

Insights

IS HS2 PHASE 2B STILL ON TRACK?

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SUMMARY

The National Infrastructure Commission has now published its Rail Needs Assessment for the Midlands and the North. With the HS2 Phase 2a Bill nearing completion of its passage through Parliament, this blog considers the future of the Western and Eastern legs of HS2 Phase 2b in the light of the NIC's Assessment.

On Monday 14th December the House of Lords completed its consideration of the High Speed (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill, the Phase 2a Bill. The House of Commons will now consider the amendments to the Bill made in the Lords and if it disagrees with any of them there will be final 'ping-pong' between the Houses and the Bill will then receive Royal Assent. Phase 2a is the relatively uncontentious part of Phase 2, to continue the railway authorised by the High Speed (London - West Midlands) Act northwards to Crewe.

In the [debate](#) on Monday (Hansard column 1498) Lord Adonis, Labour former Secretary of State for Transport, founding chair of the National Infrastructure Commission and longtime HS2 supporter, argued that it was essential that both legs of Phase 2b are handled as a single stage and taken forward together. He quoted Lloyd George "When traversing a chasm it is advisable to do so in one leap".

But what is the future for the rest of the Western leg of Phase 2b, which would take the railway to Manchester and the West Coast Main Line, and for its Eastern leg to the East Midlands and Leeds, in the light of the [National Infrastructure Commission's Rail Needs Assessment for the Midlands and the North](#) published on 15th December, and the number and scale of rail schemes currently being proposed for the North and Midlands?

The Government has accepted that plans for HS2 and other major schemes need to be brought together in an Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) for the North and Midlands and has said that this will set out the form, scope and phasing of the Phase 2b route across the Western and Eastern legs. The NIC's Rail Needs Assessment was commissioned by the Government to inform the IRP.

The NIC's Report highlights the strategic case for major rail investment across the North and Midlands and the need for the IRP to set out a rolling programme of affordable investments. The Report analyses how different sets of schemes currently proposed, including Northern Powerhouse Rail between Liverpool and Hull, the Midlands Engine Rail programme, and HS2 Phase 2b, might be sequenced and prioritised.

The NIC looked at different mixes of schemes based on cost estimates at the time of the 2018 [National Infrastructure Assessment \(NIA\)](#), but concluded that those figures would now only provide enough funding for upgrades and some new lines, which would not meet the strategic objective of levelling up in the North and the Midlands. It then considered mixes of schemes based on those figures plus 25% and plus 50%.

HS2 Phases 1 and 2a were taken as givens as they were included in the NIA strategic rail budget. The Western leg of Phase 2b was also considered necessary to realise the full benefits of Phase 2a as there are no viable alternatives to increase capacity into Manchester.

But what of the Eastern leg of Phase 2b? The NIC's key conclusion is that prioritising regional links over long-distance ones appears most likely to bring the greatest benefits overall to cities in the North and Midlands and to support levelling up as part of a wider economic strategy. Prioritising links between nearby cities is likely to achieve greater economic benefits more quickly for the Midlands and the North than alternative schemes.

The Report suggests that as part of an adaptive approach, the Government could begin by committing to a core set of programmes including those which could be delivered relatively early such as the Transpennine Route Upgrade, Midland Main Line electrification and some Midlands Engine Rail schemes. Work should also continue on developing plans for schemes not included in the core set of programmes.

However the Report also states that while higher local economic benefits are likely to be delivered by initially prioritising regional links, this does not rule out the further development of options to complete the HS2 Phase 2b Eastern leg. It is also possible that part only of the Eastern leg could be included in packages which may come forward, or that there might be a phased approach to the remaining sections of the Eastern leg.

At present the remainder of the Western leg of Phase 2 is looking relatively secure. Work is progressing on this. The Government has responded to Western leg changes in the 2019 design refinement consultation, the consultation period for further design refinement changes has just expired, and safeguarding directions have been updated. HS2 are working towards submission of a hybrid bill for the remainder of the Western leg in early 2022 or sooner if possible, with a view to the Western leg being complete in 2038.

The Eastern leg is looking much more uncertain. Prioritisation of rail schemes for the North and Midlands is inevitable given financial realities. Yet whilst options may be kept open, the concerns of

Lord Adonis and of East Midlands and Yorkshire politicians and business leaders that the Eastern leg is being downgraded seem very real.

Meanwhile publication of the IRP is slipping from late 2020 into 2021, so we will have to wait a little longer to find out how big a leap the Government will take.

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