



Growth Track 360
c/o Cheshire West and Chester Council
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6 December 2021

Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP
Chair
Welsh Affairs Committee
House of Commons
Westminster
London SW1A 0AA
By email: welshcom@parliament.uk

Dear Mr Crabb

Accelerating Union Connectivity Through Investment in Cross-Border Railways Linking North Wales and Northern England

Growth Track 360 noted the announcement by your Committee that you will be holding a one-off evidence session on 15 December 2021 with Sir Peter Hendy CBE, Chair of the Union Connectivity Review (UCR), and relevant UK Ministers. We thought you might find useful our reaction to the Review in preparing your questions.

Since being established in 2016 as the cross-border and all-party alliance for securing transformational investment in our regional rail network, Growth Track 360, has sought to utilise all available governmental and industry processes to secure the funds that we need to realise our vision. We believe that by bringing together all of the local government, rail industry and business community stakeholders in our powerhouse, cross-border industrial economy around a shared set of proposals, we have laid the foundations for accelerating rail investment between North Wales and Northern England with wider benefits for connectivity to South Wales, the Midlands and London.

In January, we responded with a detailed submission to Sir Peter Hendy's call for evidence to the UCR being conducted on behalf of the UK Government. We were delighted when the publication of Sir Peter's interim report in March was accompanied by the UK Secretary of State for Transport's announcement of £20 million towards exploring the development of four projects across the UK, one of which was improved rail connectivity between the north coast of Wales and England.

Analysing the Integrated Rail Plan in the Context of Union Connectivity

In the week between the publication of the UK Government's Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) for the North and Midlands on 18 November and the final report of the UCR, we made a late submission to Sir Peter Hendy taking account of the IRP's contents.

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Growth Track 360 welcomed the news that HS2's construction to Crewe was confirmed in the IRP along with a northern junction to enable northbound trains to re-join the HS2 line North after departing from the station. The IRP envisages that 400m HS2 northbound trains will divide at Crewe with one portion travelling to Warrington and Liverpool and the other to Lancaster (with trains recombining at Crewe in the reverse direction).

We would argue that it will be far more sensible for that section of the train currently timetabled for Lancaster to serve Chester and North Wales which have vast tourism and commercial potential. Chester and North Wales only receive the briefest mentions in the IRP as being interchange destinations from HS2 after changing at Crewe. We considered this to be an appalling missed opportunity and to run counter to the principle of enhancing Union connectivity.

For example, there are over thirty million tourism visits per year just for North Wales. Switching a significant percentage (say 10%) of this traffic to rail would make incredible carbon savings from an existing market and, with HS2 onward services from London and Birmingham, open up even further low carbon business and tourism opportunities.

Chester is the rail hub for a significant part of North West England and the whole of North Wales. It is one of the busiest stations in the North West of England by passenger usage as well as being a substantial business and tourism destination in its own right. With the IRP having completely missed this point, we looked to the final UCR report with its emphasis on cross-border connectivity between the nations of the UK to embrace it.

Indeed, Transport for Wales (TfW) and Network Rail (Wales branch) had jointly provided an opportunity for the UCR to do so by bidding, at Sir Peter Hendy's request, for development funding for Chester Station, an interchange at Shotton (between the North Wales Coast Mainline and the Wrexham to Bidston Line) and a feasibility study on the electrification of the North Wales Coast Mainline. We looked forward to Sir Peter and the DfT endorsing and funding these proposals from TfW and Network Rail in North Wales as part of his final report.

Fairness to Wales from HS2

In our November submission to Sir Peter Hendy, we recognised that the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee had noted earlier this year that HS2 is treated as an England and Wales project for the purposes of the Barnett Formula, yet Wales receives no direct benefits from the project (and even economic disbenefits). We pointed out that the UK Government had refused to accept this point in its response to your Committee. Therefore, we contended that through HS2 services to Chester and North Wales will go some way to addressing the argument that HS2 provides little benefit to Wales and provide a degree of fairness to Wales.

The IRP appears to have a theme of trying to bring benefits to more medium sized town and cities than the original plans for HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) would have. If this is so, then we believe that applying that principle to Chester and the North Wales towns, adds to the case for electrification of the Chester and North Wales main line with its established communities, business and tourism centres, which are currently very poorly served by rail. Were electrification of the North Wales main line to coincide with completion of HS2 to Crewe, it would be possible to introduce direct, electrified services via Chester on classic-compatible trains at the same time.

Improving Local Connectivity Between North Wales, Cheshire, Merseyside and Northern England

Growth Track 360's proposals for North Wales main line electrification envisage taking the wires to Warrington as well as Crewe to improve connectivity with Manchester. With the IRP making Warrington Bank Quay a key part of HS2 in addition to its role in NPR, we believe this makes our case for electrification of the North Wales Main Line even stronger. Restoration of the low-level platforms at Warrington Bank Quay in the IPR is a welcome move in this regard yet we are concerned that the plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) announced in the IRP will not create sufficient capacity across the North of England to make the best of potential improvements between North Wales, Chester and the wider North, given the emphasis on the use of existing lines for substantial parts of NPR.

Our original submission to the UCR also made the case for investment in the Wrexham-Bidston line to enable a much more frequent metro-style service to operate on this cross-border route. Since then, Merseyrail has conducted a successful trial with batteries on its new Class 777 electric trains which could eventually lead to a 15-minute service frequency between central Liverpool and Wrexham serving major industrial and business centres in the Mersey-Dee region. We asked for Sir Peter's final report to support this vision for the Wrexham to Liverpool service.

Growth Track 360's Welcome for the UCR Final Report

On 26 November, Growth Track 360 welcomed the recognition of North Wales and North West England as a highly integrated cross-border economy in the final report of the UCR along with Sir Peter Hendy's support for a programme of transport improvements.

Sir Peter's final report made nineteen recommendations to the UK Government of which No. 7 is of most direct relevance to the North Wales and Mersey Dee cross border economic region served by Growth Track 360:

“Work with the Welsh Government to undertake a multimodal review of the North Wales transport corridor, and develop a package of improvements focused on the North Wales Main Line (including better connectivity with HS2, and electrification), the A55, the M53, M56 and onward travel to and from the island of Ireland”

Recommendation No. 18 added a specific call for improved connectivity to seaports across the UK by enhancing railfreight connections.

The UCR accepted a major theme of all Growth Track 360's campaigning by acknowledging the existence of highly integrated cross-border economic areas of significant scale in the UK that have distinct transport needs with substantial numbers of cross-border commuters or regular regional freight flows (p.30). One such region is acknowledged as our own, embracing North Wales and the North West of England where, at the time of the 2011 census, 25% of employees were crossing the border for work and where access from North Wales to international gateways in England such as Manchester Airport is particularly important. In 2019, 1.9 million people and 5.3 million tonnes of goods moved via the port of Holyhead to and from Ireland.

Sir Peter Hendy's final report noted that Transport for Wales and Growth Track 360 have been developing plans for:-

- A multi modal North Wales Metro and improvements to the North Wales Main Line, including line speed and capacity improvements,
- Upgrades between Wrexham, Bidston and Liverpool,
- Enhancements to Chester station and
- A Crewe hub interface to maximise the benefits of HS2 (p.47).

The UCR acknowledges the role of faster journey times and capacity to support enhanced cross-border economic links which will facilitate sustainable, increased growth, jobs, housing and social cohesion.

Growth Track 360 Chair and Leader of Cheshire West & Chester Council, Councillor Louise Gittins, said in reaction the the publication of the report:

"In his report to the UK Government, Sir Peter Hendy has accepted the key underlying arguments for the Growth Track 360 campaign by recognising the existence of our cross-border economy and the role of enhanced, sustainable transport in unlocking its full potential for the people who live and work here as well as for the country as a whole."

Growth Track 360 Vice Chair and Leader of Flintshire Council, Councillor Ian Roberts, said:

"It is essential that the Union Connectivity Review is not allowed to become yet another worthy report which gathers dust. Post-pandemic economic recovery in our cross-border region needs the boost that investment in our rail network will provide. We urge the UK Government quickly to release the development funds that Transport for Wales and Network Rail need in order to turn our priority projects into reality."

We trust that you will find this evidence useful for your Committee's hearing on 15 December and we would of course be delighted to provide any further information that you may require.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Louise Gittins,
Chair, Growth Track 360,
Leader of Cheshire West & Chester Council



Councillor Ian Roberts,
Vice Chair, Growth Track 360,
Leader of Flintshire County Council