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Sheffield city centre loses out in HS2 plan

By Andrew Bounds and Mark Odell

Sheffield was dubbed the “Silicon Valley of the industrial revolution” for its 19th century innovations in steelmaking.

Yet, when David Cameron announced updated plans for the High Speed 2 rail line this week, Yorkshire’s “steel city” was bypassed.

While Manchester and Leeds will be directly served by the £34.5bn line between London and the north, Sheffield lost out on a station in favour of a stop at Meadowhall, a giant shopping mall three miles outside the city centre.

The decision, along with Sheffield city council’s recent veto of a big new Next store at Meadowhall, has brought tensions to a head between the leaders of England’s fourth biggest city and the out-of-town shopping hub.

Paul Blomfield, Labour MP for Sheffield central, is among those pushing for a rethink of the high-speed rail route: “The case for HS2 is about improving connectivity between our great cities. We need centre-to-centre links.”

Some think the HS2 link will accelerate decline in the city centre and reinforce Meadowhall’s emergence as a business and transport hub for the south Yorkshire region. Sam Moorwood, a planning expert at Sheffield Hallam university, said the decision “could make Meadowhall a magnet for investment”, with office parks springing up alongside its shops and cinemas.

The blocking of Next’s proposed expansion at Meadowhall in December was seen as a sign of the city centre starting to fight back. A quarter of Sheffield’s shops are empty and the council says more Meadowhall development threatens the £600m Sevenstone retail scheme that Hammerson, the developer, has put on hold since the 2008 financial crash.

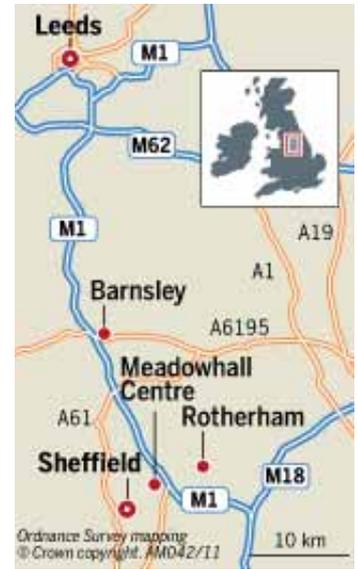
Mr Moorwood says Next’s appeal against the council veto, scheduled for May, will be a “landmark case” in the nationwide battle for survival by town centre shops against suburban retail parks. “It will decide whether planners are still able to protect city centres,” he said.

Lord Wolfson, chief executive of Next, told the FT that Sheffield had “enormous potential” but planners had held it back. “If you look at

other industrial cities they have made a success of their city centres. Meadowhall is not an excuse. Manchester has done very well despite the Trafford centre because it has been commercial.”

Mr Moorwood said Sheffield should build more city centre homes, as Manchester and Leeds had done.

But on HS2, it is a victim of geography. Like Rome it boasts seven hills but also has two rivers, making access difficult. The former coal mines around it that fed its steel furnaces complicated tunnelling to the south, said Ian Jordan, project director for the northern section of HS2.



A tunnel to take the line north out of Sheffield would have cost at least £600m. “We had to apply various criteria: cost, engineering complexity, sustainability, journey times and scope for following existing travel corridors,” he said.

Mr Jordan said Meadowhall “offered a better balance” – a hub with nine trains an hour into Sheffield, rail links across Yorkshire and to the tram and M1.

Nick Clegg, the deputy prime minister and MP for Sheffield Hallam, agreed. He said that a route into Sheffield would bulldoze through a 4,000 home estate and several high-technology factories.

Clive Betts, a former Sheffield council leader and now Labour MP, also supported the decision. “It is about connections to places like Barnsley and Rotherham too,” he said. “We’re part of a bigger city region.” He said he did not regret granting permission for Meadowhall, which opened in 1990. “It would have gone 20 miles down the road and taken the jobs and shoppers with it. It was a regeneration project that has worked.”

BACKGROUND NEWS

Winners

York is already just two hours from London. The decision to extend the high-speed track north of Leeds will bring it within 83 minutes of the capital and 63 minutes from Birmingham. Already a large rail interchange with a skilled workforce, it could lure fresh investment.

Manchester No expense was spared for a city becoming the powerhouse of the northern economy, which has 37m rail passengers through its three central stations annually. It gets a station at its airport, the biggest outside London, which will increase passenger numbers, and a 12km tunnel under the city to avoid disruption and blight, costing £500m-£600m.

Losers

Liverpool believes it is at a disadvantage as it will be 96 minutes from London, more distant than Preston and Wigan. The saving on current times is 30 minutes, compared with an hour for Manchester. However, MPs and business groups are pressing for a dedicated high-speed spur into the city, rather than have trains run on existing slower track from Crewe.

Nottingham While the station at Toton siding will be 51 minutes from London, Nottingham's tram system needs extending to reach it. Many travelling from the city centre are likely to continue using the existing main line, which will get passengers to or from the capital within 90 minutes after its planned electrification.

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