

Arcadis: New Year Reflection on the Integrated Rail Plan

January 7, 2022



The announcement by the UK Government in November of a revised plan for Rail in the North of England was met with less than full approval by local leaders, businesses and the Rail Industry.

It contained the ‘headline change’ of removing any commitment to the extension of the HS2 line as far as Leeds, and this immediately led to a ‘damage assessment’ across the board, with analysts preoccupied with how this will affect plans for expensive infrastructure that were driven by HS2 connectivity, and economic models based upon this.

Having had time to digest the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP), Arcadis’ Senior Technical Director, Regional Infrastructure Lead, Paul Garthwaite, and Senior Consultant Matthew Bearman have written the article below giving their reflections and what the implications will be in the year ahead.

Perspectives

Before looking too far forward, however, it is always informative to go back a few years. In 2015 the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) Northern policy think tank said “Due to a long history of

underinvestment, Northern passengers still travel to work on overcrowded Pacer trains and face sluggish journey times and connections between major towns and cities. If the North is to grow and prosper then it needs the investment in a modern, efficient rail network". Of course, this was a common sentiment, and still is. Decades of chronic under investment means that Northern rail traffic is returning post-covid to the same old Victorian infrastructure that is crying out for attention.

When HS2 was announced there were mutterings about white elephants and missing the point. In 2014, MEP and Green Party transport minister Rupert Read said "The simple truth is that we will not improve the North with an infrastructure project focused on London, but by improving connectivity within the North of England itself. We need to be looking not at isolated commuter links between cities, but at the rail network as a network.

While many in Leeds (no HS2 Eastern Leg) and Bradford (no NPR route or station) were disappointed, the decisions made by government are as much a return to these themes and an acknowledgement of the need for immediate change as they are a disappointing withdrawal from a flagship commitment. IPPR North said: "The Integrated Rail Plan appears to be a levelling down of government's commitment to the North. Not only does it break the Prime Minister's own promises and his manifesto pledges, but it also breaks many years' worth of plans and assurances to the north of England. It is time for a U-turn. Nothing else will do. Government must commit to delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail, HS2's Eastern Leg, and local transport improvements, or face the anger of a betrayed North"

Certainly, there was political backlash. When the announcement was made by Shapps, Parliament Shadow Transport Secretary Jim McMahon tweeted: "They've sold out the North, but still expect us to be grateful. It just won't wash. People deserve better. Our communities deserve better".

At Arcadis, our initial reaction was more measured though similar to the rest of our industry – summed up by our MD for Rail, Richard Hoare, commenting in Rail Insider: "Until the solution to get High Speed trains to Leeds is in place, the plan isn't as fully integrated as hoped, and so naturally many will be disappointed. The need to decarbonise and update an aging, under invested network inevitably means that some very difficult choices needed to be made. The strategic decision to prioritise connectivity within the region while investing in the High-Speed network will give a strong chance of delivering improved services for the towns and cities that can most benefit and have been historically underfunded. We'll need to work together, across the sector, to focus on the positives and realise these benefits for stakeholders who may be disappointed by the plan set out today"

As we went on to look at the opportunities presented by the Integrated Rail Plan for us to pursue our goals as an organisation – to improve quality of life – Arcadis found that despite the perception of backtracking, there is a lot to be said for approaching the IRP with a 'glass half full' mindset. Local rail transport improvements are not off the table – there remains circa £50 million of 'new' money as part of the plan, on top of existing commitments of cash aimed at precisely the connectivity improvements WITHIN the north (not to and from the North) identified as most vital to the regional economy.

A subtle shift of focus

We feel that work 'by the North, for the North' on Northern rail infrastructure presents a subtle shift from a

concept of an umbilical chord for wealth from London towards the concept of a non-dependent but nevertheless connected North with its own vital systems.

A high-speed connection from the South was always a symbol of commitment for Leeds and Bradford. However, those of us in the North know that Leeds and 'the North' are far from the same thing. HS2 to Leeds means little to an individual or a business in Newcastle or Pickering for example, beyond its symbolic resonance.

The positives are in the detail. On the subject of Northern Powerhouse Rail, Transport for the North state "Looking at a rail map of the UK, the main lines run south to north. The connections east to west are much poorer – they're often branch lines which means capacity isn't as good, and the rolling stock is poorer. Coast to coast in the North can take longer than travelling from the North of England to Paris. These slow connections are what needs addressing as a matter of urgency to help deliver on the levelling-up agenda across the region. Northern Powerhouse Rail will improve the transport connections for the North to make the North more competitive and cohesive".

HS2 was yet another North-South connection. What remains, now that it terminates short of Leeds, is the NPR vision for a connected North and all of the social and economic benefits that will bring.

TFN have supported the realignment of rail to serve as a network as much as a way in or out. From the days of Dr. Christaller, Human Geographers and Economists have always known that the most efficient networks are place-agnostic – you should be equally well served for mobility whether in York, Leeds or Whitby for a truly effective solution. Curiously, HS2 – for all its symbolic significance and efficacy in rapid connections between major conurbations tips the balance – favouring the terminus over its peers – and works against the principles that define the theoretical optimum situation. Less academically and in the real world, those of us who live in the North are painfully aware of how East-West travel takes twice as long as North-South and has done since Beaching.

The proposal as it now stands includes the full electrification of the main line between Manchester, Leeds and York. This along with other key infrastructure interventions 'could' reduce journey times between Manchester and Leeds to as little as 33 minutes. Further down from this headline reduction, the proposal goes on to talk of full digital signalling along the Trans Pennine route, three or four tracking and ultimately a tripling of capacity.

This, along with upgrades to the East Coast Main Line and Midlands Main Line, presents both enormous challenges and a significant opportunity to those organisations equipped to deliver a raft of renewals and enhancements by the North for the North, securing local futures for decades to come and offering actual 'Levelling up' in the real, grass-roots way that matters. In this, our industry partners have the chance to collaborate, to prove we can deliver on the cost.

Future development is dependent on performance

Many questions have been raised in the past over value for money on nationally significant schemes such as HS1 and Crossrail. Indeed, it was overspend on the Western Main Line that turned government against electrification schemes – making any current commitment to continued electrification a 'win' for the

environment and for the future of our railways. It will take the engagement of organisations able to demonstrate the controls and value engineering expertise necessary to make this change real and ongoing. Design Automation and Engineering Design Assurance will come to the fore as critical to investment decisions.

Decision making itself will be accelerated and made easier by the new PACE approach, which goes beyond GRIP to introduce streamlined project delivery in an accountable environment that incorporates the shared lesson / 'One Team' ethos already adopted by Arcadis and other industry best practitioners. These new ways of working dovetail with the Williams review, making all parts of the railway system work more closely together, changing the culture to embrace Great British Railways into the 'One Team' that will develop this enhanced mobility service.

This investment of 'Pounds in the Ground' defined in the IRP creates a test environment for these new ways of working together – It is up to us in the industry to prove how effective this enhanced collaboration can be.

That the implementation of the IRP needs to become a showcase is more than a mere strategic judgement by Industry. It is explicit in the plan, which states "We are committed to delivering core IRP schemes on time, and to budget. Any future development of further schemes (such as further electrification to Hull) will depend on this".

Opportunities to mobilise and make places at the same time

Another significant re-focussing within the IRP is that unlike the original plans, HS2 will "serve Nottingham and Derby city centres". While of course this isn't strictly accurate – instead, trains that use the HS2 lines will continue on newly-electrified sections into these cities – the significance of this is not lost on place-makers like Arcadis. This will present an opportunity for a reappraisal of the functionality of these stations, in the context of a new connection with Birmingham as well as London, with higher capacity and halved travel times.

Beyond the upgrade of inter-urban services, the other main thrust of the IRP is to "improve local services, integrate them properly with HS2 and NPR, and ensure benefits for places on the existing lines". The most concrete of the plans then laid out is the creation of the Leeds and West Yorkshire rapid transit system. Covering much of West Yorkshire in its catchment, this development, when coupled with a commitment to electrify the Leeds-New Pudsey-Bradford line will entail a new set of transport hubs to support connectivity across a region and not just a single city centre. This again is an opportunity to go beyond redefining travel between these points – the chance to build, rebuild and renew is an opportunity to define what these places are to the communities they serve.

For this reason, Arcadis were very pleased to hear of the inclusion of schemes to enhance local mobility in the IRP vision. Our positive take is down to our ongoing mission to improve quality of life. Our Northern Rail offices are working with the global business to do just this in the north of England, with a complete understanding of the social and economic factors at play when placemaking transit hubs coupled with an ever-growing appreciation of the benefits for people that are unlocked by successful placemaking at and around hubs.

These places are urban assets, and their value needs to be captured. The IRP is an opportunity to create long-term sustainable centres for economic growth that are destinations in themselves. Rather than points on a line, the true value of new stations and hubs is to be places with their own social and economic worth. This would prove a huge benefit of implementing the IRP in the right way.

Vision

To properly harness the benefits of this change requires vision from industry and organisations like Arcadis. It requires consultants equally versed in transformation of place as they are in Design and Engineering. Improvement in quality of life, as per Arcadis' intent is after all the ultimate aim of 'Levelling Up'.

Analyst Samantha Sleights of De Havilland notes the language of the November IRP document, pointing out that the word 'could' is used 77 times, mostly in relation to improved journey times resulting from improvement works under the plan but also with respect to economic benefits for the people of the North.

This may be seen as political phrasing – but to any Rail Engineer this is nothing more than necessary. It requires 'boots on the ground' as well as assurance of 'Pounds in the Ground' now to make the transport systems that will deliver these improvements both in immediate experience and quality of life in the North – they don't, as with public imagination, automatically come into existence with the timetables and journey times specified by the politicians. It is all very much the art of the possible – It just needs the right people with the right mindset.



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