

Written evidence submitted by TravelWatch North West (MTP0026)

Major transport infrastructure projects: appraisal and delivery

1. TravelWatch NorthWest is an independent Community Interest Company representing all public transport users in North West England. We are pleased to give our views to this inquiry.

Transport infrastructure strategy and priorities

The Government's transport infrastructure priorities, including those set out in the National Infrastructure Strategy

2. We broadly welcome the support for HS2 to deliver essential North-South connectivity. A priority for HS2 should be to provide intensified services to Scotland and also ensure intermediate towns and cities are served with direct services to London. We agree that high-speed rail does not just affect those who ride it, but also releases capacity on the classic rail network. This should enable improvements to classic services and it is very important that HS2 integrates fully with local services to make journeys as seam-free as possible.

3. We welcome the planned improvements in the Midlands and the North and look forward to the publication of the Integrated Rail Plan for the Midlands and the North of England. We agree it is essential that the Plan ensures that Phase 2b of HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail and other planned rail investments in the North and Midlands are scoped and delivered in an integrated way e.g. upgrading the WCML to provide extra capacity for sub HS trains and semi fast services.

4. We agree that local authorities and operators should be encouraged and supported to work together to co-ordinate timetables and ticketing to meet demand and to deliver bus priority measures that tackle congestion.

Restoring lost rail links

5. We note that the government will also deliver on its manifesto commitment to spend £500 million to restore transport services previously lost in the Beeching cuts of the 1960s. We understand that there has been a recent statement from Highways England that it intends to remove some redundant railway structures over the next 5 years for safety reasons. We trust this will not jeopardise any potential restorations of services.

6. Of the first 10 feasibility funded schemes which have been announced and which will provide a basis for decisions on further development there are two in our region - Bury-Heywood-Rochdale and Clitheroe to Hellifield. Of the additional 15 proposals that the government will provide further feasibility funding for the following are in our region - Tarporley station in Cheshire, reinstating links between Bolton, Radcliffe, and Bury and upgrading the South Fylde Line. We are somewhat disappointed that Skipton – Colne, the Burscough curves and Poulton – Fleetwood have not made the list so far.

Decarbonising transport

7. We agree with the statement that, as well as decarbonising private vehicles, the government wants to increase the share of journeys taken by public transport, cycling and walking, and decarbonise buses and trains. We would make the point that one essential element of bus planning is to ensure new housing and industrial/business developments feature public transport facilities as an integral part of planning processes. We welcome the commitment to zero emission buses. The trend to introduce battery powered buses is to be welcomed but this needs to be prioritised.

8. Whilst the Covid 19 crisis has presented major problems for public transport, it has also provided some insight into what a better and more environmentally friendly future for our centres of population could be like. These conurbations must be dependent upon walking, cycling and sustainable public transport. Limitless car use cannot be an option for future mobility in cities and elsewhere. Some 22% of UK *carbon emissions arise from cars and so the UK cannot return to an excessive reliance on car travel, but must develop innovative and sustainable public transport as an alternative.*

9. Electric cars are not the answer. They will take up space and contribute to congestion in the same way as conventional cars. Cars of any power source take up space which could be used for houses, green areas, parks and other outdoor spaces. Walking, cycling and of course sustainable public transport has to be the priority for future planning.

10. To encourage the greater use of buses the introduction of a congestion or workplace parking charge would reduce traffic levels and fund local transport investment, including subsidy for bus services. There should also be greater bus priority measures across cities through bus lanes, bus gates and bus priority at junctions, to protect bus services from congestion. Cities should not get extra funding for bus services while also making them worse by forcing buses into traffic jams.

11. On the subject of cycling the National Infrastructure Strategy refers to the 60% recent increase in cycling. The rail industry needs to respond to this increase by considering ways of increasing provision for carrying bicycles on trains which at the moment is generally rather limited. Many rural lines would have loved to try and attract cyclists to increase traffic to rural stations from the cities but are unable to do so because of inadequate cycle space on trains.

12. Ways of increasing cycle space could include more customised areas in carriages, perhaps half of or an entire vehicle on some tourist lines for example. This concept is already being implemented on the West Highland Line. If peak demands do not recur to pre Covid levels because of changed work patterns that could also offer scope for more bikes on trains.

Rail and electrification

13. ***Astonishingly there appears no reference at all to rail in the section on Decarbonising the Economy, especially electrification.*** More use of rail can, on its own, be a major factor in reducing carbon emissions. Recent deliveries of new rail rolling stock which is wholly or partly diesel powered, even where running on electrified routes, militates against carbon reduction. With reference to light rail, past cancellation of major projects in Leeds, Liverpool and South Hampshire is a missed opportunity to install fully electrified systems and new light rail schemes should be strongly supported

14. On 31st August 2020 we submitted a response to the DfT's consultation on decarbonising transport.

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15. We laid great emphasis on rail electrification asserting that it is the key contribution to de-carbonising rail transport. We emphasised the need for a rolling programme of consistent, proactive and extensive electrification

16. We referred to the 2015 report of the North of England Electrification Task Force – “Northern Sparks” which advocated that 12 routes should be progressed immediately through outline design and costing to feed into the initial industry plan / High Level Output Statement for Network Rail's Control Period 6 (CP6), running from 2019 to 2024.

17. Unfortunately there has been little progress in the 6 years since the report was published, with even two routes considered at that time to be in the baseline – North Transpennine (NTP) and Oxenholme to Windermere - not yet started.

18. We firmly believe that many of the schemes in Northern Sparks should be progressed - and the need for greater sustainability underpins this even more since the report was written 6 years ago. Aside from NTP and The Lakes Line priorities should be Calder Valley, Liverpool to Manchester via Warrington and Southport/Kirkby to Salford Crescent. Also priority should be given to other relatively short links from the current electrified network e.g. Lancaster – Morecambe, (Eden Centre to open in 2022), Hazel Grove to Buxton.

19. One important factor with electrification schemes is the high initial capital cost. We understand that Network Rail is now asserting that, following the Great Western electrification overspecification, costs are now at a more reasonable level. Therefore, progressive electrification should be very much back on the agenda, with more cost-effective methods of implementing schemes. The central role of electrification in decarbonisation appears to have been confirmed, with hydrogen fuel cell and battery traction relegated to lesser routes.

To what extent the coronavirus pandemic and its longer-term implications affects the necessity and cost-effectiveness of current and future major transport infrastructure projects

20. There are predictions there will be less rail travel after Covid. We accept that work and business travel patterns may well change with greater emphasis on home working and on-line video meetings we would look for a greater emphasis on a wide range of travel. There is huge potential to transfer travel from road to rail and contribute to environmental issues if rail can emerge from the pandemic with an absolute focus on reliability and attracting passengers back.

21. See also our response to the Committee in September on reforming public transport after the pandemic.

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How major transport projects can be delivered while ensuring the Government meets its decarbonisation 2050 net-zero targets

21. No comments.

Appraisal and funding of transport infrastructure

22. No comments.

Oversight, accountability and governance of transport infrastructure projects

23. We agree there should be more devolution to regional bodies such as Transport for the North and Combined Authorities for transport infrastructure projects.

24. Transport policy making and funding is still far too centralised in the UK, much more so than other developed countries. Where some form of devolution has been made, e.g. Transport for the North, tight control has still been maintained by the DfT, resulting in these bodies being perceived as ‘talking shops’, with some justification.

Factors influencing the cost of transport infrastructure in the UK

25. We have referred above to the over-specification and high costs of Great Western electrification and hopefully the lessons learned. It would be a useful exercise to examine costs of other schemes to ensure that specification is appropriate for the nature of the work.

26. In a wider sense there will inevitably be strong pressure from the Treasury to radically reduce spending on bus, tram and rail services. This could well lead to substantial reductions in existing networks including branch line closures, reductions of service levels on main lines and reduced bus services. This must be resisted as it will result in more car dependency, greater environmental impacts and increased social deprivation. The current levels of Government support for public transport must be maintained until passenger levels return to pre-pandemic levels. Otherwise policies to reduce congestion and reduce pollution will be nullified.

What lessons can be learned from other countries in the delivery of major transport infrastructure projects

No comments

Transport infrastructure capacity and skills

No comments.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

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