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National Infrastructure Commission
 Finlaison House
 15-17 Furnival Street
 London
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29th May 2020

Dear Commission Secretariat,

**National Infrastructure Commission call for evidence – Rail Needs
 Assessment for the Midlands and the North**

TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) is an independent Community Interest Company representing all public transport users in NW England. We are pleased to give our views as follows to this call for evidence, in respect of our region.

1. Introduction

1.1 We trust that in the post Covid 19 world, people will come back to public transport in appreciable numbers. However, the post Covid 19 uncertainty means it is difficult to estimate what the level of patronage will be over the next 1 to 3 years. There may be a shift towards greater reliance on private cars as people reflect a reluctance to enter crowded conditions. This is very unwelcome, given the impact on air quality and congestion.

1.2 For example, there is a reduction in air pollution. Air quality has started to improve in many UK cities, mirroring what has been seen in other countries that have restricted travel and levels of outdoor activity. “This is primarily a consequence of lower traffic volumes, and some of the most clear reductions have been in nitrogen dioxide, which comes primarily from vehicle exhaust” (Professor Alastair Lewis, the National Centre for Atmospheric Science at the University of York). Also, The Centre for International Climate Research in Oslo, Norway, said the drop in air pollution caused by the measures could lead to a reduction in premature deaths between 54,000 and 109,000 people

if continued. See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/coronavirus-air-pollution-uk-lockdown-china-italy-covid-19-a9421291.html>

1.3 Therefore the rail transport needs of our region are, over the next one to three years, unpredictable. However, those needs are vast and require solutions to be provided in incremental ways, and over the next few years.

1.4 In view of the long timescales before we are likely to see the implementation of HS2 phase 2b and Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) – not likely until the 2040s - we have taken the opportunity to identify where we see the need for interim investments leading to the position when proper integration between HS2 and NPR can take effect. In any case and quite apart from the need for the development of HS2 and NPR, the whole of the interlinked rail network, local and longer distance, requires urgent attention. There has been a stop-go to the investment in the railways of the North. Numerous proposals and plans for rail investment have been developed, but have not proceeded in a coherent way.

1.5 Our approach to this document therefore is to set out what we see as the priorities in our region in the interim years which can be both free standing and in terms of fitting with HS2 and NPR. In the National Audit Office Report, published in June 2010: 'Increasing Passenger Rail Capacity', Mr Amyas Morse, head of the National Audit Office, stated:

"The DfT used a broadly sound framework to develop plans for adding capacity to the rail network. These plans were developed in a stronger economic climate. However, we believe that it needs to implement these plans flexibly in light of current conditions, in order to protect value for money, and to be continually looking to drive down the costs of rail improvement works."

1.6 In the wake of Covid 19, current conditions are exceptional. Therefore, the above paragraph must be applied as we review current and future infrastructure investment.

2. 2020 - 2040 Priorities

2.1 Electrification

2.1.1 In December 2013 the Government established the North of England Electrification Task Force (ETF) with a central brief to prioritise the North of England's rail lines for electrification on economic grounds. To undertake the detailed assessment work, an Electrification Stakeholder Working Group comprising representatives from northern local authorities, Merseytravel, TfGM, West Yorkshire PTE and the rail industry was established. The thirty-two rail routes of the Northern Rail and TransPennine Express franchise areas were considered.

2.1.2 On 5 March 2015, the North of England ETF published its report, 'Northern Sparks', stating that:

“Across the world a modern urban or indeed intercity railway is an electric railway because there are a number of significant benefits from electric traction”.

The Electrification Task Force recommended that 12 routes (Tier 1) 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) which runs for the 5 years from 2019 to 2024.

2.1.3 The choice of routes within the Northern Sparks Report was based on assessing their economic contribution. TWNW commended this report, recognising the significant benefits electrification would bring for passengers.

2.1.4 These benefits include better reliability, faster acceleration and quicker journey times especially for services with frequent stops. In turn there is proof that electrification brings major social, economic and environmental benefits – ‘the sparks effect’. With this response, **we include a copy of the Northern Sparks Report**, as we feel it is worthy of more detailed consideration, and hopefully, the inclusion of some elements in future proposals

2.1.5 Unfortunately there has been little progress in the 5 year 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 (the latter now proposed to become part of the bi-mode network).

2.1.6 The North TransPennine route is now being upgraded (TPE upgrade) in certain sections but the question of electrification is unclear, though wiring Church Fenton to Colton Jc will enable First TPE bi-modes to use more of their electric capability. It is clear to us that this line should be fully electrified between Manchester and Colton Junction with appropriate capacity enhancements to permit growth in both local and long-distance services.

2.1.7 Recently, Network Rail Chief Executive Andrew Haines has stated that: “We have to be bolder about demonstrating what electrification can do” and that the Government should “start soon and start progressively”. Also, crucially, Andrew Haines believes that Network Rail could deliver electrification costs which are “much more credible and palatable than they were”. (Ref: Haines: electrification must start soon and progressively, in Rail Issue 904, May 6 – May 19 2020, pp 12-13).

2.1.8 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 generally less favoured. In the light of this we would advocate that the priority (Tier 1) schemes in the Northern Sparks paper form the basis of future progress. In addition to Oxenholme – Windermere and North TransPennine these would include – the Calder Valley line, Liverpool to Manchester via Warrington and Southport/Kirkby to Salford Crescent. For a full list of schemes see the report which is attached.

2.2 Local service improvements

2.2.1 There is a danger that connectivity between city regions becomes solely focussed on city centre connectivity. It is imperative that local connectivity improvements into city centres and other hubs complement city to city corridor investment. Of primary importance in normal times is to provide more seating capacity for passengers.

2.2.2 Allied to this is the need for integration. It should be recognised, though, that the private car will probably continue to be more attractive than connecting buses to rail stations for many people and the challenge will be to bring about a step change in the provision of parking space at the many totally inadequate current station locations. With more trains and more passengers this vital issue becomes increasingly exacerbated. Accessibility at many stations is poor or non-existent for those with limited mobility. This should be a priority.

2.2.3 Away from the major conurbations, some single track branch lines will need to be upgraded to allow for extra services with either passing loops or double tracking. Two examples are the Morecambe line (the Eden project promising a large increase in passengers and working to an eco-friendly travel mode), and the Windermere branch but there will doubtlessly be others.

2.3 The Manchester bottleneck

2.3.1 Regrettably, proposals to solve the problem of 'the Manchester Bottleneck' have been under development since 2006, when the first ideas emerged as 'the Manchester Hub'. Those plans have evolved and been refined over some 15 years into the Northern Hub (2010) and now as part of Northern Powerhouse Rail. Yet no comprehensive solutions have been implemented and over those 15 years the situation has become increasingly worse. There is an urgent need to increase capacity in normal times around and through Manchester with more radical solutions in the longer term.

2.3.2 The Castlefield corridor is particularly vexing. The capacity problems on the Corridor have been made worse by the opening of the Ordsall Chord. Under previous plans for the Manchester bottleneck, it was always proposed that improvements at Manchester Piccadilly and Oxford Road would complement the construction of the Ordsall Chord. That has not been the case.

2.3.3 Current solutions to the congestion comprise a reduction in service frequency, affecting both local and longer distance, including interregional, services. Infrastructure solutions suggested have been extra platforms at Piccadilly and providing additional infrastructure in the area and on the routes feeding the corridor. In 2014 Network Rail published proposals for the dramatic improvement of Oxford Road Station. However, again, these plans have not proceeded, even in part. They should be reviewed, updated and implemented.

2.3.4 A further interim aid would be to reroute freight to/from Trafford Park via a new cord off the WCML in the Warrington area. This should be linked to the beneficial electrification of the former CLC route (Liverpool – Manchester via Warrington). An additional interim stage should be an objective review of which services operate over the Castlefield Corridor, to ascertain if any would be better diverted elsewhere. Such diversions should only take place after proper public and rail industry consultation.

2.3.5 Capacity at Manchester Victoria station and other locations is insufficient now for current and projected traffic. Other locations requiring additional infrdstructure include - Bolton Blackburn single track sections and various junctions which would benefit from grade separation, e.g. Euxton Jct, Salford Crescent.

2.4 The West Coast Main Line (WCML)

2.4.1 The WCML will need additional capacity north of Preston to cater for extra HS2 services as well as the current service level which should be retained. This will mean more passing loops or an extension to 3/4 running lines where possible. Where 4 track cannot be accommodated, we understand that a 3 track option could provide relief with bi-directional running. An example would be between Lancaster and Carnforth where Leeds & Furness line services have also to be accommodated. This investment will also pave the way for improving rail connectivity between the North West (& West Midlands) and Scotland in HS2 phase 2b.

2.5 Re-opening closed railway lines.

2.5.1 There have been many calls over the years for lines closed in the Beeching era to be re-opened for passenger services. There has been a fairly recent government initiative in this regard with a £500 million fund to help to make the case for the reinstatement of axed local services and also help accelerate the development of closed lines and stations which are already in the process of being considered for restoration. Hitherto, progress has been very lethargic over the years. We have previously suggested the following possibilities -

- Colne - Skipton
- Rochdale – Bury – Bolton
- Penrith – Keswick
- The Burscough Curves
- Poulton le Fylde - Fleetwood
- The Halton Curve

2.5.2 It is at least pleasing to reflect that the last of these – the Halton curve - has now been reopened to allow direct passenger services between Merseyside and North Wales. It had the advantage of the track already being in place, thus minimising the infrastructure costs which have always been a major impediment to re-openings. Direct costs aside, a major consideration of

re-openings is the need to match capacity elsewhere on the system to enable maximum benefit in terms of service connectivity with the new lines/ stations.

3. HS2 phase 2b and Northern Powerhouse Rail

3.1 We support much of the thrust of the arguments in the recent paper produced by Greengauge 21 “Revisiting High Speed North”. As in that report we have concerns as expressed above on the lengthy timescales into the 2040s. Solutions to the current capacity issues cannot wait for that period of time. We focus now on the long term picture.

3.2 Manchester

3.2.1 Purely from the North West viewpoint, it is essential that the phase 2b line from Crewe to Manchester is built as soon as possible to provide useful connection to the economic heartland of the region and allow work to progress on the NPR scheme. We have already demonstrated the inadequacies of Manchester’s congested rail system.

3.2.2 It is unfortunate that whereas we understand that rail operators believe that through stations are more efficient than terminating stations, HS2 has terminating stations at every major location: Euston, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. In Manchester at least we firmly support the concept of a HS2 West – East oriented through underground station at Piccadilly as advocated by the Mayor of Greater Manchester. Together with a tunnel under central Manchester this would enable through fast NPR trains between NorthWales/Chester, Liverpool, Blackpool, Barrow and Glasgow and a variety of destinations east of the Pennines. It would also be possible for some HS2 services to continue their journeys in that direction, hopefully on a high speed route. Importantly it would be the ultimate solution for relieving the congested Castlefield corridor.

3.2.3 It is interesting to note that that the Greengauge 21 report maintains that this new tunnel and station would not have to wait until the full phase 2b is completed.

3.3 Liverpool

3.3.1 Lime St station has already had some work done to increase capacity. With the projected increase in services that HS2 and NPR will bring to Liverpool there will need to be an innovative solution to terminal provision in the city to deliver further capacity enhancements.

3.4 Other connectivity – Scotland and others

3.4.1 The new Piccadilly underground station would ideally handle Scottish services. As referred to above radical capacity improvements to the WCML north of Wigan and Preston will be needed. Ultimately we suggest that action should be taken to work with the Scottish Government to build a high speed line throughout.

3.4.2 The “Revisiting High Speed North” paper emphasises the need to consider TPE upgrade as complementary to NPR – combining sections of high speed line with upgrading (e.g. 4 tracking of existing lines).

3.4.3 There is a current campaign to restore through links between West Yorkshire and Scotland via the Settle-Carlisle line. In the longer term this would help to relieve pressure on the WCML north of Preston which will become increasingly busier and the route can also be used for freight.

3.4.4 Currently Manchester – Sheffield rail links are poor. This is a very important transpennine link which could be neglected by HS2 phase 2 & NPR. Intermediate infrastructure upgrade is necessary and further improvements in tandem with HS2 phase 2b and NPR. The route also has potential for Manchester - St. Pancras direct services to connect with HS1, given the decision not to provide the London HS2/HS1 link. In connection with this, upgrades in the Sheffield area would be needed.

3.5 International connectivity

3.5.1 We had previously understood that the proposed location of the Manchester Airport HS station will be some distance from the Airport Terminals. We can appreciate the reasoning behind this location but stress that the best possible measures must be taken to ensure that passenger interchange arrangements are as convenient as possible.

3.5.2 Liverpool John Lennon Airport has poor public transport connectivity. The airport forecasts an increase in passengers, so there needs to be significant investment in public transport access, perhaps a combination of light and heavy rail, as well as bus provision. Ultimately we would wish to see the Airport directly rail served.

3.6 Supporting policies

3.6.1 Government has to be in the driving seat, but clearly local input is essential. Transport for the North and Rail North should work in close conjunction taking into account local connectivity in both urban and more rural areas of the North West. Public transport is vital in those areas for environmental and capacity provision reasons.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours faithfully,

John A Moorhouse

John Moorhouse
Company Secretary