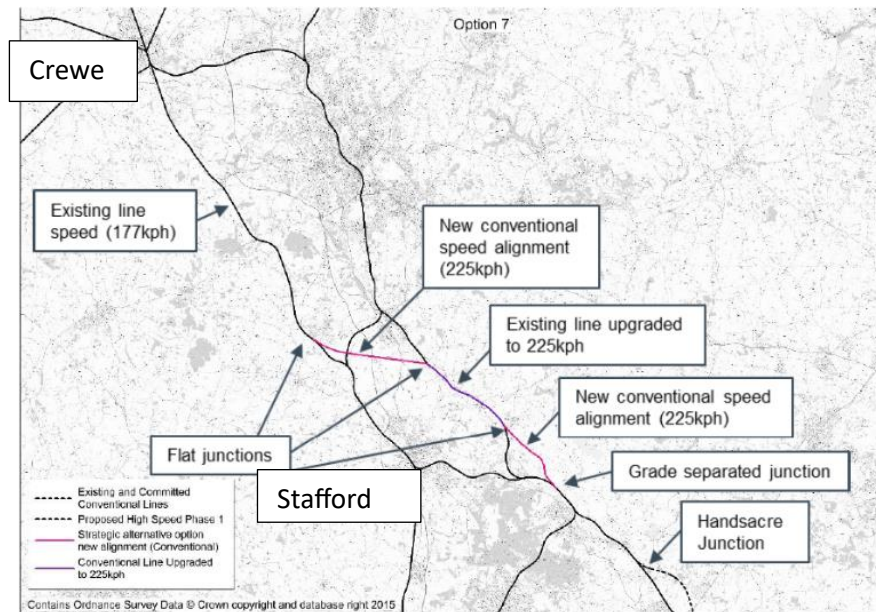
Key features of this alignment include:

- Crossings of the Trent & Mersey Canal and of the Trent River

- Three major bridges crossing the A34 dual carriageway, M6 motorway and the existing railway line between Norton Bridge and Stone; and
- Three new ‘flat’ junctions at Hixon, Sandon and Norton Bridge, and one new (costlier) grade-separated junction between Colwich and Rugeley
- 26km running over the existing WCML from Norton Bridge to Crewe.

The low cost alternative was illustrated in the Atkins report as Figure 2.4, reproduced below.

Figure 2-4 Low Cost Alternative Option: 18km of new conventional speed alignment



A third **Medium Cost** option was also developed. This was similar to the low cost option, but rather than using new conventional speed alignment to bypass Colwich, it took a longer section of new build, using roughly one third of the HS2 Phase 2a high speed alignment northwards from Streethay Junction. This would feed into 5km of new high speed alignment, joining the existing Colwich-Stone line near the site of the former level crossing at Hixon. From this point north the design is the same as low cost option.

Option Assessment

The three shortlisted options were examined against the strategic criteria of costs, journey time, economic appraisal, capacity, performance, disruption and environmental impact. The economic case (see below) presumed later phases would not be built⁷, ensuring that benefit estimation was solely reliant on an incremental option to proceed with Phase 2a, taking Phase 1 as a given. This is the reality facing any assessment of Phase 2a alternatives today, although it was considered to be hypothetical at the time.

Costs and journey times

Capital costs of the high, medium and low cost alternatives were estimated to be 64%, 55% and 43% of the Phase 2a values.

Journey times for HS2 services over the alternatives to Phase 2a were slower, but not by much in the case of the higher cost alternative. In the low cost alternative, HS2 train service journey times would be 6 - 8 minutes

⁷ In parallel analysis, the economic case was also assessed assuming a commitment to the full Phase 2b project.

longer than if Phase 2a were provided; in the case of the high cost alternative, HS2 journeys would be lengthened by only 1 - 2½ minutes (the variation here being due to whether it was assumed that operation over the existing fast lines into Crewe would be at 110 mile/h or 125 mile/h).

Economic Appraisal summary table (N.B. at 2011 price levels)

£2011, 2011 PV	Incremental Phase 2a	Incremental high cost option	Incremental medium cost option	Incremental low cost option
Transport User Benefits (Business)	£1.5bn	£1.2bn	£0.9bn	£0.6bn
Transport User Benefits (Other)	£0.4bn	£0.3bn	£0.3bn	£0.2bn
Other quantifiable benefits	£0.0bn	£0.0bn	£0.0bn	£0.0bn
Loss to Government of Indirect Taxes	-£0.1bn	-£0.1bn	-£0.1bn	£0.0bn
Net Transport Benefits (PVB)	£1.9bn	£1.5bn	£1.1bn	£0.7bn
Wider Economic Impacts (WEIs)	£0.4bn	£0.3bn	£0.2bn	£0.1bn
Net Benefits including WEIs	£2.2bn	£1.7bn	£1.3bn	£0.9bn
Capital Costs	£2.7bn	£1.7bn	£1.4bn	£1.1bn
Operating Costs	£0.1bn	£0.1bn	£0.0bn	£0.0bn
Total Costs	£2.8bn	£1.8bn	£1.5bn	£1.1bn
Revenues	£1.4bn	£1.1bn	£0.9bn	£0.6bn
Net Costs to Government (PVC)	£1.4bn	£0.7bn	£0.6bn	£0.5bn
BCR without WEIs (ratio)	1.3	2.2	1.8	1.5
BCR with WEIs (ratio)	1.6	2.6	2.2	1.8
NPV without WEIs	£0.4bn	£0.8bn	£0.5bn	£0.2bn
NPV with WEIs	£0.8bn	£1.1bn	£0.7bn	£0.4bn

Source:

Atkins strategic alternatives report Table 3.7 (as an increment to Phase 1 (no further network development))⁸

The benefit:cost ratio (BCR) of each of the three alternatives is higher than the BCR of Phase 2a. The high cost alternative (BCR of 2.6) is best overall, outperforming the full Phase 2a scheme (BCR of 1.6).

Operational performance

The *high cost alternative* was adjudged to offer similar performance benefits to HS2 Phase 2a and possibly some advantages, with HS2 services approaching Crewe from the south on the eastern (fast line) tracks, rather than to the western side of the multi-track layout.

The *medium and low cost options* were adjudged unlikely to offer the same level of performance as the high cost option or Phase 2a, either for HS2 trains or residual classic line trains.

⁸ Note on table acronyms: NPV is net present value; PV is present value; WEI refers to wider economic impacts; PVB and PVC refers to the present (discounted) value of and benefits and costs respectively; BCR is benefit:cost ratio.

Freight

In addition to accommodating the indicative passenger post-HS2 Phase 1 passenger train service, the West Coast Main Line (WCML) will also need to accommodate future freight services.

The number of paths reserved for freight on the WCML currently varies across the day. Analysis of the then current working timetable showed that a maximum of 4 timetabled freight paths per hour were timetabled between Crewe and Stafford, with up to 2 freight paths between Stafford and Handsacre. The number of timetabled freight paths, it was noted, was not constant across the day.

Of the available paths reserved for freight services, only a proportion are typically used on any one day. Flexibility is required by the freight operators to be able to respond to different market conditions and the requirements of their customers across different times of the day, week and season.

For the purpose of their analysis, Atkins assumed that 4 freight trains per hour would operate across the whole day between Stafford and Crewe. This assumption, it was argued, offered an increase in freight capacity over that available today because it assumed a higher number of overall paths.

Given the Government's recent commitment to a growth target for rail freight of +75% by 2050⁹, and given that the West Coast Main Line is the nations' busiest rail freight route, the importance of providing relief to the Colwich-Shugborough-Stafford bottleneck, whether provided by re-instating the now-stalled Phase 2a scheme, or by the one of the strategic alternatives identified in the Atkins 2016 study, looks to be essential, if the Government railfreight growth target is to be met.

Environmental Assessment

An environmental assessment was undertaken for each of the alternative options.

The *medium and low cost options* would run approximately 1km to the north of the Pasturefields Salt Marsh Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Work by HS2 Ltd with the Environment Agency and Natural England showed that adverse effects on the SAC could not be ruled out due to complex hydrological issues. This had led HS2 Ltd to reject potential routes in this area in advice to Government because of the high risk associated with ensuring compliance with the Habitats Directive. And Atkins concluded that if the medium or low cost were to be considered further, more analysis would be needed to understand the detailed impacts of the proposed alternative alignment, and what mitigations would be needed, with any solution needing to be consistent with the Habitats Directive and European Regulations.

Conclusions on Strategic Alternatives

We know that Government concluded in 2015 that:

- there was no better high-speed rail alignment available than that selected for HS2 Phase 2a
- that an alternative approach of widening the existing right-of-way was infeasible
- it wasn't essential to build the full length of high-speed line into Crewe station.

All three strategic alternatives have a higher benefit: cost ratio than Phase 2a, although only the high cost option also has a higher NPV.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-ambitious-target-to-grow-rail-freight-by-at-least-75>

All three alternatives provide sufficient capacity to allow the full operation of the indicative train service specification proposed for the full HS2 Y scenario. They also all provide *some* spare capacity to run additional HS2 trains, and additional passenger or freight services on the WCML, although this varies between options. None of the options provide the same overall capacity as Phase 2a, which together with the WCML effectively provides a six track railway between the northern limit of HS2 Phase One and Crewe.

Construction of the high cost option is not expected to cause as much disruption to the existing rail network as would the construction of Phase 2a.

A high level assessment of environmental impacts suggests that the higher cost option is likely to have a lower environmental impact than Phase 2a. (The low and medium cost options have some environmental risks in respect of the Pasturefields Special Area of Conservation, as noted above.)

If HS2 services are able to operate on the near-straight sections of the WCML between Baldwin's Gate and Crewe at the enhanced permissible speed of 125mph, then there is the potential for the journey time differential to Phase 2a to be reduced. An increase in line speeds to 140mph would reduce the margin further, but is likely to require some investment in signalling and power supply.

The medium and low cost options provide a greater cost saving but provide fewer benefits and a lower BCR than the high cost option. They also both have greater capacity constraints which reduces both the number of additional services that could be run and also introduce a greater risk of unreliability or poor operational performance.

Just as with the full Phase 2a scheme, the high cost strategic alternative should allow a 25% increase in HS2 service levels and would allow the frequency of the Trent Valley service over the existing Stafford-Lichfield-Tamworth-Nuneaton-Rugby corridor to be doubled – a real HS2 dividend to people living in the area affected by this part of the HS2 project. These benefits are not scored in the economic appraisal shown above.

5. Capital funding

It's easy to lose sight of the fact that HS2 wasn't cut back in October 2023 in order to save money.

Instead of making a budget cut, DfT was asked to re-allocate all the HS2 funding saved to other transport projects. It turns out that some of these projects had already been announced while others face major planning hurdles ahead that HS2 Phase 2a has already crossed, with a Parliamentary Act on the statute book.

No comparative timeline for the replacement projects was provided, yet of course some of the HS2 funding 'saved' would not have been spent until many years hence. It is hard to imagine HM Treasury accepting that the October changes could result in an acceleration of capital expenditure into earlier decades. HS2 'replacement projects' are unlikely to be deliverable speedily. And, as Secretary of State Mark Harper told the Transport Select Committee on November 15th 2023, only 30% of HS2 funding would go to other rail projects.

But the funding does remain, apparently within the transport sector. All the more surprising that some of the reviews now in-hand are looking at private sector funding as if that would be the key to unlocking rail investment funding. Private sector funding for infrastructure is entirely feasible, but best applied when possible risks that are unmanageable as far as the private sector is concerned – for example, Government may just change its mind, and decide it doesn't want the project after all – have passed. High Speed One, lest it be forgotten, was privatised (on a long lease) soon after it was complete and high-speed train services were proven in service.

Some share of property value gains might also be exploitable, but it needs to be recognised that achievements in this field in London are far less likely to be achievable now in the Midlands and North, where extra cost burdens on development and business expansion plans would run counter to the wider aims improved rail connectivity is designed to bring.

And now must be the hardest of times to entice the market without creating a high tariff for future rail use, most probably in the form of high future year track access charges.

Why so? Because for the private sector the biggest risk in funding infrastructure is inconsistency of Government policy: the private sector needs stable policy and a secure market position. The October decisions on HS2 could hardly better represent what will deter Pension funds and other like-minded capital sources from entering the fray.

6. Next Steps

The next Government will have plenty of review material to read when it comes to make decisions on HS2. But it will need to act decisively if the progress made to date acquiring land for Phase 2a is not to be squandered.

Realistically, the choice is between Phase 2a and the 2015 study's 'higher cost strategic alternative'. Widening the existing West Coast Main Line was ruled out in this earlier study, as was the possibility that any different high-speed alignment would be better. HS2 Ltd had systematically explored all of these options, after all. Clearly the full HS2 Phase 2a scheme remains the most straight-forward way ahead. All other options would require new planning consents which have timescale implications measurable in years.

Land acquired within 12 miles of Crewe could be released if Government wishes to make a capital cost saving by adopting the most substantial of the three strategic alternatives to Phase 2a. In several respects this option has a better business case than the full Phase 2a scheme.

The savings made on the line of route if the higher cost strategic alternative is chosen might usefully be put to use in upgrading Crewe station and approaches. This in turn could allow the cost of tunnelling under Crewe in Phase 2b (should that be fully re-instated) to be avoided. Phase 2b has a weaker business case than Phase 2a (it involves two major new stations and extensive tunnelling, while accommodating fewer trains/hour). So Phase 2b cost savings from removing the need to tunnel under Crewe could be most welcome.

Of course, it will be important to re-check findings from a study carried out in 2015 to see if there have been any changed circumstances, and a decision to relinquish any lands acquired over the northern section of the Phase 2a route should not be taken until this has been carried out.

Greengauge 21

January 3rd 2024