

Councillor Paul Haslam,
Chair, Transport for the North Scrutiny Committee

Dear Paul,

It was a pleasure to meet you at the Mayoral hustings in Harrogate on 17th April. I apologise for going somewhat off-topic by speaking to you in your current role as Chair of Transport for the North's Scrutiny Committee, but I felt it important to raise critical concerns with TfN's misguided development of their Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) project. The mistakes currently being made by TfN could cost the people of the North at least £100 billion per year in lost economic benefits. We have written on this basis to all Northern Mayors, and I attach a copy for your review.

Our concerns relate to NPR's wholly inadequate performance as a railway network, and its inability to deliver the transformational improvements in connectivity and capacity that are essential to Level-up the North's economy, and to achieve Net Zero transport emissions. Specifically, TfN's current Northern Powerhouse Rail proposals will collectively:

- Fail to meet most of TfN's own journey time targets, established back in 2016;
- Fail to deliver the 'London-style connectivity' that was promised in the 2022 Levelling-up White Paper;
- Fail to provide the transformational increase in Transpennine and cross-Manchester capacity, for both passengers and freight, that is necessary to achieve both Levelling-up and Net Zero in the Northern Powerhouse.

These concerns are confirmed in TfN's latest Strategic Transport Plan (STP, March 2024), which additionally makes the bogus claim that Northern Powerhouse Rail will deliver annual GVA benefits of £118 billion to the Northern economy. These claimed benefits – achieved by elevating the economies of the North-West, the North-East and the Yorkshire & Humber region to the level of the South-East, the UK's highest-performing region – equate to 'full' Levelling-up. These benefits might accrue from a railway scheme achieving optimum connectivity between and within all principal communities of the North; but certainly not from a single-line-of-route scheme such as Northern Powerhouse Rail, that is so plainly lacking in scope, integration and fundamental connectivity.

Thank you for reminding me of the approach that my colleague Quentin Macdonald had made to you in March of last year, highlighting the huge technical superiority of our alternative Network North scheme, based upon our wider High Speed UK concept. Thank you also for passing Quentin's letter (dated 26th March 2023) on to professional heads at TfN. We would be very interested to see any response you have received, that might allay our concerns, and we would be grateful if you could share this with us.

By coincidence, we had engaged with TfN Chief Executive Martin Tugwell at around the same time, and we received a response (dated 28/03/23, see attached) from TfN Rail & Roads Director Darren Oldham, that might well be similar to any response that you received. In Mr Oldham's response, he makes the continual assertion that TfN's Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme represents the "optimal solution", delivering "maximum benefits for the North".

Yet, aside from assuring us that "state of the art modelling techniques" have been used, Mr Oldham offers no evidence of any process that might have been employed to ensure his claimed optimisation. Moreover, he ignores the fact that his "optimal solution" now fails to meet most of TfN's original journey time targets.

However, the strongest evidence of Transport for the North's failure lies with the massively superior performance of our own High speed UK/Network North Exemplar Alternative. We have now developed comprehensive data to demonstrate that:

- Network North fully complies with all of TfN's intercity journey time targets;
- Network North will deliver journey time reductions across the Northern network far in excess of anything NPR can offer;
- Network North will achieve near-complete direct (i.e. no change of trains) interconnectivity between the principal centres of the Northern Powerhouse;
- Network North's proposed interventions will deliver huge increases in capacity for local services in all the principal cities of the North.

The above considerations represent the 3 key aspects of connectivity – reduction of journey times, achievement of comprehensive direct interconnectivity, and integration with existing local networks – and on all 3 considerations, our HSUK/Network North Exemplar Alternative vastly outperforms the official Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme. It is mystifying what “state of the art modelling techniques” Transport for the North could have employed, to convince themselves that their own demonstrably inferior NPR proposals represent the “optimal solution” to develop the railway system in the North of England.

Our data is set out in the attached documents I03, J03 and K03, which we submit for your review. These documents paint a damning picture of a hugely suboptimal and massively underperforming public project that will fail to deliver upon any of its remitted goals, and they represent a critical challenge to Transport for the North. It is of course for TfN to present an alternative narrative that might contradict our findings; but we believe strongly that they have no comparable research to back up their own Northern Powerhouse Rail proposals.

We would comment additionally that Network North's performance, far outmatching anything that Northern Powerhouse Rail can offer, is primarily achieved not by high speed *per se*, but by fully integrated railway network design. This includes not only route design between cities, but also full integration with the existing network and bespoke station solutions that (unlike TfN's Strategic Transport Plan) will achieve 'London-style connectivity' in all the major cities. On this basis, we are confident that our proposals will provide a launchpad for a Levelled-up and Net Zero North – one that could potentially achieve the £118 billion annual GVA benefits promised by Transport for the North, and enable the step-change road-to-rail modal shift that is vital to cutting CO₂ emissions.

You will hopefully appreciate our concern at Transport for the North's failure to deliver on its promise of an “optimal solution” for the railways of the North, and at its transparently false claim of triple-digit billion benefits for its own inadequate proposals. Put simply, Transport for the North's patent incompetence is short-changing the people of the North by more than £100 billion per year.

This is a situation that is plainly neither acceptable nor sustainable, and we would urge strong action by the TfN Scrutiny Committee to ensure that the Northern Powerhouse Rail project is brought back on track, and those responsible for its current failure are held to account. As Quentin suggested in his letter dated 26/03/23, a good first step might be for us to brief your Committee, so that you may fully understand the extent of the problem, and the full potential of the solution offered by Network North and HSUK. We will contact you shortly to discuss matters further.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Elliff BSc CEng MICE
Civil Engineering Principal, High Speed UK