



Department
for Transport

From the Secretary of State
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Iain Stewart MP
Chair, Transport Select Committee
House of Commons
London
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11 March 2024

Dear Iain,

Thank you for your letter seeking clarifications on Handsacre Junction following the Committee's recent oral evidence sessions, and my letter of 9 January 2024.

Handsacre Junction has always been a key part of the HS2 scheme. When originally conceived, the HS2 scheme consisted of Phase One (London to West Midlands, including a 'fast line' connection at Handsacre) and Phase Two (West Midlands to Manchester and Leeds). These two phases were due to open in 2026 and 2033 respectively, meaning that Handsacre Junction would be used for up to seven trains an hour for the period between 2026 and 2033.

In the November 2015 Autumn Statement, the Government announced that it was accelerating delivery of the West Midlands to Crewe section of the Western leg of Phase Two. This accelerated section became known as Phase 2a with delivery profiled for 2027 (six years earlier than originally planned).

In view of the plans at the time, accelerated delivery of Phase 2a subsequently meant that Handsacre Junction would only be needed for seven trains an hour for a period of one year, on the basis that once Phase 2a was open the majority of the trains to the North West and Scotland would use the 2a line (which would be significantly quicker). Thereafter, the junction would only carry one train an hour in order for HS2 services to call at Stafford, Stoke-on-Trent and Macclesfield.

In view of the permanent requirement to only handle one train an hour, the design for Handsacre was therefore adapted to take account of the changed specification, with the junction redesigned to connect instead to the 'slow lines' on the West Coast Main Line. At the time, the design change to a slow line junction was assessed as being c. £80m cheaper than the fast-line design, and significantly less disruptive to the West Coast Main Line during its construction.

The design change was also approved by the then Secretary of State, and the environmental and land changes required for the slow-line design were subsequently confirmed in the Phase 2a Act.

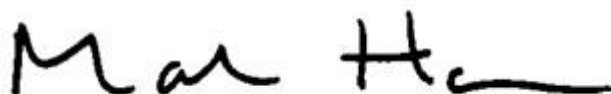
Network North cancelled the later phases of HS2. In order to maximise the benefits of the new HS2 scope, it was recognised that enhancements to the junction between HS2 and the West Coast Main Line at Handsacre was likely to be required, and £500m was provided for these works. Page 18, paragraph 24 of Network North stated: *“It will also reduce the journey time between London and Manchester by nearly half an hour (down to 100 minutes), facilitated through an upgrade of Handsacre Junction which will allow more trains to reach key destinations north of Birmingham.”*

At the time of Network North, the enhancement envisaged would be a return to the fast-line connection at Handsacre Junction, and on 15 November 2023 I said to the committee *“On Handsacre, the plan is now to connect to the fast lines of the West Coast Main Line.”*

Following the Network North announcement, the Department, working with Network Rail, HS2 Ltd and West Coast Partnership Development, has been undertaking further analysis of the optimal interventions to enhance Handsacre Junction. This more recent analysis has indicated that the design of the junction (whether slow line or fast line) is not the constraining factor in terms of journey times and capacity. Therefore, maintaining a slow-line connection and enhancing the West Coast Main Line in the vicinity of Handsacre is likely to achieve the same outcome at lower cost and disruption. These interventions are currently being developed but are likely to be additional crossovers and line-speed improvements on the West Coast Main Line north of Handsacre. This is the analysis that Sir Jon Thompson was referring to when he appeared before the committee on 10 January 2024: *“On Handsacre Junction, we came to the conclusion that that was not the rate-limiting step that people initially thought that it might be, and that very little work was required on the junction to facilitate connection back to the west coast main line.”*

Further analysis is currently underway to assess if there are other high-value interventions that could be made to support further increases in performance and capacity and leverage the investment in HS2 further. These potential interventions could be delivered using the remainder of the £500m set aside in Network North to support improved journeys north of Birmingham.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Harper', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Rt Hon Mark Harper MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT