

Rt Hon Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester
Mr Richard Parker, West Midlands Mayor

ref L33

High Speed UK
Connecting the Nation

www.highspeeduk.co.uk

20 Hartley Road
Harrogate
HG2 9DQ

16th June 2026

07591 959134

cc Mr Steve Rotheram, Metro Mayor of Liverpool City Region
Ms Claire Ward, East Midlands Mayor
Councillor Jane Ashworth OBE, Leader of Stoke City Council

Dear Mayors Burnham and Parker,

We are writing to alert you to critical deficiencies in the *Opportunity through Connectivity* initiative¹, launched in 2024 by a consortium of railway industry construction firms, to which you have given vocal support. Our research indicates unequivocally that you have been badly misadvised in this matter, and we would strongly urge you to reconsider your position.

The proposals for a Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link (MNWRL) purport to represent a credible alternative to the HS2 Phases 2a/2b proposals, cancelled by the previous Government in October 2023. They have now been taken up once more² by the present Government, which sees them as key to resolving the crippling congestion that exists along the M6 Corridor between the Midlands and the North-West. In reality, however, the MNWRL scheme is fundamentally flawed, and offers catastrophically poor value:

- **Costs** With the MNWRL specified to follow the same intrusive and environmentally destructive route that was selected for HS2's much greater design speed (note that HS2 was 'future-proofed' for potential 250MPH operation), the post-facto specification of a much lower speed (125MPH) will do little to reduce project costs.
- **Connectivity Benefits** The MNWRL scheme almost exactly replicates the connectivity deficiencies of the abandoned HS2 scheme; its only meaningful offer as an interregional intercity railway is its superfast 'Curzon-dilly' link between the centres of Birmingham and Manchester. All other Midlands-NorthWest intercity journeys will see no meaningful journey time or connectivity improvement, and many intermediate communities – in particular Wolverhampton, Stoke and Stockport – will be left bypassed and isolated. These multiple deficiencies are set out in detail in **Appendices A1–A7**.
- **Congestion Reduction** With most Midlands-NorthWest intercity journeys compelled to remain on the existing main line network, the MNWRL will fail to address the critical railway capacity pressures along the M6 Corridor that are holding back economic growth.
- **Conclusion** Given both its high costs and its extremely limited benefits, it is plain that the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link's business case remains poor, and that the claimed £43 - £70 billion economic benefits – equivalent to full Levelling-up of the regional economy – simply cannot happen.

¹ *Opportunity through connectivity : Catalysing economic growth through a Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link* MNWRL Consortium, September 2024. See <https://www.midlandsnorthwestraillink.co.uk/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/northern-growth-strategy-case-for-change>

Consequently, we believe that the MNWRL initiative will do nothing meaningful to address public policy priorities for Levelling-up the economy and achieving Net Zero emissions, either in the Midlands or in the North-West. As such it can only represent a further catastrophic squandering of public money and critical railway industry resources, to compound the unprecedented and potentially criminal waste that has already blighted Phase 1 of the HS2 project.

We are especially concerned at the baseless comparisons that *Opportunity through Connectivity* draws with the Rhine-Ruhr region in Germany. There is no doubt that this region's prosperity is critically dependent upon its dense, integrated and well-connected railway network; yet the report presents no evidence to demonstrate that the MNWRL's single intervention of a new high speed link between Birmingham and Manchester will either a) effect the transformation necessary to create a similarly-connected network in the Midlands and the North-West of England, or b) offer the most appropriate and cost-effective intervention, outperforming all available alternatives.

We believe that a radically different approach must be taken. It is plainly wrong to retrofit the new ambition, of a dense, integrated and well-connected network, upon the failed HS2 scheme and its MNWRL derivative, both developed with no worthwhile consideration of either integration or network. Instead, any railway scheme intended to link the Midlands and the North-West, and to create connectivity equivalent to the Rhine-Ruhr region in Germany, must be designed to rigorous and relevant railway engineering criteria, a performance specification in which the quantified improvement of connectivity, capacity and overall network performance is paramount.

However, this is not a design exercise that should be undertaken in isolation. To provide the necessary assurance of fitness for purpose, optimum performance and value for money, the MNWRL scheme must be tested against an 'Exemplar Alternative', and we would commend to your attention our High Speed UK (HSUK) scheme³ and its 'Network North' and 'Midland Ring' regional derivatives.

We would also suggest, for the sake of impartiality, the adoption of a neutral name – for instance the 'M6 Corridor Rail Link' or M6CRL – with a 'Key Technical Specification' formulated to establish the primary network performance requirements for this M6 Corridor Rail Link. This Key Technical Specification is set out in **Appendix A**.

Our assessment of the MNWRL scheme against the requirements of this Key Technical Specification, and against our own High Speed UK initiative, is presented in **Appendices A1–A7**. This exposes the MNWRL's catastrophic underperformance and its total unfitness for purpose as an intercity railway; its only possible redeeming feature, its one superfast link between Manchester Piccadilly and Birmingham Curzon Street, is fatally compromised by the lack of onward intercity connections from Curzon Street, especially along the CrossCountry routes to the South Coast, the South-West and South Wales.

³ Details of HSUK and its supporting schemes are set out in **Appendix B**. See also www.highspeeduk.co.uk.

Our assessment also shines a harsh light upon the £43 - £70 billion GVA gains that have been predicted for the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link. These huge economic benefits simply defy all credulity; we believe that they relate not to the connectivity gains that the actual MNWRL scheme would bring, but to the fictional ideal of a fully Levelled-up Midlands and North-West, in which all communities enjoy transformed connectivity.

Our challenge to the backers of the *Opportunity through Connectivity* initiative is simple:

- Q1** Please define the railway scheme on which the £43 - £70 billion benefit claim is based.
- Q2** Please demonstrate your 'due diligence', to confirm that the MNWRL project represents an optimised scheme, developed to rigorous railway engineering criteria, delivering the greatest connectivity and capacity gains between the conurbations of the Midlands and the North-West, and also within these conurbations.
- Q3** Please demonstrate your 'due diligence', to confirm that the MNWRL project will maintain and enhance the integrity of the national railway network, in particular the CrossCountry corridor through Birmingham that links Scotland and the North of England with the South Coast, the South-West and South Wales.
- Q4** Please review the technical comparisons set out in **Appendix A**, and provide an alternative narrative if you believe any of these comparisons to be wrong, unfair or inappropriate.

We trust you would agree, that these are crucial questions of public interest which demand answers; but noting the MNWRL consortium's lack of official standing, we would be grateful if you could treat these as 'Freedom of Information' requests to yourselves, and seek appropriate responses from the MNWRL consortium. We look forward to your prompt reply.

Please note that we have written separately⁴ to the regional leaders who are stakeholders in the Northern Powerhouse Rail project (also promoted under the Government's *Northern Growth Strategy*), and we will shortly be writing to the Prime Minister.

We would request the opportunity to meet you in Manchester and/or Birmingham, to discuss matters further. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require further information.

Yours sincerely,

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

⁴ Letter reference **L32**, available on <http://highspeeduk.co.uk/letters.html>, see also letter reference **L31** to Transport for the North. Please note that **Appendix A6** of this letter (ref **L33**) also addresses the critical co-dependency between the Northern Powerhouse Rail project and the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link project.

APPENDIX A

KEY TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION FOR THE M6 CORRIDOR RAIL LINK AND ASSESSMENT OF COMPETING PROPOSALS

Development of Key Technical Specification for M6 Corridor Rail Link

In the apparent absence of either any definitive technical specification for the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link, or any substantiated confirmation that it has the scope, scale and performance necessary to deliver its promised “opportunity through connectivity”, a ‘Key Technical Specification’ should be established to address the following core issues and determine fitness for purpose:

- 1) **Provision of 6-track Capacity along WCML axis, from HS2 Handsacre Junction to Crewe** The M6CRL must address the headline MNWRL justification, the provision of 2 new tracks along the WCML corridor to resolve the predicted ‘capacity crunch’ north-west of Handsacre, where HS2 Phase 1 will join the WCML. This problem is particularly acute at the level Colwich Junction and at the adjoining 2-track section through Shugborough Tunnel.
- 2) **Transformation of Connectivity between all principal Midlands and North-West Conurbations** The M6CRL cannot simply be about delivering a new superfast link between the centres of Birmingham and Manchester. It must deliver transformed links between all principal population centres besides Birmingham and Greater Manchester, including Merseyside, the Potteries, the East Midlands and other West Midlands cities.
- 3) **Preservation of the Integrity of the CrossCountry Corridor through Birmingham** It must be recognised that the continuity of current CrossCountry routes through Birmingham, from the North-West (and also from the East Midlands, Yorkshire, the North-East and Scotland) to the South Coast, to the South-West and also to South Wales, is crucial to the integrity of the national railway network. The M6CRL must preserve and enhance this connectivity.
- 4) **Comprehensive Direct Links between all major cities of the Midlands and the North-West** The achievement of direct (i.e. no change of trains), frequent and high-quality links between all major stakeholder communities is a primary indicator of the efficiency of an intercity network.
- 5) **Step-Change Enhancement of Local Networks in all Major Conurbations** The delivery of a ‘local capacity dividend’ in regional conurbations was always a key promise made by proponents of the HS2 project. The M6CRL must honour this promise by demonstrating how its new high speed line intervention will enable the necessary step-change increase in capacity.
- 6) **No Predetermination of Intercity Rail Links in the Northern Powerhouse** The M6CRL must avoid the mistakes made in the development of HS2, whereby its approach route to Manchester has predetermined the inefficient and inappropriate configuration of Northern Powerhouse Rail, with huge adverse implications for its effectiveness as an intercity network linking the major cities of the North, and its predicted delivery of £118 billion annual GVA gains.
- 7) **Avoidance of Critical Geological Problems** HS2’s unresolved geological problems along its new-build route through the Cheshire Salt Field must be noted. If at all possible, the M6CRL should avoid these critical issues.

HSUK’s assessment of the proposed Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link shows extraordinarily poor performance against all of these criteria. This assessment is summarised on the following page, and set out in greater detail in the subsequent **Appendices A1–A7**.

Performance Criterion		MNWRL Performance	HSUK Performance	Winner
1	Provision of 6-track capacity along WCML axis, from HS2 Handsacre Junction to Crewe (refer Appendix A1)	Although MNWRL offers 2 new tracks from Handsacre to Crewe, it fails to address the existing bottleneck at Colwich Junction and Shugborough Tunnel	The HSUK scheme resolves the Colwich/Shugborough bottleneck and provides at least 6 continuous intercity tracks between Handsacre and Crewe	HSUK
2	Transformation of connectivity between all principal Midlands and North-West conurbations (refer Appendix A2)	Like HS2, MNWRL's only primary benefit is its superfast link from Birmingham Curzon Street to Manchester. It fails to accelerate any other inter-conurbation link	HSUK will transform strategic links between all principal conurbations along the M6 and A50 corridors, with major improvements to capacity and journey times	HSUK
3	Preservation of the Integrity of the CrossCountry corridor through Birmingham (refer Appendix A3)	Termination of MNWRL Manchester-Birmingham services at Curzon Street will effectively sever the critical CrossCountry corridor at its midpoint	HSUK's proposed network enhancements in the West Midlands will enable major enhancement of CrossCountry flows through Birmingham New Street	HSUK
4	Comprehensive Direct Links between all Major Cities of the Midlands and the North-West (refer Appendix A4)	MNWRL will not create any new intercity links between Midlands and North-West cities. Overall, its score is 1 improved direct link out of 47 possible, or 2%.	HSUK will offer 37 improved direct links out of 47 – a score of 79%, literally 37 times better. It will also offer several new intercity links.	HSUK
5	Step-Change Enhancement of Local Networks in all Major Conurbations (refer Appendix A5)	Like HS2 and all other derivative schemes, MNWRL lacks any integration with local networks and offers no schemes to demonstrate how local networks will be enhanced	HSUK has developed Network North / Midland Ring connectivity enhancement schemes for Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Potteries & West Midlands conurbations	HSUK
6	No Predetermination of Intercity Rail Links in the Northern Powerhouse (refer Appendix A6)	There is a critical interdependence dictating both NPR's inefficient Liverpool-Manchester route and MNWRL's Cheshire Salt Field route	With no dependence upon HS2 or MNWRL, HSUK/ Network North fully delivers the TfN specification for intercity journey times	HSUK
7	Geological Problems (refer Appendix A7)	MNWRL will follow the HS2 new-build route through the Cheshire Salt Field	HSUK's proposals in the Cheshire Salt Field comprise upgrading of existing routes	HSUK

Table 1 : Comparison of MNWRL / HSUK Performance as M6 Corridor Rail Link

On the basis of the comparisons set out above, it is plain that the proposed Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link cannot be the optimised scheme that it is claimed to be, and moreover it stands no chance whatsoever of delivering the claimed £43 - £70 billion additional annual GVA benefits⁵. It is vital, from any consideration of local, regional or national interest, that a new direction is found, so that the people of the Midlands and the North, and indeed the entire UK, get the railway network that they need, and deserve.

⁵ The true provenance of this £43 - £70 billion claim must be established. It appears not to relate to the very limited connectivity gains offered by the MNWRL, but instead to an idealised scheme offering optimum connectivity.

APPENDIX A1

Provision of 6-track capacity along WCML corridor, from HS2 Handsacre Jn to Crewe

Refer Appendix B, Figures B05 – B08

This assessment addresses the primary rationale of the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link proposals – the perceived need to:

- replicate the extra capacity that HS2 Phase 2a would have delivered to the West Coast Main Line corridor through Staffordshire;
- avoid the 'capacity crunch' of adding the 2 new HS2 tracks to the 4 existing WCML tracks at Handsacre Junction.

The capacity crunch will become even more severe a few miles to the north-west at the level (and therefore conflicted) Colwich Junction where 2 tracks split to the north for Stoke and Manchester, and the WCML continues to the west with only 2 tracks through Shugborough Tunnel and the National Trust Shugborough estate, before expanding once more to 4 tracks through Stafford and onwards to Crewe.

All this creates a 'headline' requirement for 6 WCML tracks for intercity and freight traffic for the full length between Handsacre and Crewe, and this assessment considers 6 separate locations (B to G) north-west of Handsacre, as indicated in Figure A1.1 below. For greater detail see Figures B05, B06 & B08 in Appendix B.

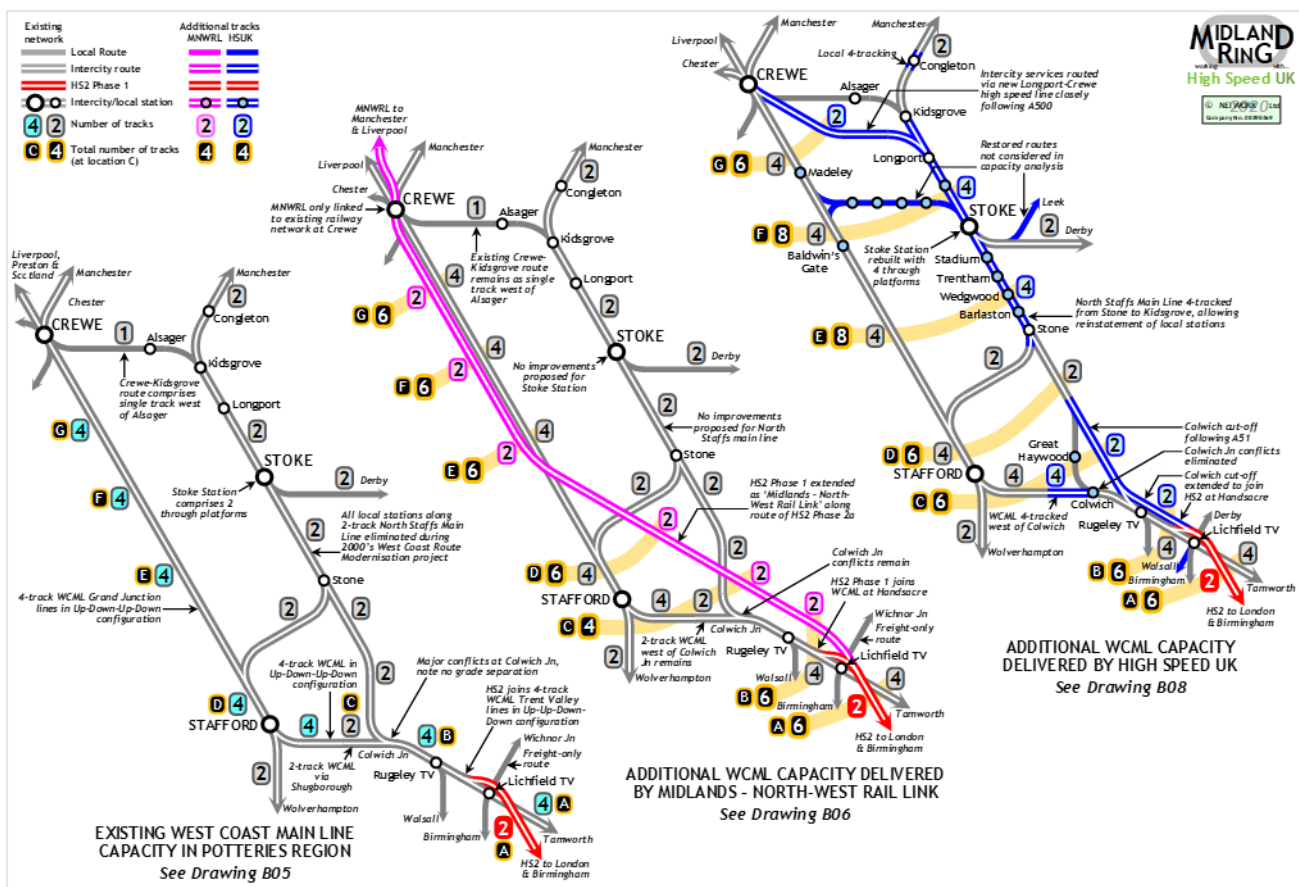


Figure A1.1 : Additional WCML Corridor Capacity delivered by MNWRL and HSUK

The capacity of the WCML corridor north and west of Lichfield/Handsacre, for the 3 scenarios shown above in Figure A1.1 (i.e. existing/'Do Nothing', Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link and High Speed UK), is summarised and compared in Table A1.2 on the following page.

Assessment Location		Total number of tracks (enabling WCML Handsacre Jn – Crewe intercity/freight operation)		
		Do Nothing (Figure B05)	MNWRL (Figure B06)	HSUK Option B (Figure B08)
A	Routes south & east of Lichfield	6	6	6
B	WCML Handsacre to Rugeley	4	6	6
C	Shugborough – Great Haywood	2	4	6
D	Great Bridgeford – Sandon	4	6	6
E	Stableford – Barlaston	4	6	8 ¹
F	Baldwin's Gate – Etruria	4	6	8 ¹
G	Madeley – Alsager	4	6	6 ²

Notes

- Local line capacity meeting requirement for 6 intercity/freight tracks
- Local line capacity failing requirement for 6 intercity/freight tracks

- 1** 8 tracks = 4-track WCML plus 4-track North Staffs Main Line, also allows for local & CrossCountry flows via Stoke
- 2** HSUK Option **A** (full redoubling of Kidsgrove-Crewe route, see Figure **B07**) will also meet 6-track requirement, albeit offering slower through journey times

Table A1.2 : Comparison of WCML Corridor Capacity

There is little doubt that introducing the additional HS2 traffic onto an already busy WCML, with its existing bottlenecks at Colwich and Shugborough, will cause major capacity issues to the UK's busiest main line corridor, and there is little doubt also, that the 2 new MNWRL tracks (also promoted as the 'Staffordshire Connector') will considerably alleviate this problem, providing aggregate 6-track capacity for most of its length from Handsacre to Crewe. However, the Colwich/Shugborough bottleneck will remain, and – as indicated in Table **A1.2** – that will leave the MNWRL 'solution' with an aggregate capacity of only 4 tracks at its most critical point.

These problems are avoided under the HSUK scheme, whereby Handsacre and Colwich junctions will be integrated into a single fully grade-separated junction at Rugeley, with 2 additional tracks (mostly in tunnel) provided through the Shugborough bottleneck. The HSUK scheme will additionally enable conflict-free transition between the 4 tracks of the WCML Trent Valley section (in Up-Up-Down-Down configuration) and the 4-tracks of the Stafford–Crewe section (in Up-Down-Up-Down configuration).

Also schemed is an upgrade of the North Staffordshire Main Line, with 4-tracking from Stone to Kidsgrove, and a new high speed line following the A500, between Longport and Crewe – all as indicated in Figures **B08** and **B21**. (Note also the slower-speed alternative of fully redoubling the Kidsgrove–Crewe line, as indicated in Figure **B07**.)

This will not only provide the required continuous 6 intercity/freight tracks from Handsacre to Crewe, it will also hugely improve Stoke's access to national intercity services.

APPENDIX A2

Transformation of Connectivity between all Principal Conurbations in Midlands and North-West

Refer Appendix B, Figures B02 – B04 and B13 – B14

This assessment addresses the true rationale for the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link proposals – an imperative to transform rail links between the Midlands and the North-West, and in so doing remedy the major congestion that currently afflicts the M6 motorway corridor, and hugely limits economic growth in both the Midlands and the North-West.

As befitting the title 'Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link', this assessment considers not only the primary cities of Birmingham and Manchester, but also:

- other principal West Midlands cities (i.e. Wolverhampton and Coventry);
- the entire East Midlands conurbation (i.e. Leicester, Derby and Nottingham);
- the Liverpool/Merseyside conurbation in the North-West;
- the Stoke/Potteries conurbation, lying equidistant between Birmingham and Manchester;
- communities generally to the south of Birmingham, lying on CrossCountry routes.

The inadequacy of the MNWRL proposals (and of the original HS2 Phase 2a/2b proposals) in improving links between the Midlands and the North-West is instantly apparent in Figure **A2.1**. This contrasts MNWRL's single improved intercity link – between central Birmingham and central Manchester – with the comprehensive improvements that HSUK will deliver on all routes. Essentially, it is the difference between building a line, and designing a network.

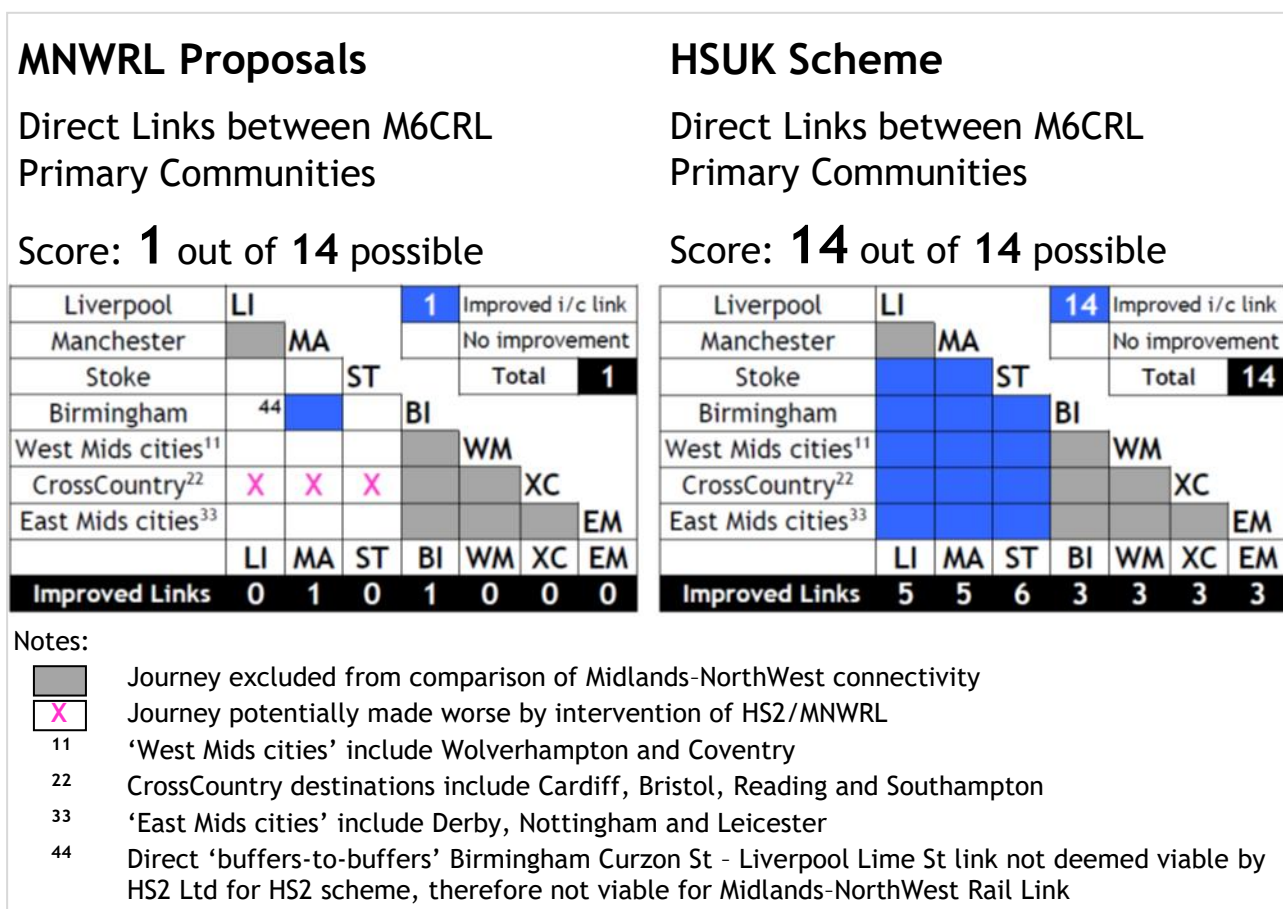


Figure A2.1 : Comparison of Direct Links between Primary M6 Corridor Communities

APPENDIX A3

Preservation of the Integrity of the CrossCountry Corridor through Birmingham

Refer Appendix B, Figures B02 – B04, B14 and B21 – B22

This assessment addresses the critical issue of CrossCountry connectivity, and the ability – or in this particular case, the inability – of the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link to effect improvements along this railway corridor.

With hourly services extending from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Plymouth, and from Manchester to Bristol and Bournemouth, all intersecting at Birmingham New Street, CrossCountry trains are unarguably the most crucial in connecting the nation⁶. It should be equally unarguable, that the MNWRL should promote this connectivity, and facilitate improved services from Manchester (and other Northern and Scottish cities) through Birmingham to the major cities of the Thames Valley, the South Coast, the South-West and South Wales.

Yet – as indicated in Figure **A3.1** on the following page – MNWRL fails entirely in this mission, exactly replicating the failings of HS2. Its accelerated services from Manchester, bypassing Stoke *en route*, will extend no further than the HS2 terminus at Birmingham Curzon Street – and luggage-laden passengers travelling to CrossCountry destinations further south will be forced either to:

- make a walking transfer to Birmingham New Street, over 400 metres distant; or
- catch a tram (assuming appropriate extension of the Midlands Metro); or
- make a shorter walking transfer to Birmingham Moor Street, to catch projected Midlands Rail Hub⁷ services to Cardiff or Bristol (but not extending to Swansea or Plymouth etc).

None of these scenarios represent any sort of improvement to the present CrossCountry service proposition i.e. north-south trains running through Birmingham New Street, from Scotland and the North to the South-West and the South Coast. Any small journey time savings that might accrue are clearly no compensation for the imposition of utterly regressive station-to-station transfers, a huge degradation of the integrity of the CrossCountry corridor, and hence of the entire national railway network.

It should also be noted that the future of CrossCountry services in their current form is in significant doubt, given the clear intention to transfer premium services to Curzon Street and (under the Midlands Rail Hub initiative) to the adjacent Moor Street terminus.

All this is the direct result of the original failure to design the HS2 project with the necessary integration with the existing railway system, in order to bring about either an enhanced overall national network, or an improved network within the West Midlands conurbation; and the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link proposals do nothing to redress this calamitous situation.

⁶ A CrossCountry service from Glasgow Central to Plymouth interconnects 7 out of 12 UK primary cities: Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, Sheffield, Birmingham and Bristol. This is replicated in the HSUK demonstrator timetable as service HSUK01.

⁷ The Midlands Rail Hub scheme has been developed by Midlands Connect, with the intention of improving local links to the HS2 terminus at Birmingham Curzon Street, primarily by means of constructing new chords at Bordesley to allow local services along the SW-NE Midland/CrossCountry axis to run through Moseley via the Camp Hill. This will enable regional services from Bristol, Cardiff, Leicester, Derby and Nottingham to access the Moor Street terminus, and thus require a short walking transfer to Curzon Street. Further information can be found on www.midlandsconnect.uk/projects/rail/midlands-rail-hub/

MNWRL Proposals

Improvement of N-S CrossCountry Links via Birmingham

Score: **0** out of **10** possible

North-West ¹¹	NW								0	Improved i/c link
Manchester		MA								No improvement
Scotland			SL							Total
NE & Yorkshire				NE						0
East Midlands					EM					
South-West ²²	X	X	X	X	X		SW			
South Coast ³³	X	X	X	X	X			SC		
	NW	MA	SL	NE	EM	SW	SC			
Improved Links	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		

HSUK Scheme

Improvement of N-S CrossCountry Links via Birmingham

Score: **10** out of **10** possible

North-West ¹¹	NW									10	Improved i/c link
Manchester		MA									No improvement
Scotland			SL								Total
NE & Yorkshire				NE							10
East Midlands					EM						
South-West ²²							SW				
South Coast ³³	44	44	44	44	44			SC			
	NW	MA	SL	NE	EM	SW	SC				
Improved Links	2	2	2	2	2	5	5				

Notes:



Journey excluded from comparison of N-S CrossCountry connectivity



Journey potentially made worse by intervention of HS2/MNWRL

¹¹

North-West destinations include Liverpool, Stoke, Crewe, Warrington etc

²²

South-West destinations include Bristol, Plymouth, Cardiff, Swansea etc

³³

South Coast destinations include Oxford, Reading, Southampton, Bournemouth etc

⁴⁴

HSUK primary links to South Coast routed clear of Birmingham via Leicester & Milton Keynes

Figure A3.1 : Assessment of Integrity of CrossCountry Links through Birmingham

By contrast, the HSUK scheme has been designed with a suite of local interventions (see Figure **B21**) that will create huge additional capacity and connectivity in the West Midlands network focused upon Birmingham New Street. These interventions will enable step-change improvements in all national CrossCountry services – as indicated in Figures **A3.1**, **B13** and **B14** – and a similar scale of improvement in local services within the West Midlands conurbation – as indicated in Figure **B22**.

Comprehensive Direct Links between all major cities of the Midlands and the North-West
Refer Appendix B, Figures B03 and B13 – B14

- Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Walsall and Coventry in the West Midlands;
- Leicester, Nottingham and Derby in the East Midlands;
- Chester, Crewe, Liverpool, Warrington and Manchester in the North-West;
- Stoke and the wider Potteries conurbation.

- Improved direct journey (**3x** weighting)
- Existing direct journey (**2x** weighting)
- Single change of trains required (**1x** weighting)
- 2 or more changes of trains required (**0x** weighting)

[illegible]

Overall Connectivity Score:
69 out of **141** possible

	LI	WA	MA	CH	CW	ST	WV	WS	BI	CV	DE	NG	LE
Liverpool													
Warrington													
Manchester													
Chester													
Crewe													
Stoke													
Wolverhampton													
Walsall													
Birmingham													
Coventry													
Derby													
Nottingham													
Leicester													
	LI	WA	MA	CH	CW	ST	WV	WS	BI	CV	DE	NG	LE
Direct Links	7	7	8	1	7	12	5	2	5	5	5	5	5

Overall Connectivity Score:
121 out of **141** possible

The official MNWRL proposals score poorly owing to their exclusive focus upon accelerating the Birmingham-Manchester route. This leaves MNWRL unable to serve the other major communities of either the Midlands or the North-West, and as a result the other principal communities – including Wolverhampton, Walsall, Coventry, Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Stoke, Crewe, Chester, Warrington and Liverpool – will remain reliant on intercity services along existing routes.

These communities will either see no significant improvements (as indicated in Figure **A4.1**) or experience actual reductions in intercity services due to the diversion of primary intercity flows to MNWRL and HS2. ***This adverse outcome – which is particularly likely for Stoke – is so far not captured in the quantified assessments presented in this study.***

It is also important to note that the MNWRL initiative will do nothing to create new intercity links where none currently exist.

By contrast, HSUK's fully integrated design will establish a hugely enhanced network, offering the following specific improvements:

- Most city-pairs directly interconnected with high-quality intercity services;
- No more than a single change of trains required for any intercity link;
- Step-change network-wide reduction in journey times;
- Transformed interurban links from Walsall (to Wolverhampton, Stoke and Derby);
- As a result, much greater network diversity.

This improved intercity network – as illustrated in Figures **B13** and **B14** – hugely exceeds the connectivity offer of the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link. Overall, the network created by HSUK will come much closer to the ideal of complete intercity interconnectivity on which the predicted multibillion pound economic benefits are predicated.

APPENDIX A5

Step-Change Enhancement of Local Networks in all Major Conurbations

Refer Appendix B, Figures B15 – B23

This assessment considers the performance of the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link in effecting meaningful improvements in the local rail networks of its stakeholder conurbations, with increased capacity enabling enhanced suburban and regional services. This 'local capacity dividend' was always a key promise made by proponents of the HS2 project, and as successor project to HS2 (Phase 2a/2b) it would be reasonable to expect the MNWRL to be designed with the integration and network capability necessary to honour this promise.

Yet there is no indication that this issue has even been considered in the development of the MNWRL, as is evidenced by its complete failure to serve Stoke and the wider Potteries conurbation, and by the lack of any improvements proposed for local services within the Potteries.

This failure broadly matches the failure of HS2 in the Midlands, where the imperative has been to make local transport systems 'HS2-ready', rather than to harmonise and integrate for optimum network performance. This failure is now exemplified in the heroic but vain efforts of Midlands Connect to develop their 'Midlands Rail Hub' scheme, with new services concentrated on the capacity-restricted Birmingham Moor Street terminus, selected on account of its proximity to HS2/MNWRL services at Curzon Street.

It is significant to note that Midlands Connect have yet to develop coherent proposals either to quantify MRH's connectivity benefits, or to demonstrate how these benefits will extend beyond central Birmingham to other major West Midlands communities such as Wolverhampton, Walsall and Coventry.

Similar issues apply in the North-West, where Transport for the North have yet to publish any detailed proposals to demonstrate how MNWRL and Northern Powerhouse Rail will effect the necessary transformational improvements for local services.

All these major shortcomings can be attributed to a critical failure in railway network design, from the outset of the HS2 project. HS2's remit was focused upon the development of new stand-alone high speed lines between arbitrary fixed points; any attention paid to integration and network performance has been at best an afterthought, with all the crucial decisions on route alignment and station location already taken, and local transport authorities left with the usually impossible task of making their systems 'HS2-ready'.

By contrast, HSUK's fully integrated network design has enabled holistic development of the entire intercity network, with complementary local strategies developed (or under development) for all major conurbations that vastly outperform anything that the official schemes in the Midlands and the North-West can possibly offer.

Table **A5.1** on the following page contrasts HSUK's near-comprehensive provision of complementary local rail integration strategies, compared with the general dearth of any such strategy from official bodies i.e. the promoters of the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link (for Stoke and the Potteries) or the relevant local transport authorities in the Midlands or the North-West.

Conurbation	MNWRL	HSUK	Ref Figures	Winner
Greater Manchester	N	Y	B15, B16	HSUK
Liverpool/ Merseyside	N	Y	B17, B18	HSUK
Stoke/ Potteries	N	Y	B19, B20	HSUK
West Midlands	N	Y	B21, B22	HSUK
East Midlands	N	?	<i>In preparation</i>	N/A

Notes

	Local rail integration strategy prepared and published
	Local rail integration strategy in preparation
	No local rail integration strategy published

Table A5.1 : Local Integration Strategies

APPENDIX A6

No Predetermination of Intercity Rail Links in the Northern Powerhouse

Refer Appendix B, Figures B03 and B09 – B12

This assessment addresses the self-evident risk, that ill-considered decisions taken on strategic railway development in one part of the country may have major adverse effects in neighbouring regions. This failure of process is perfectly illustrated in the confused priorities that have applied in the development timeline for a 21st Century 'Liverpool-Manchester Railway':

- **2012** – HS2 Phase 2a/2b scheme launched along a broad N-S axis, with its 'Western Arm' entering the North-West via Crewe, joining the WCML at Golborne, near Wigan, and with a spur from High Legh to a central Manchester terminus at Piccadilly. This would follow a southern alignment via a 'Manchester Airport' station and a long tunnel under the southern Manchester suburbs. These routes are indicated brown in Figure A6.1.
- **2015** – Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) launched on a generally E-W axis, with a Liverpool-Manchester route (shown blue) projected also to follow the HS2 spur into Manchester. Onward NPR services to Yorkshire via the new-build Northern Powerhouse Rail route (shown red) would be forced to reverse at the Piccadilly terminus.

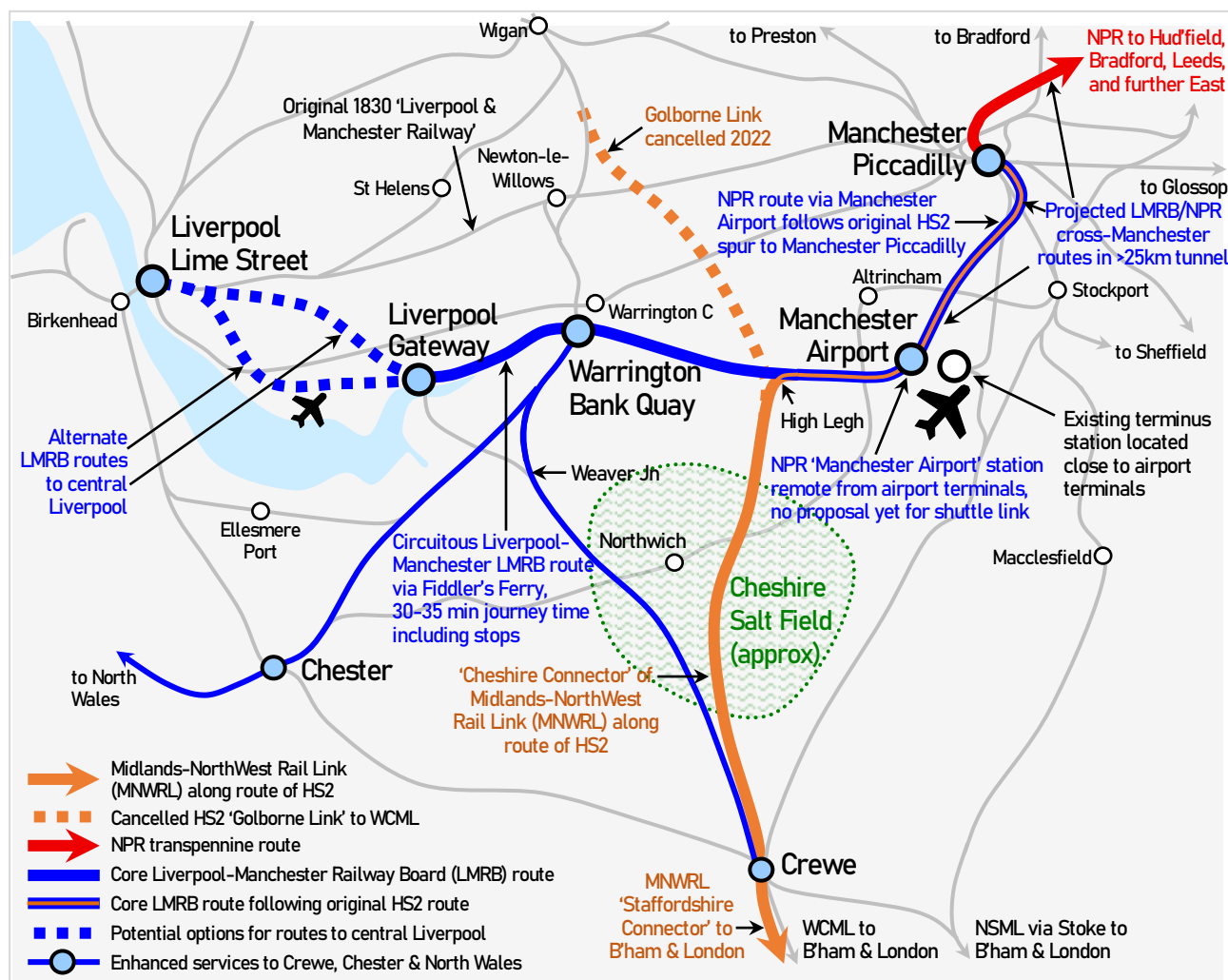


Figure A6.1 : Predication Effects of Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link upon development of Northern Powerhouse Rail in North-West

(Sketch developed from *Connecting the North-West to drive national prosperity – Our prospectus for a modern Liverpool-Manchester Railway*, Liverpool-Manchester Railway Board, 2025)

- **2022** – HS2 ‘Golborne Link’ to WCML (shown in brown dashes) cancelled.
- **2023** – HS2 Phase 2a/2b (from the West Midlands to High Legh) cancelled; remaining HS2 Manchester spur adopted by Northern Powerhouse Rail.
- **2024** – Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link (MNWRL) launched as a lower-speed alternative to HS2 Phase 2a/2b, but following the same original HS2 route for the full route length from HS2 Phase 1 at Lichfield to its Manchester terminus.
- **2025** – Liverpool-Manchester Railway Board (LMRB) relaunch western element of Northern Powerhouse Rail as ‘Liverpool-Manchester Railway’, comprising (from east to west):
 - a ‘through’ underground station for NPR & MNWRL services at Manchester Piccadilly;
 - the HS2 Manchester Spur via a ‘Manchester Airport’ station;
 - an onward route to Liverpool along the currently mothballed ‘Fiddler’s Ferry’ freight line via Warrington Bank Quay (Low Level);
 - a new ‘Liverpool Gateway’ station;
 - connecting routes to Crewe, Chester and North Wales, diverging at Warrington BQ.
- **2026** – Government’s *Northern Growth Strategy* (launched 14 January 2026), endorsing both Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link and LMRB’s ‘Liverpool-Manchester Railway’ as co-dependent projects.

The configuration of LMRB’s Liverpool-Manchester route, relative to both HS2/MNWRL and the existing railway network, is illustrated on the previous page in Figure **A6.1**.

It is plain that the circuitous LMRB route, following slow-speed freight alignments through Warrington, and approaching central Manchester from the south along a route originally selected for HS2, cannot constitute the optimum Liverpool-Manchester railway:

- Its predicted journey time of 30-35 minutes (dependent upon stopping pattern) is no better than what can be achieved on the original (and much more direct) Liverpool-Manchester Railway via Newton-le-Willows, first opened in 1830.
- The LMRB’s proposed route via the Fiddler’s Ferry freight line will block this line’s future use as part of a dedicated transpennine freight corridor, connecting Liverpool and the Humber.
- No design has yet been advanced for its new hub station at Warrington Bank Quay, with efficient co-located interchange between existing high-level WCML platforms, new low-level platforms for the trunk Liverpool-Manchester route, and junction platforms for the southward through routes towards Crewe and Chester.
- No proposal has yet been put forward for how its proposed ‘Manchester Airport’ station, located to the west of the M56, will be efficiently connected to the actual airport terminals, located 1.5km to the east, on the other side of the motorway.
- It is also plain that the LMRB solution for Manchester Airport does not comprise an integrated initiative that will deliver efficient and comprehensive surface access to Manchester Airport from all major Northern Powerhouse communities.
- No viable proposal yet exists for its station at Manchester Piccadilly. It will comprise either an operationally-difficult and limited-capacity surface-level terminus, or an underground station with sufficient platforms to accommodate both NPR through flows and MNWRL/HS2 terminating services – all constructed on a broad north-south alignment in a cavern below the existing station, with huge costs and risks. ***It should be noted that neither option will resolve existing congestion problems along the Castlefield Corridor.***

However, the true cost of the Liverpool-Manchester Railway's predication upon HS2/MNWRL can only be fully appreciated through comparison with the vastly superior performance of the High Speed UK/Network North/Midland Ring 'exemplar alternative' scheme (as documented in other sections of **Appendix A**), that is not predicated upon HS2/MNWRL.

The HSUK/Network North scheme for a fully integrated network in the North-West of England is set out in Figure **A6.2** below. It is based around the core initiative of a new transpennine main line, starting in Liverpool, closely following the axis of the original (1830) Liverpool & Manchester Railway, passing under central Manchester in tunnel and continuing eastwards via the Woodhead corridor across the Pennines towards Sheffield and Leeds. The scheme will also create a new 'South Manchester Loop' to radically improve rail access to Manchester Airport, and provide a resilient diversionary route clear of central Manchester.

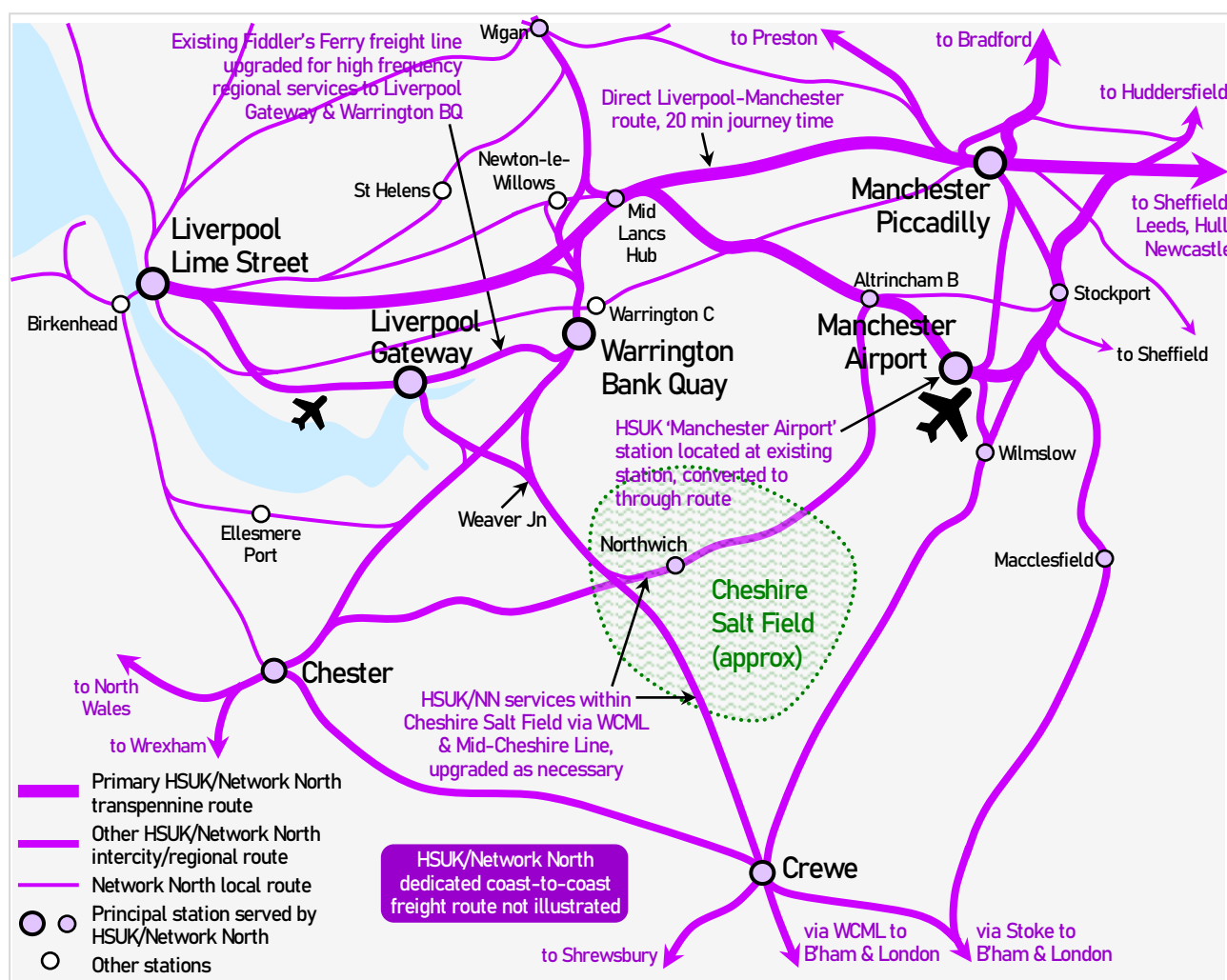


Figure A6.2 : High Speed UK / Network North Routes in English North-West
(Sketch developed from *Connecting the North-West to drive national prosperity – Our prospectus for a modern Liverpool-Manchester Railway*, Liverpool-Manchester Railway Board, 2025)

HSUK/Network North (as illustrated in Figure **A6.2** above) offers the following specific advantages over the LMRB's Liverpool-Manchester Railway initiative:

- 20 minutes Liverpool-Manchester journey time (and similar superiority on other journey times across the Northern Powerhouse, all meeting the requirements of Transport for the North's specification for intercity journey times).

- Dedicated HSUK/NN Liverpool-Manchester intercity route completely independent of dedicated HSUK/NN transpennine freight route via Fiddler's Ferry and Warrington Bank Quay (Low Level) – *not illustrated on Figure A6.2*.
- All intercity and regional journeys concentrated upon existing Warrington Bank Quay (High Level), avoiding the need for new (and probably remote) platforms, and offering Warrington greatly superior overall connectivity compared with LMRB scheme.
- All intercity and regional journeys concentrated upon existing Manchester Airport station (at its existing central location between Terminals 1, 2 and 3), transformed into through facility with massively increased capacity.
- Manchester Airport's rail network transformed, extending direct high-quality services to all major Northern Powerhouse communities.
- Central Manchester 'Castlefield Corridor' congestion problems addressed with new west-to-east cross-Manchester tunnel, serving new 'Manchester Central' station and new Manchester Piccadilly underground platforms, located under Fairfield Street and largely clear of existing station structures.

HSUK/Network North's demonstrable superiority can be attributed to many factors, the most fundamental of which is its design in compliance with clear, locally-established technical parameters, primarily developed for transformed east-west/transpennine connectivity.

By contrast, the priority of the designers of the LMRB's Liverpool-Manchester Railway, and of the wider Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme, has always been to conform with the established HS2/MNWRL scheme – which was developed with no thought for transpennine connectivity.

Through this clear logical contradiction between the aims of HS2/MNWRL and the aims of Northern Powerhouse Rail, Transport for the North has ignored its own journey time specification and put forward plainly sub-optimal transport proposals that will fail to meet TfN's self-imposed ambitions⁸ for transformed connectivity, and £118 billion GVA economic growth.

⁸ TfN's ambitions are set out in pp27-28 of *Strategic Transport Plan*, Transport for the North, 2024.

APPENDIX A7

Geological Problems in the Cheshire Salt Field

Refer Appendix A6, Figures A6.1 and A6.2

It is not the purpose of this study, to provide comparative assessments of either the detailed engineering of the candidate schemes, or of their construction costs, environmental impacts or overall risk issues. However, there is one specific engineering issue concerning the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link that must be addressed – its proposed routeing through the Cheshire Salt Field.

The Cheshire Salt Field is a large area of mid Cheshire, centred around the town of Northwich, which since Roman times has been mined to extract rock salt. This mining has traditionally been accomplished through solution extraction, by which fresh water was injected into the salt strata, and brine pumped out, from which the salt would then be precipitated.

This has had the effect of creating large underground voids, which have caused major progressive settlement at surface level, with the formation of many lakes (known locally as 'flashes'). This settlement is potentially calamitous in both its scale and its unpredictability; in the specific field of railway operations this settlement has always posed major worries for the necessary maintenance of 'line and level', with the ever-present risk of train derailment.

For the new Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link, this major risk is greatly exacerbated both by its new-build route across the centre of the Cheshire Salt Field along an alignment inherited from its HS2 predecessor with an unproven potential for collapse, and by its proposed high speed which would magnify the consequences of any derailment.

By contrast, the routeing of HSUK and Network North services via existing routes (both West Coast Main Line and Mid-Cheshire Line), where both greater historic knowledge of settlement patterns and lower operating speeds apply, constitutes a much lower risk.

APPENDIX B

HSUK (*unless otherwise noted*) DIAGRAMS ILLUSTRATING:

Proposals developed by Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link Coalition

Alternative HSUK scheme for M6 Corridor Rail Link

Index	Description
B01	M6CRL Primary Communities & Comparison with Rhine-Ruhr Region**
B02	M6 Corridor Rail Link Primary Communities and Zone of Influence
B03	Components of Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link
B04	HSUK New Direct Links & M6RCL Zone of Influence
B05	Handsacre - Crewe WCML Line Capacity : 'Do Nothing' Scenario
B06	Handsacre - Crewe WCML Line Capacity : HS2/MNWRL Scenario
B07	Handsacre - Crewe WCML Line Capacity : HSUK Option A Scenario
B08	Handsacre - Crewe WCML Line Capacity : HSUK Option B Scenario
B09	HSUK/Network North Proposed Infrastructure
B10	HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed Infrastructure
B11	HSUK/Network North Proposed Intercity & Local Network
B12	HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed Intercity & Local Network
B13	HSUK/Network North Proposed Intercity Services
B14	HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed Intercity Services
B15	HSUK/Network North Proposed New Works & Upgrades in Greater Manchester
B16	HSUK/Network North Indicative Suburban Services in Greater Manchester
B17	HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed New Works & Upgrades in Merseyside
B18	HSUK/Midland Ring Indicative Suburban Services in Merseyside
B19	HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed New Works & Upgrades in Potteries
B20	HSUK/Midland Ring Indicative Suburban Services in Potteries
B21	HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed New Works & Upgrades in West Midlands
B22	HSUK/Midland Ring Indicative Suburban Services in West Midlands
B23	Midlands Rail Hub service plan##

** Drawing by *Opportunity through Connectivity* Coalition

Drawing by Midlands Connect

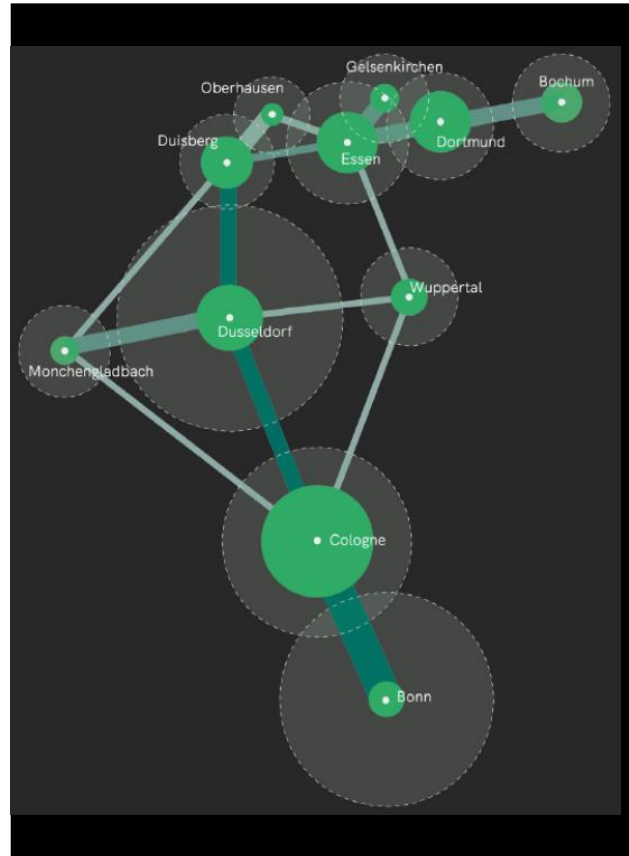
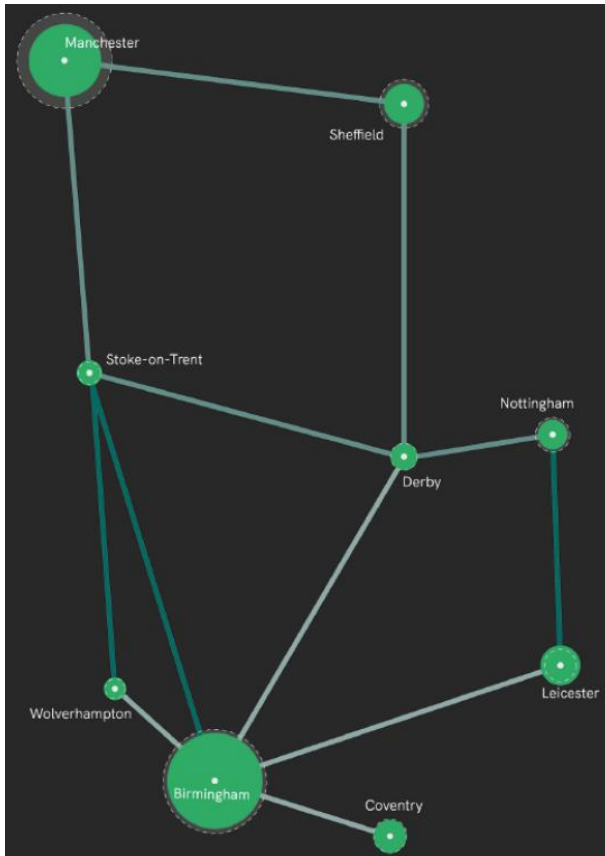


Figure B01 : M6CRL Primary Communities & Comparison with Rhine-Ruhr Region
(Drawings reproduced from 2024 report *Opportunity Through Connectivity*)

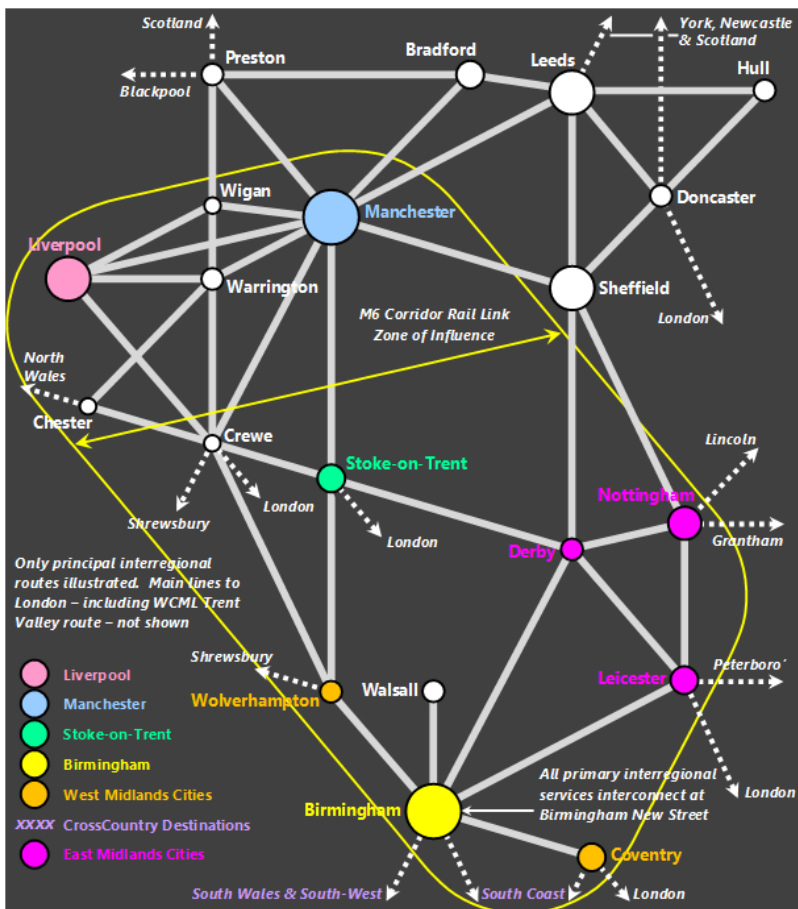


Figure B02 : M6 Corridor Rail Link Primary Communities and Zone of Influence

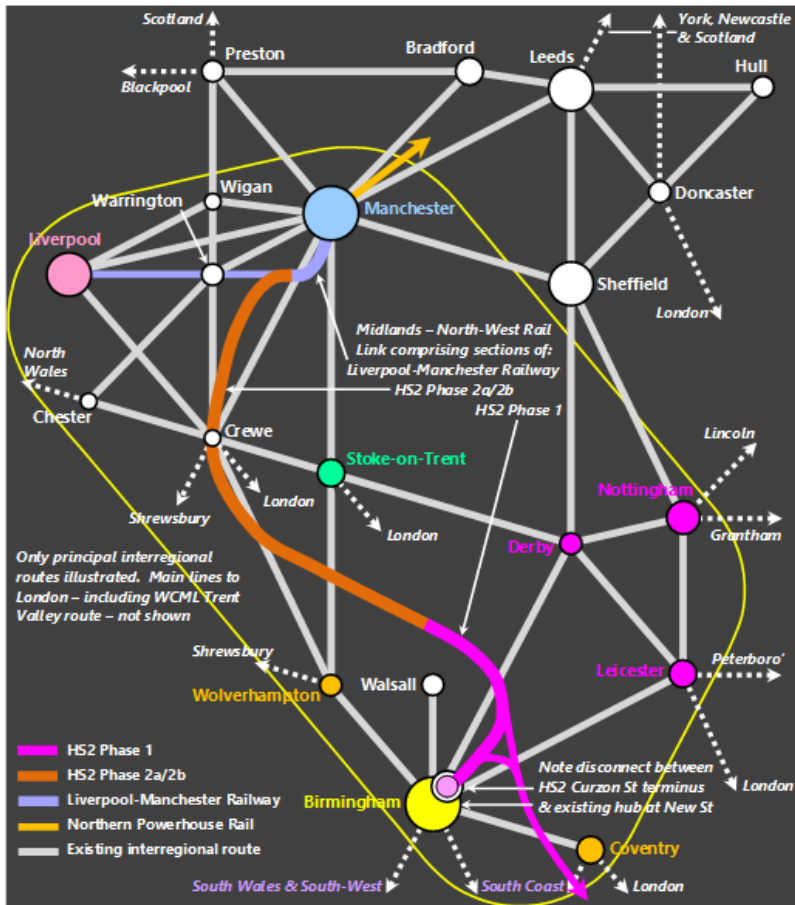


Figure B03 : Components of Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link

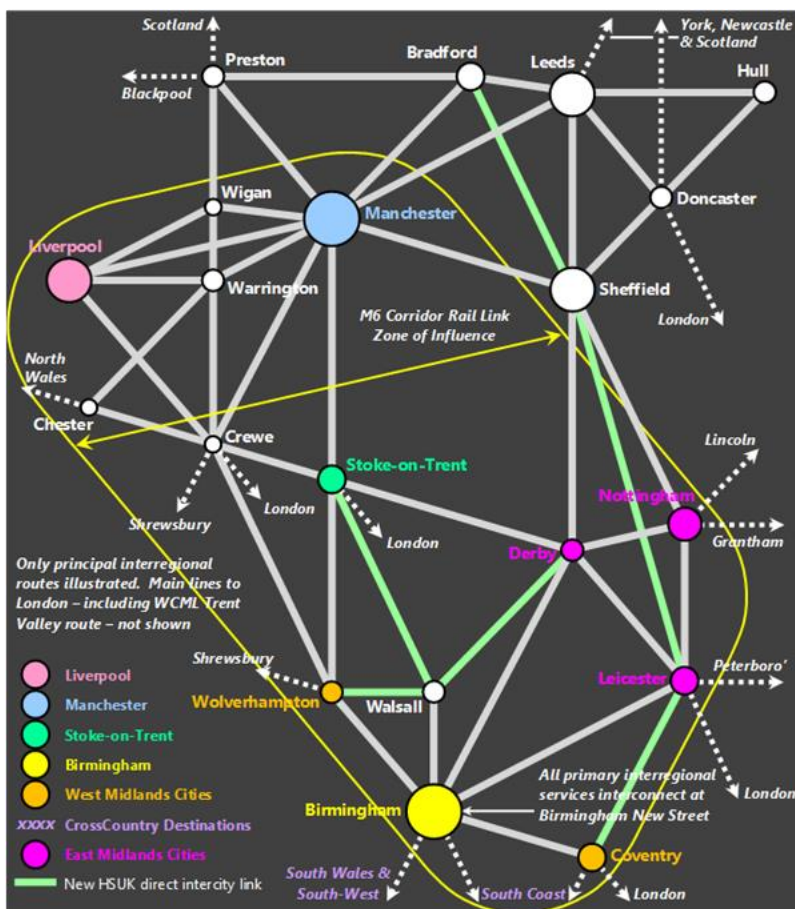
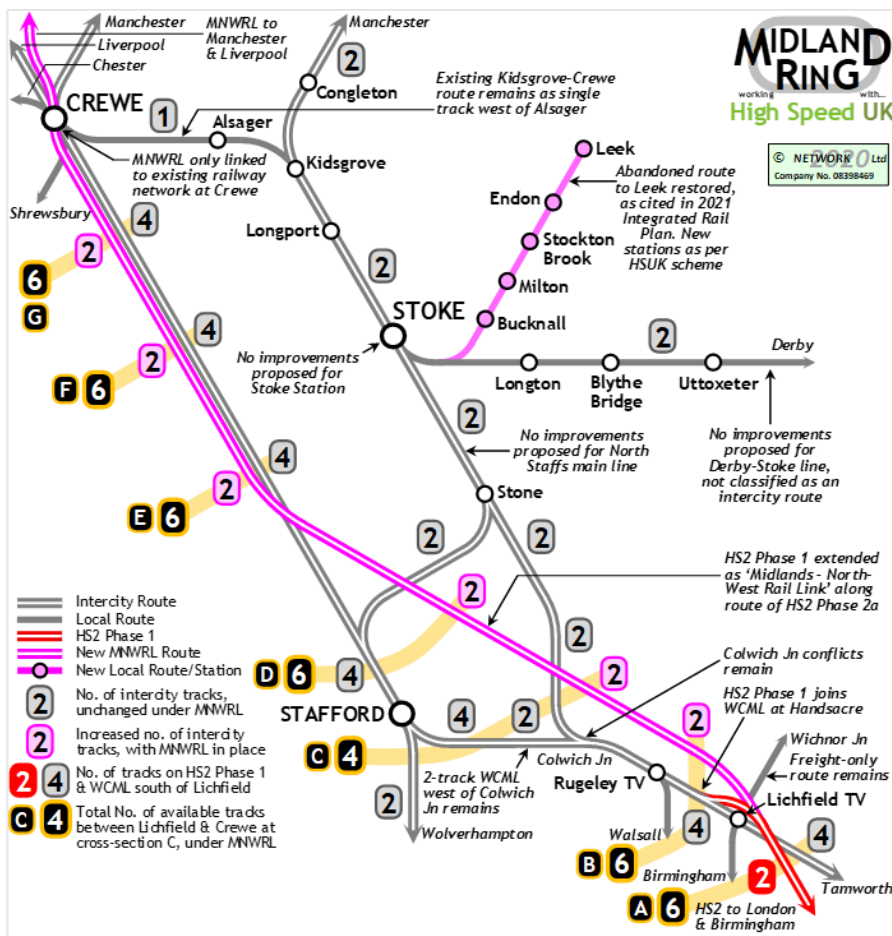
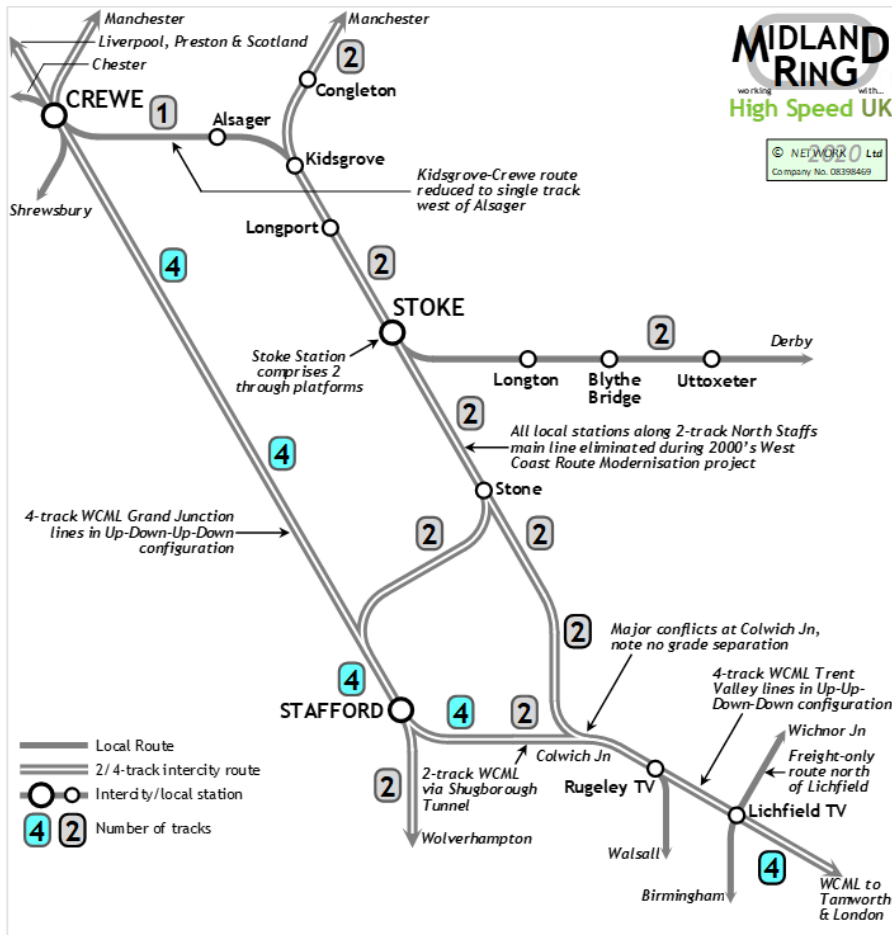


Figure B04 : HSUK New Direct Links & M6RCL Zone of Influence



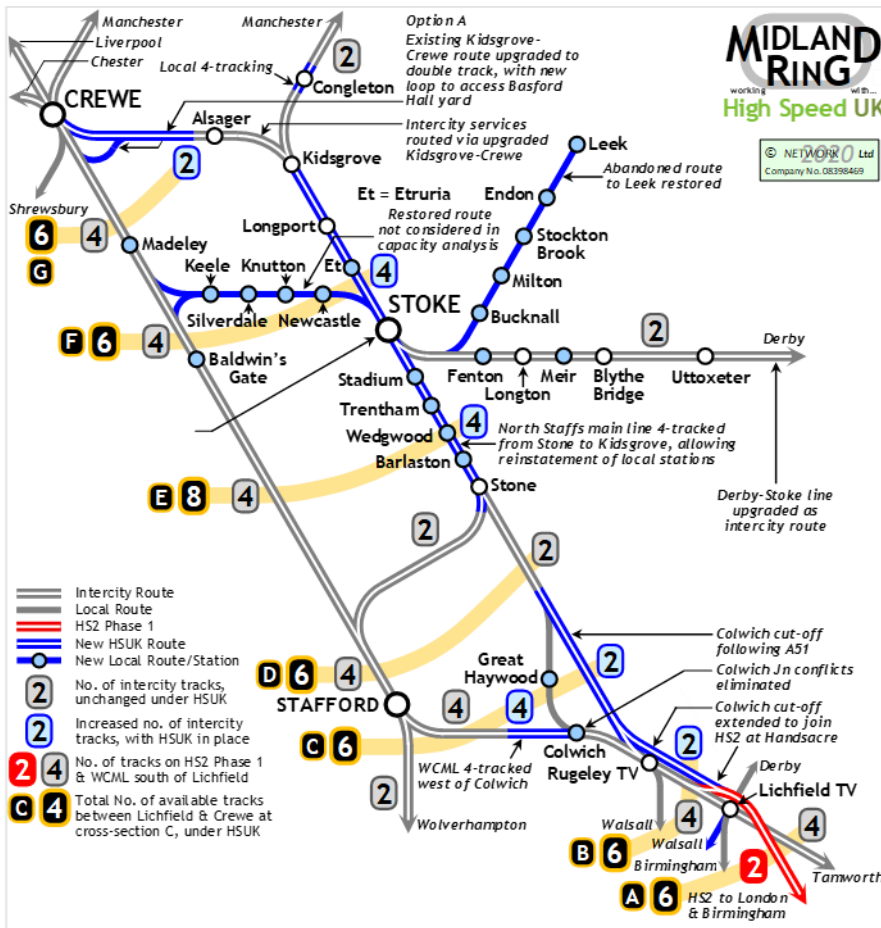


Figure B07 :
Handsacre – Crewe
WCML Line Capacity
HSUK – Option A

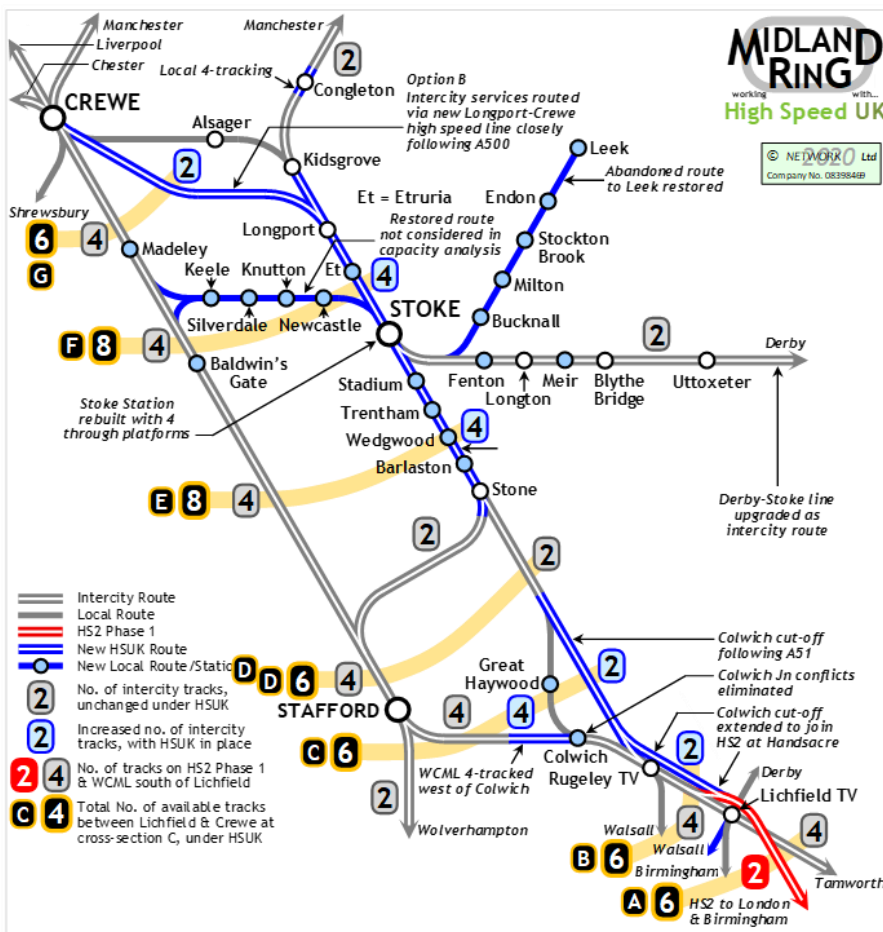


Figure B08 :
Handsacre – Crewe
WCML Line Capacity
HSUK – Option B

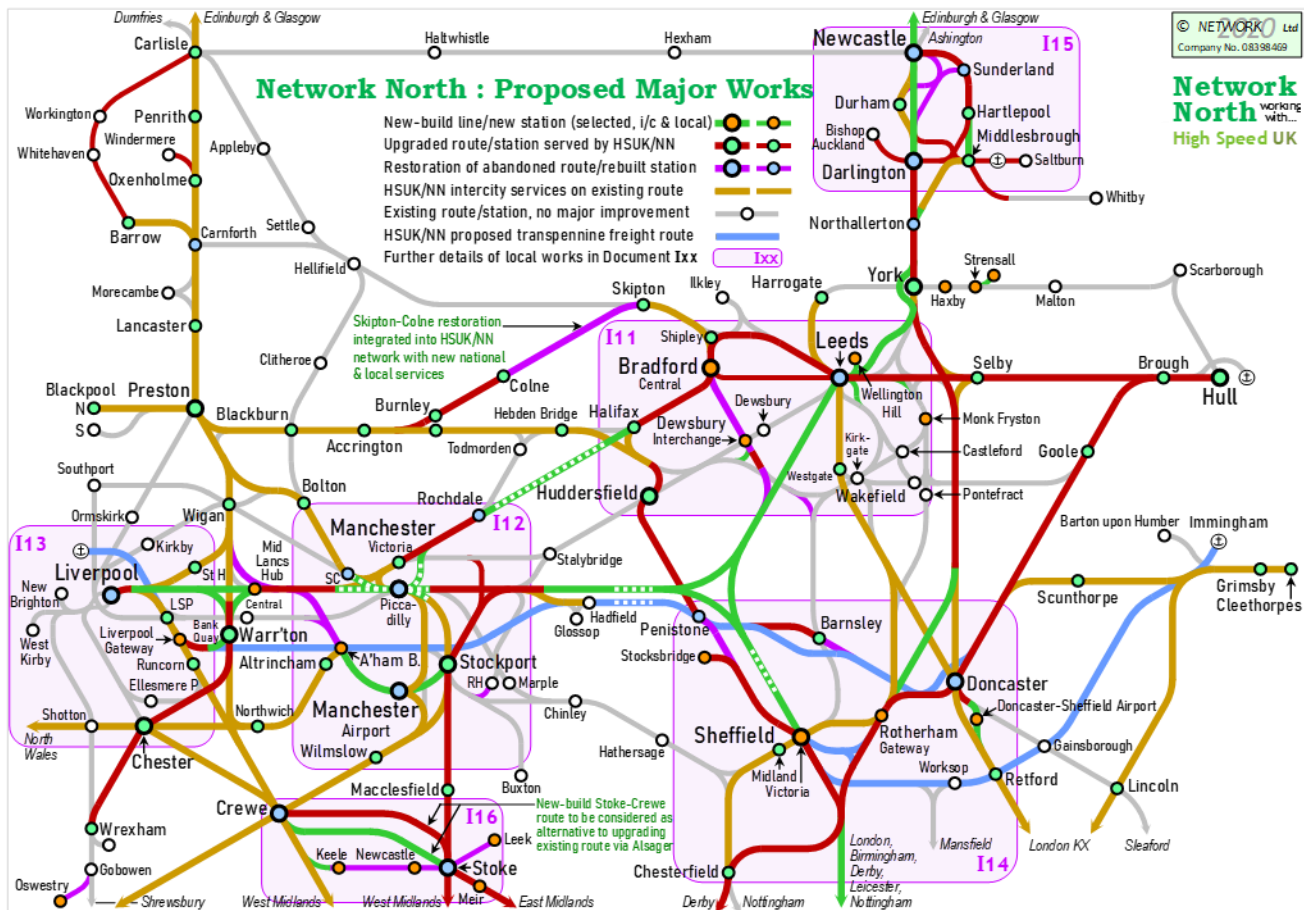


Figure B09 : HSUK/Network North Proposed Infrastructure

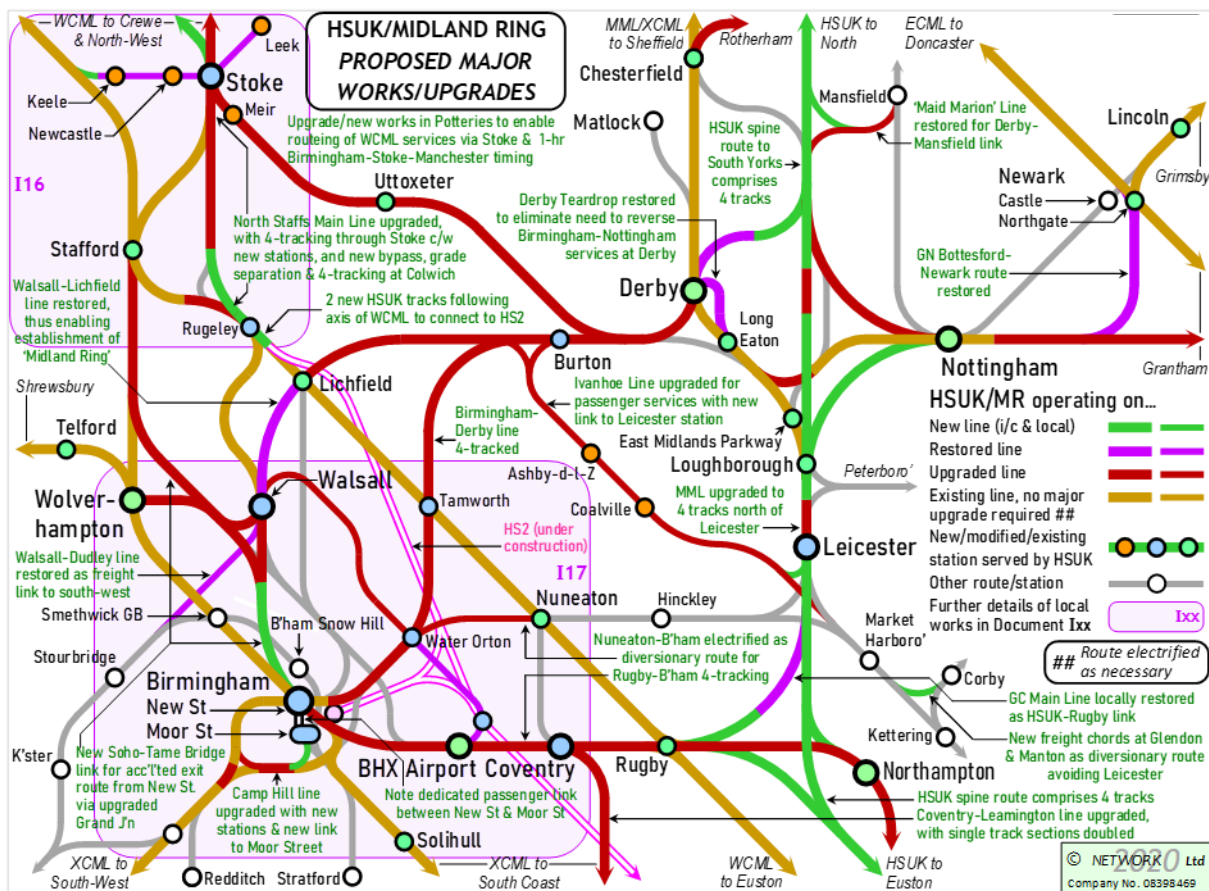


Figure B10 : HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed Infrastructure

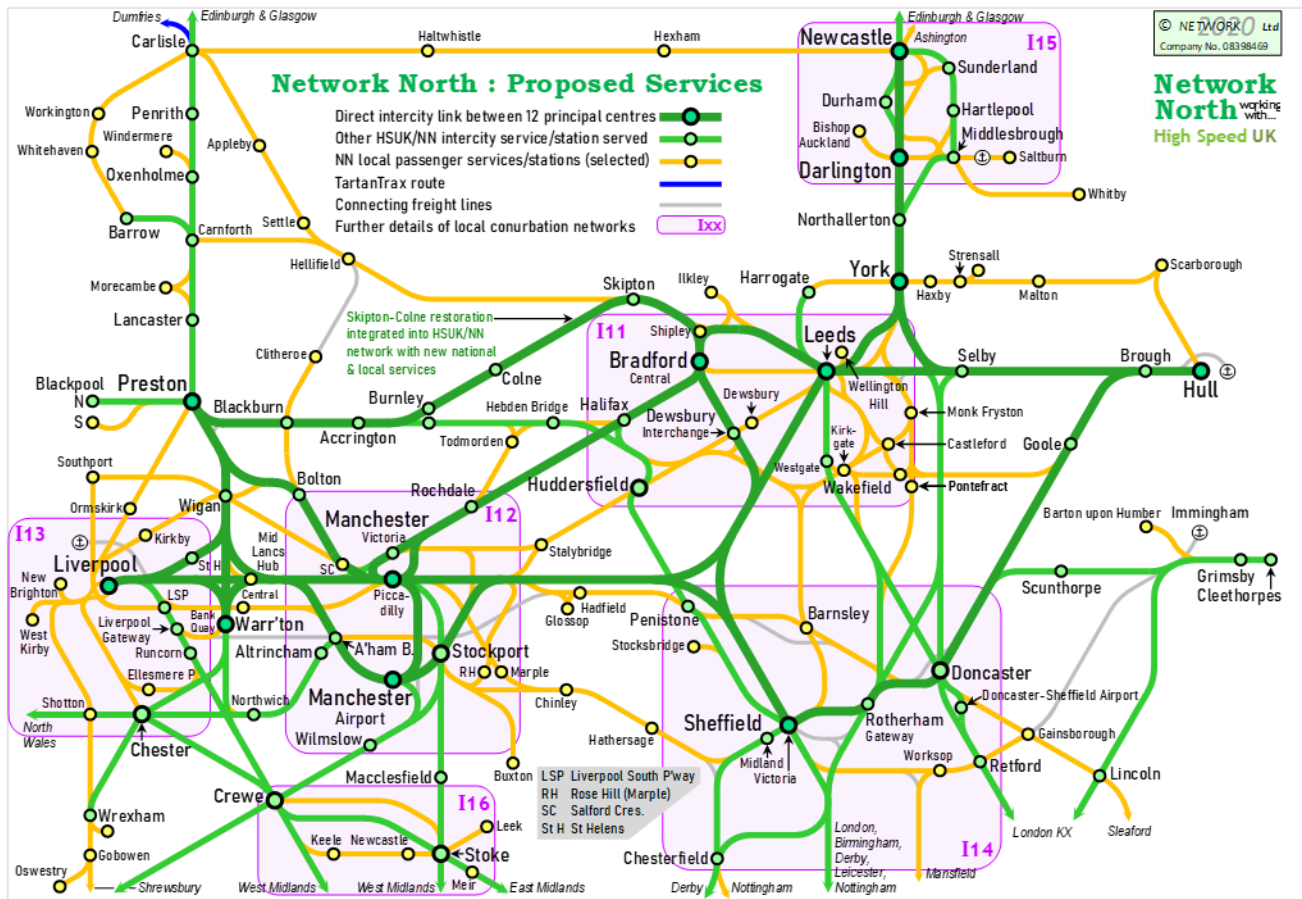


Figure B11 : HSUK/Network North Proposed Intercity & Local Network

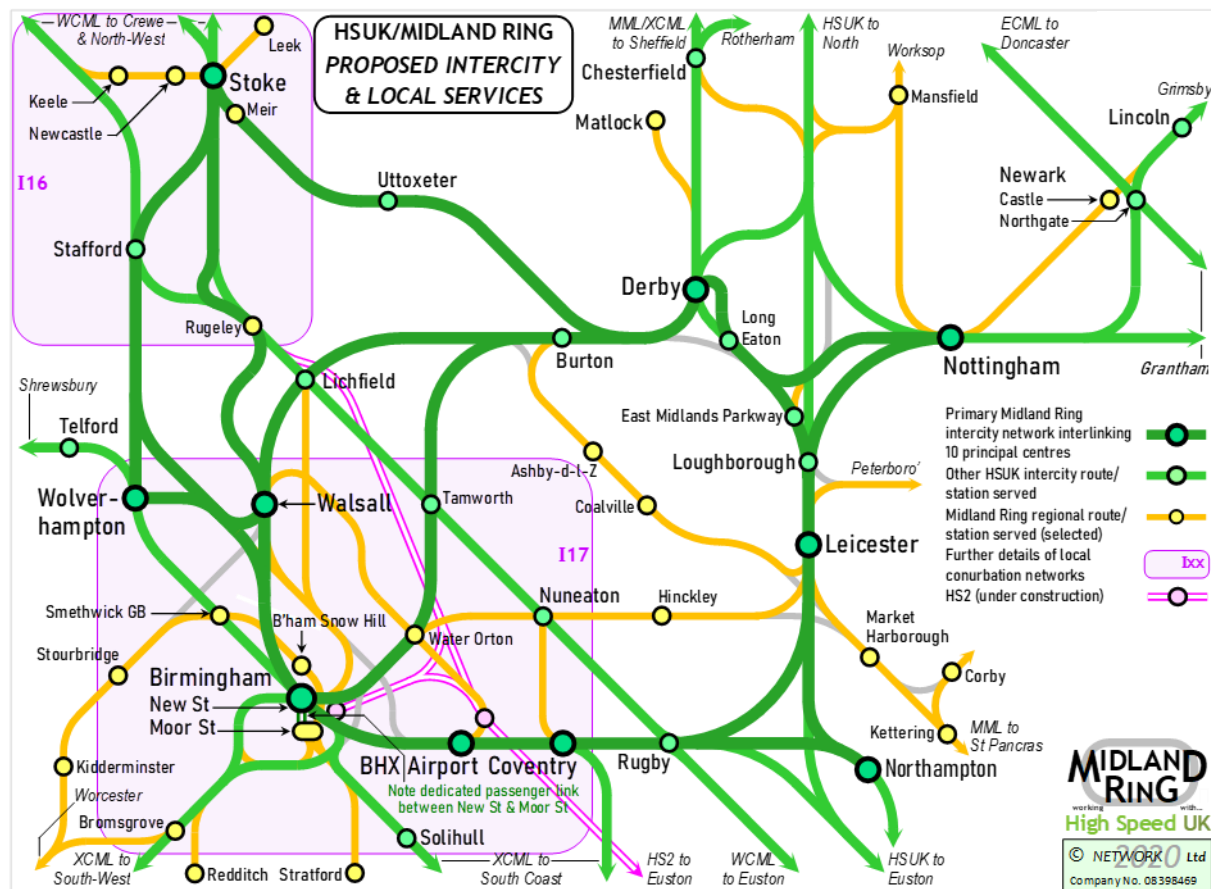


Figure B12 : HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed Intercity & Local Network

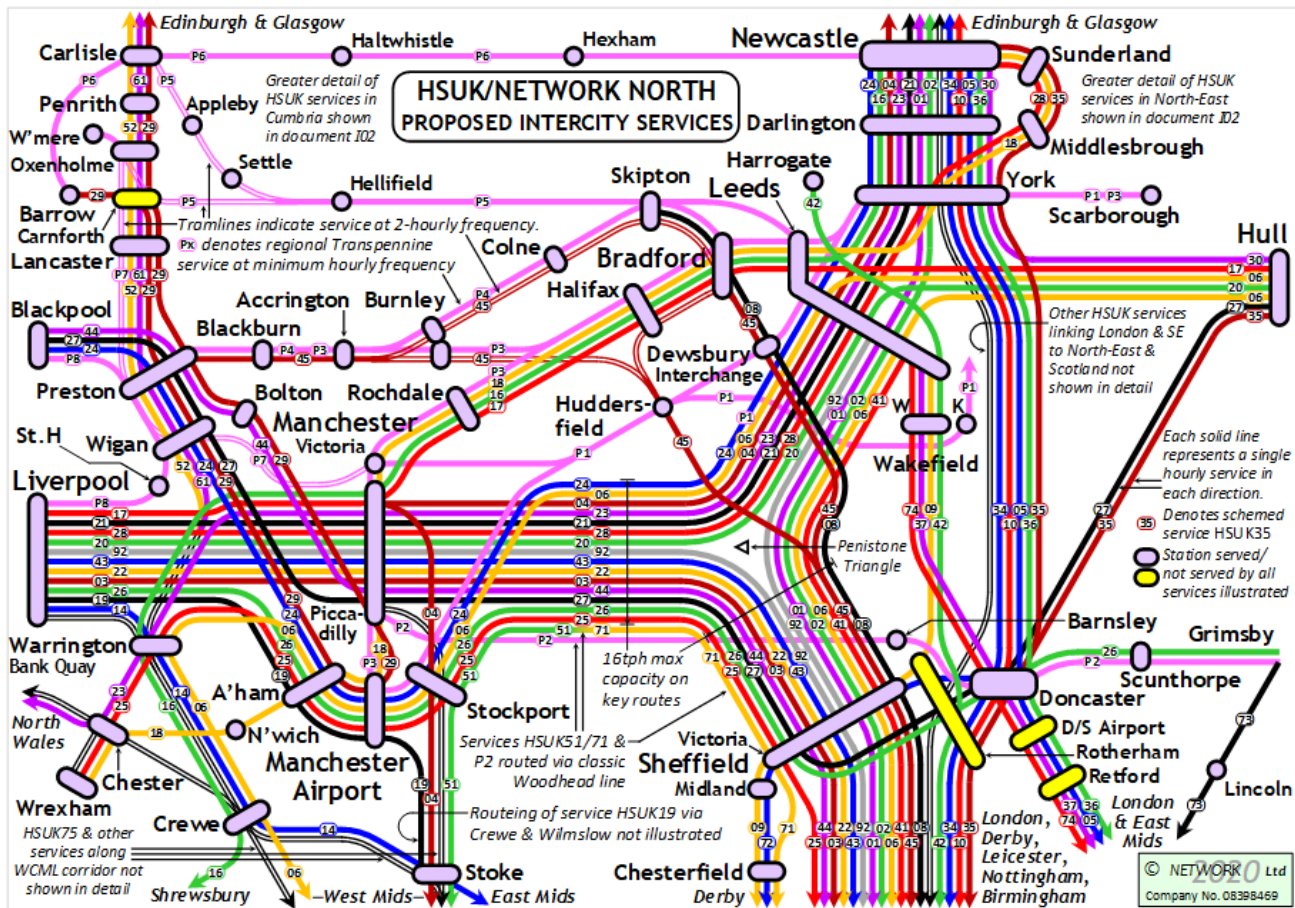


Figure B13 : HSUK/Network North Proposed Intercity Services

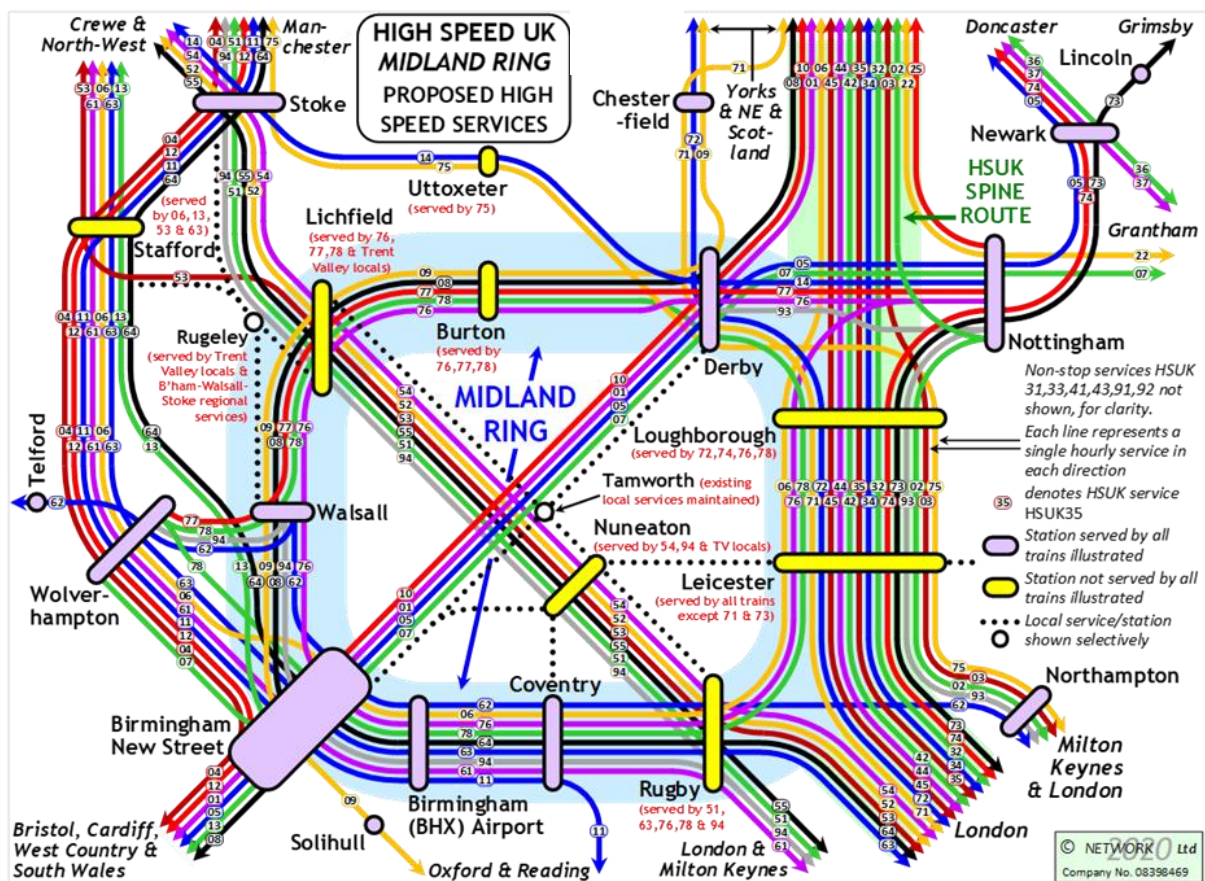


Figure B14 : HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed Intercity Services

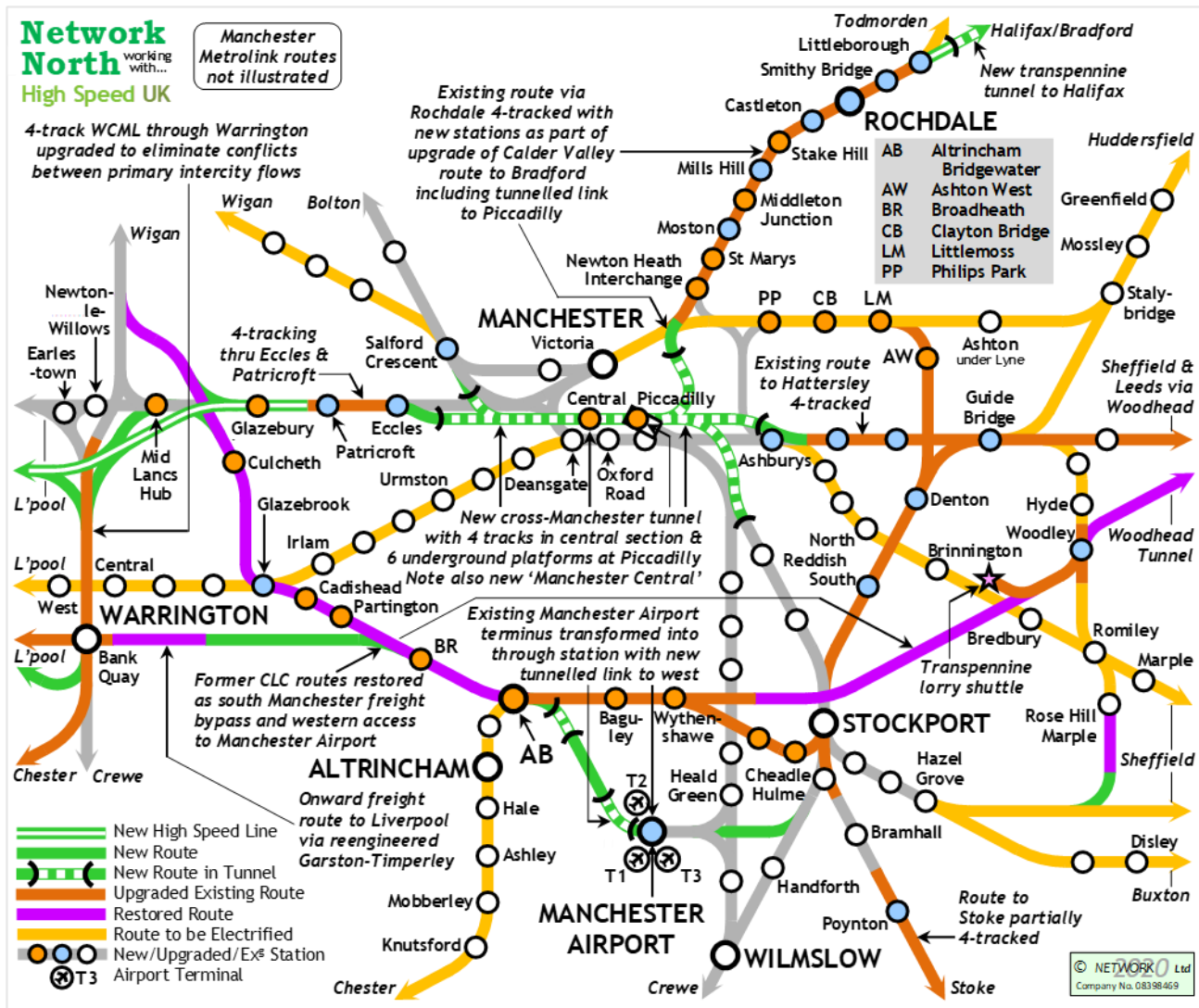


Figure B15 :
HSUK/Network North : Proposed New Works & Upgrades in Greater Manchester

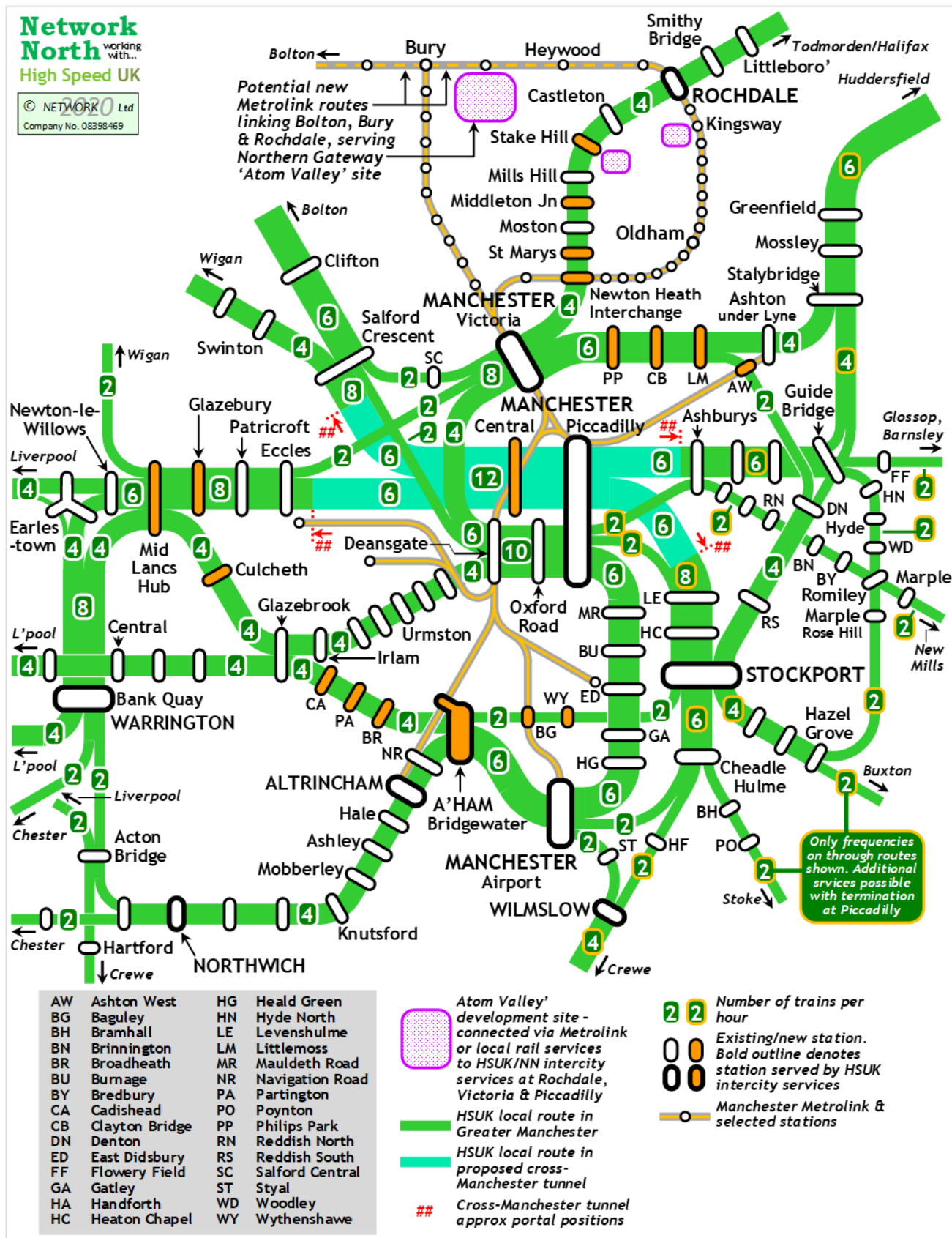


Figure B16 :
HSUK/Network North : Indicative Suburban Services in Greater Manchester

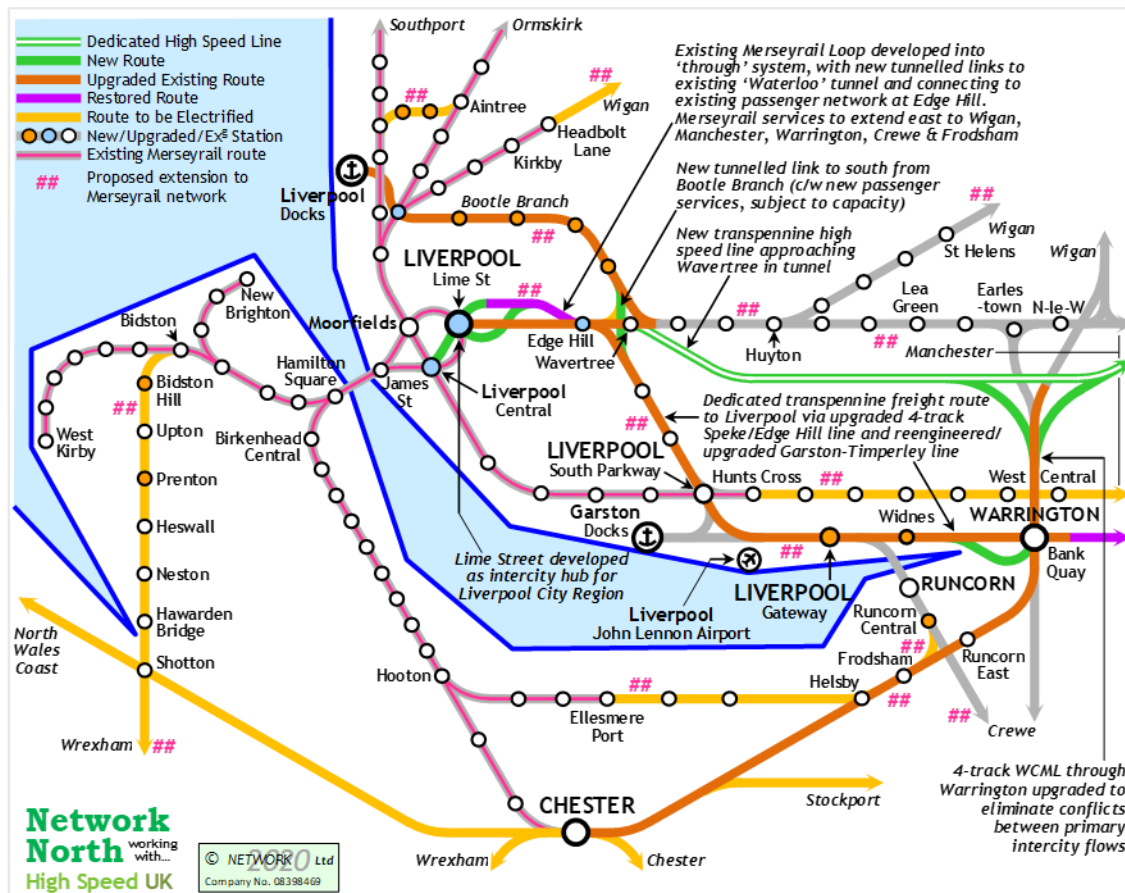


Figure B17 : HSUK/Network North Proposed New Works & Upgrades in Merseyside



Figure B18 :
HSUK/Network North
Indicative Suburban
Services in Merseyside



Figure B19 :
HSUK/Midland Ring
Proposed New Works & Upgrades in Potteries

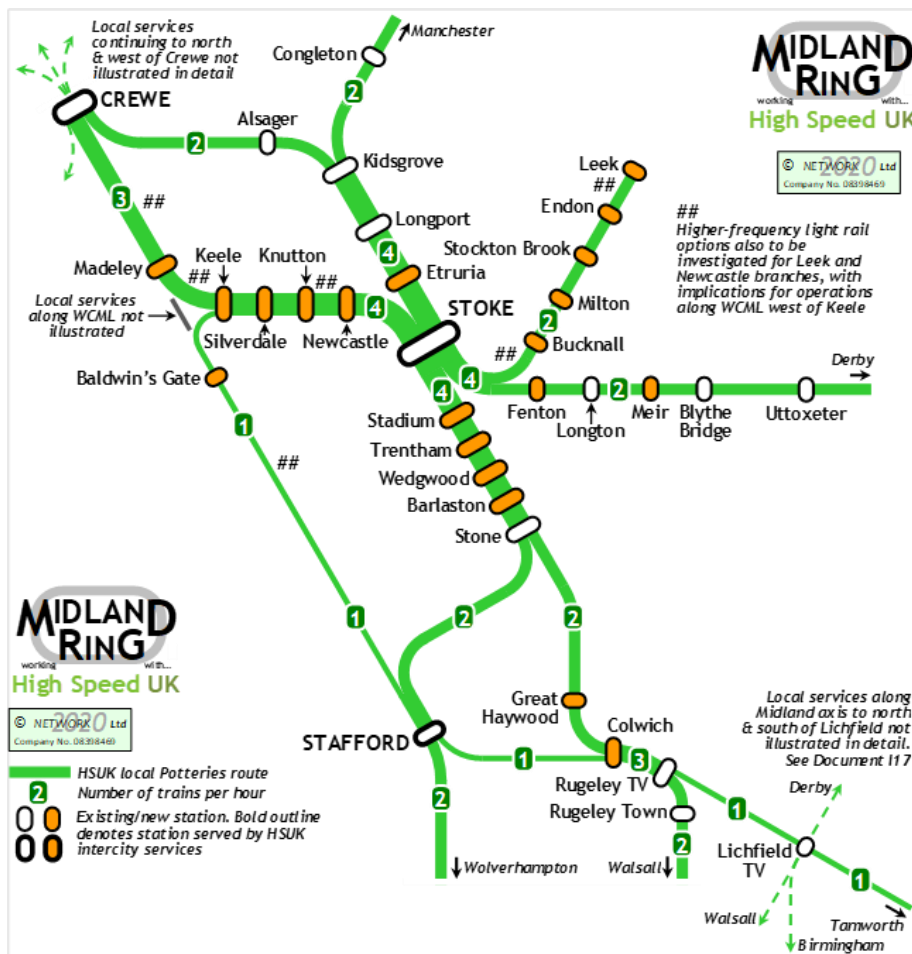


Figure B20 :
HSUK/Midland Ring
Indicative Suburban Services in Potteries

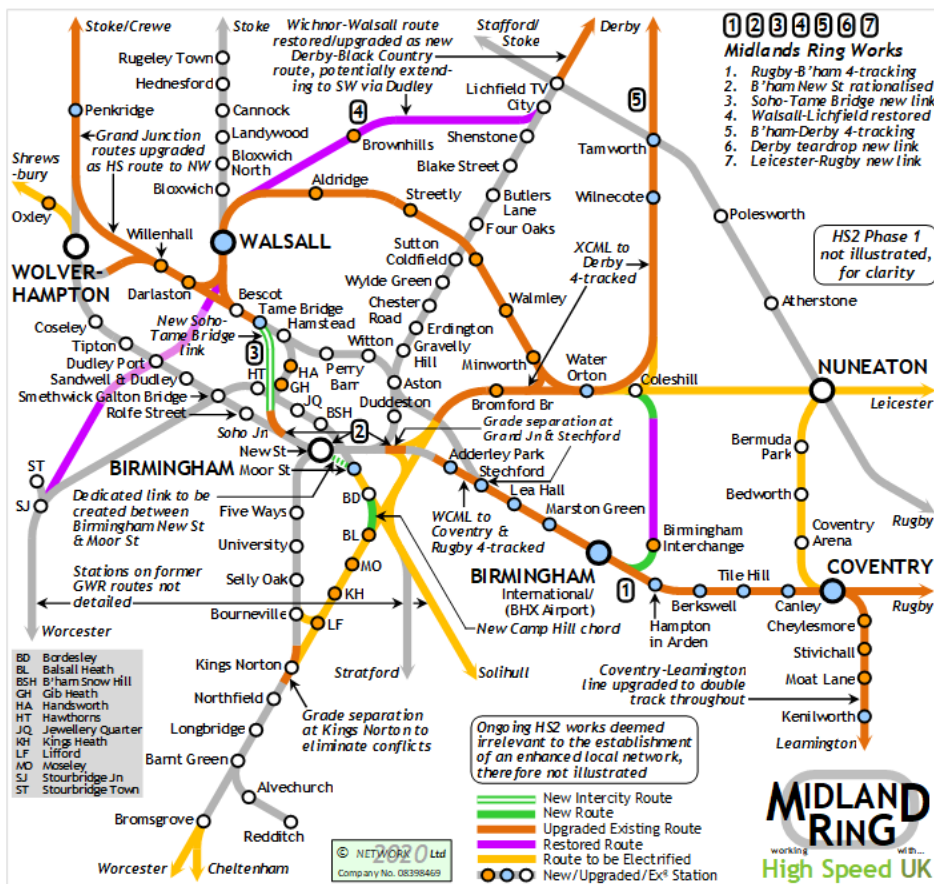


Figure B21 : HSUK/Midland Ring Proposed New Works & Upgrades in West Midlands

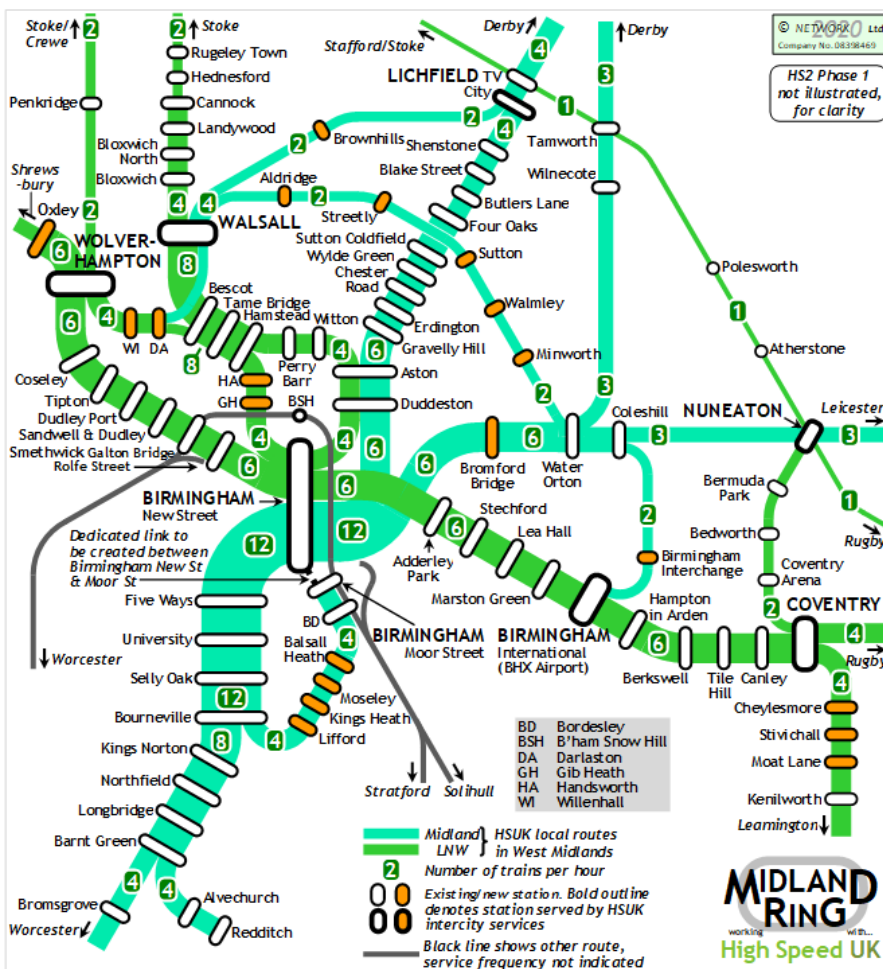


Figure B22 : HSUK/Midland Ring : Indicative West Midlands Suburban Services



Figure B23 : Midlands Rail Hub service plan

(drawing reproduced from *Midlands Rail Hub: The Productivity Prize: Mind the Gap*, Midlands Connect, 2025)