

Open Letter to:

ref L35

High Speed UK
Connecting the Nation

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Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP, Prime Minister

cc Chancellor of the Exchequer John Healey MP
SoS Transport Heidi Alexander MP

20 Hartley Road
Harrogate
HG2 9DQ

24th August 2026

07591 959134

Dear Mr Burnham,

We write first to congratulate you upon your recent appointment as Prime Minister; but more importantly, we write to alert you to critical deficiencies in the railway schemes – both the proposed revival of Phases 2a/2b of HS2 (as the Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link), and the Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme (aka the 'Liverpool-Manchester Railway') – that you have long supported.

You are of course entirely correct to call for the radical improvement of rail links in the North. Such improvement is essential to deliver the transformational change – both economic and environmental – that the North needs. These priorities are recognised in your Government's *Northern Growth Strategy*, which sets out refreshed proposals for a new Birmingham-Manchester rail link, and for new Northern Powerhouse Rail links between certain principal cities of the North.

On a superficial level the *Northern Growth Strategy* would appear to redress the dangerous 'policy vacuum' that has existed since the previous Government effectively cancelled its Integrated Rail Plan with its 2023 scrapping of HS2 Phases 2a/2b; and there is certainly a persuasive logic and linkage in the schemes now endorsed by Government:

- **Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link (MNWRL)** – a lower-speed version of **HS2** Phases 2a/2b, following the same route and linking **HS2** Phase 1 near Lichfield to...
- The new **Liverpool-Manchester Railway (LMR)** – effectively, the western half of **Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR)**, a low-speed route running from Liverpool to Warrington Bank Quay and following the circuitous route previously selected for the **HS2** spur to Manchester Airport and Manchester Piccadilly, with an onward connection to...
- **Yorkshire's Plan for Rail** – essentially a rebranding of previous **Northern Powerhouse Rail** initiatives in Yorkshire, launched in May 2025 by the Yorkshire Mayors and Lord Blunkett.

However, as professional railway engineers, we must warn you of **MNWRL's** and **NPR's** extraordinarily poor performance, either as individual railways, or as core elements of the fully integrated and optimised national network that your Government's Growth Agenda demands. Both projects share the same deeply concerning features:

- Both **MNWRL** and **NPR** are based upon **HS2's** discredited core concept, of a 'tree' of stand-alone high speed routes spreading north from London. These derivative schemes embody broadly the same deficiencies as **HS2**, offering neither meaningful integration with the existing rail network, nor the effective and comprehensive interregional links necessary to rebalance and 'Level-up' the economy, and enable the modal shift necessary for 'Net Zero'.
- Given their clear dependency upon **HS2**, there must be a major concern that the **MNWRL** and **NPR** projects will also be plagued by the same disastrous level of cost overrun.
- No indication is given, of how the proposed interventions would integrate with the existing railway system. This is necessary to deliver optimum overall network performance and extend their connectivity and capacity benefits to the 'small town' satellite communities around the major hubs, and to bypassed major communities such as Stoke and the Potteries.

- With such evidently poor integration, the opportunities for 'land value capture' as a mechanism to fund these schemes are inevitably limited to a very small number of new station sites, hotspots to which these real estate benefits will be confined.
- There is no recognisable due process of design and optimisation, whereby gains in connectivity, capacity and network performance should be measured and maximised, with options selected accordingly, to achieve the greatest economic/environmental/transport benefits.
- There has been no worthwhile consideration of alternative schemes that might better improve connectivity between the UK regions (which must be the central purpose of both **MNWRL** and **NPR**), integrate better with the existing network and thereby deliver greater and more widespread economic benefit.

The dangerous dependency between **NPR**, **MNWRL** and the original **HS2** concept is perhaps best illustrated in the current **NPR** plans for a new Liverpool-Manchester Railway (**LMR**). This follows a slow and circuitous route between the two cities, a route that was primarily determined by the pre-existing **HS2** scheme:

- This **LMR/NPR** route is no faster than the original (1830) Liverpool & Manchester Railway.
- As with **HS2**, **LMR**'s Manchester Airport station is more than 1 mile from the airport terminals, on the far side of the M56, with no proposal for any sort of shuttle connection.
- There are huge technical concerns with **LMR**'s proposed interchange station at Warrington Bank Quay.

We have already written¹ to you, as a member of the Liverpool-Manchester Railway Board, and in your former capacity as Mayor of Greater Manchester, to alert you to these, and other concerns.

On a wider scale, **Northern Powerhouse Rail**'s critical technical failings are just as apparent in the **NPR** scheme that is presented in Transport for the North's *Strategic Transport Plan*, and now endorsed in your Government's *Northern Growth Strategy*. Despite the **total absence of due process and optimisation**, or **consideration of overall network performance**, and despite also the **apparent absence of any definitive route for the critical transpennine section**, or **masterplan for the critical hubs at Manchester and Leeds** (or any other major Northern city), Transport for the North still make the astonishing claim that their **NPR** scheme will deliver **£118 billion** additional annual GVA – equivalent to full Levelling-up of the entire Northern economy.

To make this claim for a single transpennine railway, largely disconnected from the existing network and seemingly lacking a substantive and costed design at any of its critical locations, is plainly absurd. We can only speculate that Transport for the North must have somehow confused the actuality of their own inadequate and undeveloped **NPR** scheme with the ideal of an optimally connected Northern Powerhouse, that they were originally remitted to deliver.

Our detailed concerns regarding the **Northern Powerhouse Rail** project are set out in our letter² (ref **L32**) recently sent to the Northern Mayors. But this is more than a regional issue, and it is now a matter of national public concern, that Transport for the North's hugely suboptimal **NPR** scheme, with its transparently bogus economic claims, sits at the heart of your Government's *Northern*

¹ HSUK letter (ref **L17**) to individual members of Liverpool-Manchester Railway Board, available on <http://highspeeduk.co.uk/letters.html>.

² HSUK letter ref **L32** to Northern Mayors (including yourself in your former capacity as Mayor of Greater Manchester), also available on <http://highspeeduk.co.uk/letters.html>, should be read in conjunction with earlier HSUK letters. We would particularly commend letters **L11**, **L12**, **L14** and **L18** to your attention.

Growth Strategy. Very similar criticisms³ can be levelled at the **Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link** (aka 'HS2-Lite') scheme, which you are now seeking to revive.

The consequences of these deficiencies, both technical and economic, are stark, and they can hardly be overstated. Effectively, Levelling-up and Net Zero, not to mention the simple social goal of fully accessible and comprehensive public transport, are all cancelled – all rendered impossible by the entirely avoidable connectivity and integration deficiencies of official railway schemes on which multi-digit millions have already been squandered. This is 'Trickledown Transport' at its worst.

We believe that a radical alternative approach is required, with the fundamental goal of an Integrated Transport Strategy for the entire United Kingdom, that will transform public transport links between all communities, large and small. At the heart of this strategy, there must be a feasible and viable plan to transform the connectivity and capacity of the national railway system. This strategy will enable step-change economic growth and make possible a greener transport system, an optimised network that is accessible to all. This is the goal that any responsible Government must have, and the benefits of our alternative approach are exemplified in the vastly superior performance of our **High Speed UK** (HSUK) initiative⁴, and its supporting **Network North** and **Midland Ring** schemes, as documented in our attached letters⁵ (ref **L32**, **L33** & **L34**).

Letters **L32** and **L33** lay out critical challenges to both the **Northern Powerhouse Rail** and the **Midlands-NorthWest Rail Link** projects, with Freedom of Information requests designed to expose:

- the catastrophic failures of due process that have taken place;
- the potentially criminal waste of public money and resources that will follow; and
- the huge overall lost opportunity that these inadequate schemes represent.

Letter **L34** is directed to the backers of **East-West Rail** (i.e. the scheme to complete the ongoing Oxford-Cambridge project with a new railway from Bedford to Cambridge), where similar issues of limited connectivity and overstated benefits apply.

These Freedom of Information requests are directed at various arms of Government, amongst other organisations; in the interests of transparency, good government and technical best practice, we would be grateful for any assistance you can provide in obtaining the necessary responses. We will of course keep you fully informed of developments in this matter.

We have no doubt that you appreciate the gravity of the issues at stake, of a *Northern Growth Strategy* at extreme risk of failing to deliver your Government's wider Growth Agenda – and opportunities forever lost for the people of the North. We hope that it will be possible for us to meet you and your transport team, to discuss matters further and to present our alternative **High Speed UK**, **Network North** and **Midland Ring** initiatives.

Yours sincerely,

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

³ Critical technical concerns re MNWRL are set out in HSUK letter ref **L33** to Midlands & North-West Mayors (including yourself in your former capacity as Mayor of Greater Manchester) <http://highspeeduk.co.uk/letters.html>.

⁴ For further details of HSUK and regional Network North and Midland Ring initiatives, see www.highspeeduk.co.uk.

⁵ Letters reference **L32**, **L33** & **L34**, also available on <http://highspeeduk.co.uk/letters.html>.