

£589m to kickstart rail upgrades across the North

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£589m to kickstart work on the Transpennine main line between Leeds, Huddersfield and Manchester has been confirmed today by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps alongside the establishment of a new Northern Transport Acceleration Council, dedicated to accelerating vital infrastructure projects and better connecting communities across the North's towns and cities.

The most congested section of the route will be doubled from two to four tracks, allowing fast trains to overtake slower ones, improving journey times and reliability for passengers across the North. Most of the line will be electrified, and our ambition is to go further. Full electrification, digital signalling, more multi-tracking and improved freight capacity are now under consideration as part of an "Integrated Rail Plan" due to report in December.

Those improvements would allow all-electric services between Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, York and Newcastle; bring longer and more frequent trains; and create significantly more local capacity along the line.

Upgrades to allow more freight on the route, replacing thousands of diesel lorry journeys with electric

freight trains, will also be considered in the Plan.

Work is also under way to tackle the bottlenecks at either end of the route, without which the upgrade's potential cannot be fulfilled. Leeds station is being resignalled and a new platform is being built. In central Manchester, development funding was awarded last month to tackle rail congestion.

The Council launched today will ensure northern leaders have a direct line to ministers and has been formed with the desire to cut bureaucracy and red tape so passengers can get the modern, reliable transport network they deserve as quickly as possible.

As part of the government's wider strategy to level up communities and strengthen devolution, the Council's work will engage with Department for Transport (DfT) staff based in northern cities and dedicated to delivering for the North.

This follows the announcement of a range of investments to level-up infrastructure across the North including £20m to deliver infrastructure renewals on the Tyne and Wear Metro, following £15m announced to upgrade Horden, Darlington and Middlesbrough stations.

Transport Secretary and Northern Powerhouse Minister Grant Shapps said: "People across the North rightly expect action, progress and ambition, and this government is determined to accelerate improvements as we invest billions to level up the region's infrastructure.

"We are determined to build back better at pace, and this new council will allow us to engage collectively and directly with elected northern leaders to build the vital projects the region is crying out for."

The Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, said: "Levelling-up opportunity will be key in our recovery from Coronavirus – and our long-term success will rely on having world-class infrastructure in all parts of the country. The Transpennine rail upgrade shows we are delivering on our promises to the North."

Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, said: "This feels like a gear change from the government in the delivery of transport improvements in the North of England and I welcome the new drive that the Transport Secretary is bringing to this.

"People here deserve a modern, reliable public transport system and it is my hope that the Northern Transport Acceleration Council will bring forward the day when that is a reality. It is crucial that the Council listens to the voice of the North and is accountable to people here through their elected politicians and bodies such as Transport for the North.

"The additional funding for the Transpennine Route Upgrade is a welcome sign of intent from the government. The North has long argued for the existing scheme to be upgraded to bring the full range of passenger and freight benefits and we are glad that the government has listened to this. But it is important to be clear that upgrading the existing railway between Manchester and Leeds does not diminish the need for a new line in Northern Powerhouse Rail nor does it solve the capacity issues in central Manchester which require a separate solution.

“As we look to recover from Covid-19 and build back better, I am ready to work in constructive partnership with the government to get visible transport improvements as quickly as possible. My top priority is to build a London-style, integrated public transport system in Greater Manchester and I look forward to working with the Secretary of State on making this vision a reality.”

The Northern Transport Acceleration Council will hold its first meeting in September and will be made up of mayors and council leaders with the Transport Secretary as chair. It will work closely with the Northern Powerhouse Growth Body to improve outcomes for people and places in the North.

Its establishment and the announcement of funds for upgrade works are the latest in a range of investments this government has put into northern transport.

In March, the DfT took over the running of rail services on the Northern network to deliver vital improvements and ensure that passengers are given the level of service they deserve.

At Budget the Chancellor confirmed over £720m investment in local transport across the North through the Transforming Cities Fund.

Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen said: “As the country begins its economic recovery following the coronavirus pandemic it’s vital that Teesside, Darlington and Hartlepool have the tools and infrastructure to play their part and achieve their potential.

“This new body will not only give leaders like me another avenue to press our transport case to ministers. DfT staff based in the North will also see first-hand the challenges and opportunities we face, and the improvements and projects needed to unlock further growth and prosperity, with the ability to act on these.

“It’s also great to see more funding for the critical upgrades necessary to the Transpennine Route, which are desperately needed to bring about transformational change across the network. This will help increase capacity, reliability and connectivity between Redcar and Middlesbrough to York, Leeds and Manchester, giving our passengers, businesses and, ultimately, freight services the links they deserve.”

Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government Simon Clarke MP said: “Improving infrastructure to help better connect communities is key to this Government’s mission to level up every region.

“The new Northern Transport Council is an important step and will help to accelerate and deliver the tangible improvements people across the Northern Powerhouse want to see.”

In May ministers gave the go-ahead to the A63 Castle Street scheme, which will better connect Hull’s city centre with the city’s retail and docks area and help boost economic growth in the region.

And earlier this month the government provided £1m to fund a business case to transform the Queensbury Tunnel in to a greenway cycling and pedestrian link between Halifax and Bradford.

At the end of this year the government will publish the Integrated Rail Plan, specifically looking at how to

deliver NPR, HS2 and other rail needs as quickly and efficiently as possible for the North.

Barry White, Chief Executive of Transport for the North, said: “We are delighted to see today’s announcement committing £600m to the Transpennine Route Upgrade, a key artery for passengers and freight in the North. This is a major step forward and we also welcome the commitment to develop proposals to fully electrify the line – something that we asked Government to consider. We will continue to make the case for the further substantial investment needed to fully deliver this crucial project.

“We also welcome the announcement of a Northern Transport Acceleration Council and a DfT North; it is important that TfN, reflecting the voice of the 15 million people in the North, and the new organisations work in partnership to build back better and level up.

“We will work with the Government and these new structures to promote faster decisions and speedier investment into the North.”

Dan Jarvis, Mayor of the Sheffield City Region, said: “I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement today and the £600 million planned investment in transport projects across the North. Additional investment in the rail network across the North to rebuild our unacceptably decrepit infrastructure and improve passenger journeys and connectivity is essential, and this is a useful start.

“We need to see the details of the new Northern Transport Acceleration Council, especially to understand how it will work with Metro Mayors and local leaders. It is important that the National Transport Acceleration Council work together with Transport for the North, who represent 15 million people across the North. Decision about rail improvements cannot be made from a desk in Westminster: they need to be made in collaboration with local leaders, Northern Leaders and with existing structures.

“I will again be raising with the Secretary of State and the Rail Minister the urgent rail projects that need investment in and around South Yorkshire including the Hope Valley Line upgrade and the proposed new East Coast Rail Station at Doncaster Sheffield Airport. If the Government want to make good on their commitment to levelling up the North, then shovel-ready schemes such as this need to be funded.”

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