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Northern support for HS2 jumps the rails

By Andrew Bounds and Mark Odell



The widespread support from northern cities and towns for the £32.7bn high-speed rail line is fracturing over concerns some will be left on the slow track.

Intense lobbying from communities including Liverpool and Warrington has left the government with a near impossible task as it prepares to announce in January the second phase of the scheme, north of Birmingham.



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Patrick McLoughlin, transport secretary, had already delayed from December details of the so-called Y-route that would link Manchester and Leeds to the proposed London to Birmingham section.

That delay led to feverish speculation over the winners and losers in northern communities from the High Speed 2 (HS2) rail project, still in its planning stages and facing many hurdles before work is due to start in 2016.

While attention has focused on the southern opposition to the first phase, due for completion in 2026, the more supportive northern councils and business leaders are at odds over the route for phase two as well as the number and location of the stops. On the current timetable, the Manchester and Leeds legs are due to become operational in 2033.

In the northwest, some of the strongest lobbying has come from Liverpool and Warrington, which fear they will suffer serious disadvantage, compared with Manchester and Leeds. Authorities in Cheshire are also pushing hard for a stop at Crewe. Manchester and Leeds are concerned mainly with maintaining the fastest possible connection times to London, which would be undermined by many intermediate stops.

Robert Hough, chairman of the Liverpool city region local enterprise partnership (Lep), said: "The route must not disadvantage Liverpool by making the journey to Manchester quicker. It is vital for Liverpool to maintain its economic position... If the government is backing localism and creating city regions there must be a level playing field."

When the government laid out the London to Birmingham route in January, it released outline proposals for the second phase that alarmed Liverpool.

The plans showed trains serving Liverpool would rejoin the existing West Coast mainline just north of Birmingham, giving a journey time to London of 106 minutes, a little less than 40 minutes slower than high-speed services to Manchester. Presently the fastest London to Liverpool service is two minutes slower than one to Manchester.

Merseyside MPs want Liverpool services run on the high-speed line further north, possibly to the old railway town of Crewe, before splitting off, which would reduce the gap with Manchester to 20 minutes.

That plan would be welcomed by Pete Waterman, the record producer and a steam train enthusiast, who is leading the Cheshire and Warrington Lep's push for a stop at Crewe, which could connect with trains to Chester, Wales and the Midlands.

Mr Waterman, who owns L&NWR Heritage, a Crewe-based rolling stock maintenance company, said: "There are 6m people within an hour of Crewe. It is why the Victorians built the station there. You need connectivity. It would be a tonic for the whole northwest."

However, further to the north and nearer Liverpool, the town of Warrington, which is less than two hours from London on the existing mainline, fears being marginalised.

"We are concerned," said Steven Broomhead, chief executive of the town council. "We have a very good service to Euston and if the investment is not maintained in the existing railway we could be at a disadvantage."

Graham Brady, Conservative MP for Altrincham and Sale West, chairman of the 1922 committee of backbench Conservatives, said he was pressing for a station in south Manchester. That could be near Manchester airport, the UK's third busiest, and in the Tatton constituency of George Osborne, chancellor, and there could be pressure for expensive tunnelling to "hide" the line there.

The main split in HS2, the so-called Y, is likely to be near Lichfield and this has led to a tussle on the eastern line to Leeds. Derby and Nottingham are vying for a station, with speculation favouring Toton Sidings, a goods yard in the outskirts of Nottingham, near the M1 motorway, or at East Midlands airport. A stop in South Yorkshire is also probable.

James Newman, chairman of Sheffield City Region Lep, which spans an area from Doncaster to Derbyshire, said he was "hopeful" the city would get a station. One theory favours Meadowhall, a big shopping centre next to the M1, which has rail links across the north and a tram line to Sheffield.

Advocates of more stops point to recent remarks by Mr McLoughlin emphasising the need for connectivity. But high-speed rail executives offer a counter argument based on Treasury concerns about the cost of HS2.

“If the objective is to cut the cost of this project then the best way of doing that is to build a line with as few stops as possible, which also has the advantage of keeping the line truly high speed. Stations are expensive to build and they have to be maintained, while slowing the services down,” said an executive.

Mr Brady said the protests in the south against the line could be echoed in the north unless “quick and generous compensation” was offered to those affected by the route.

Whatever course the government chooses, one thing it can be certain of is that in the eyes of some it will have got it wrong.

High Court to rule on first-phase consultation

January is a key month for the government in keeping the momentum behind HS2, with a High Court judge due to rule on whether the government’s consultation on the first phase of the line was flawed, **writes Mark Odell**.

Opponents of the rail project were in the High Court this month, where five cases against the London to Birmingham line were wrapped into a hearing that lasted just over a week.

If the judge were to rule in favour of the opponents it could lead to a delay of up to two years and have huge ramifications for the project, which is still in its planning stages. A judgment is expected by late January.

HS2 has cross-party support and the government is backing it with about £500m in funding over the next two years. An arms-length delivery body, HS2 Ltd, is to complete the documentation for the complex planning process that is scheduled to go before parliament at the end of 2013.

The lengthy parliamentary process, known as a hybrid bill, is due to be finished before the next general election in 2015 and was expected to cover only the first phase of the scheme. There has been speculation that the government might put the whole route into the one bill, although it is unclear what that would do to the timing.

If the bill were to pass as planned, construction work on the first phase could start in 2016, a full 10 years before the London to Birmingham section is due to open.

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