

Northern leg of HS2 could be built first 'to bring benefits to the north quicker'

The northern leg of HS2 linking Manchester and Leeds to Birmingham could be built first to bring benefits to the north quicker, the newly appointed head of the project told MPs.



Under the Government's current plans the first stage of the line, from London to Birmingham will be built first. Photo: PA

By David Millward, Transport Editor

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Sir David Higgins, who takes over as chairman of HS2 in January, told the Transport Select Committee he would "certainly look at" building the line from north the south.

His remarks came as he admitted that the north will face a long wait before they enjoy the fruits of the £50 billion scheme.

"If you are in the north, you want to see the benefits earlier.

"You don't want to see the benefits in 2032 or 2035, it is something which we will look at."

Under the Government's current plans the first stage of the line, from London to Birmingham will be built first, with the first 225 mph trains running in 2026.

Only then would construction start on the so-called “Y” linking the Midlands to Manchester and Leeds.

Reversing the order of the construction would require rewriting of the Parliamentary timetable with the Government currently only committed to introducing the Hybrid Bill necessary for the London to Midlands phase.

However even if the Government of the day does not adopt the most radical proposal of starting the line in the north, other options would be available to complete the line far quicker.

One would be to start work on the northern stage of HS2 before the line up to Birmingham has been completed, which could see the whole scheme being finished several years earlier.

With spending currently being spread over nearly 20 years, bringing some of the investment forward would not necessarily be out of the question.

The idea of starting the line in the north was floated by Graham Stringer, Labour MP for Blackley and Broughton, who is a strong supporter of HS2.

Mr Stringer welcomed Sir David’s remarks. “It was a really positive answer.

“I think he feels there is a need to speed up the whole process and also there is strong support from the pressure from the North.”

Mr Stringer believes there are a number of options which could be examined including starting both phases at the same time and meeting in the middle of the country.

A Department for Transport spokesman said the current construction timetable had been drawn up to tackle overcrowding.

“We are starting with the London to Birmingham section because it is the southern end of the West Coast Mainline where the capacity crunch needs tackling first.

“However, we will work hard to complete the northern sections more quickly than 2032/33 if possible.”

Sir David also told MPs that the real purpose of HS2 was to meet soaring demand for rail travel and the project would not starve the rest of the industry of investment.

“To date, everyone has focused on speed. To me, it has never been about speed. It’s about capacity - the bottom of the West Coast main line is full. It’s also about connectivity.”

