

Mayors HS2 northern leg alternative proposal expected next month

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The Mayor of Greater Manchester says a private sector group looking to tackle one of the most congested and unreliable routes on the UK rail network following the cancellation of HS2 Phase 2A is due to come back with its findings next month.

Andy Burnham has joined forces with the Mayor of the West Midlands Andy Street to explore how links could be improved following the Prime Minister's decision to scrap the northern leg of HS2 from Birmingham to Manchester.

They convened a private sector group chaired by infrastructure expert Sir David Higgins, with a "constructive" meeting held last week with the Secretary of State for Transport, the Rail Minister and senior officials from the Department for Transport.

Speaking to Rail Business Daily at the Transport for the North Annual Conference, Andy Burnham said: "We're not reviving HS2, we've reluctantly had to accept that decision has been made the money reallocated elsewhere. Where we've had some success is in saying to the government that there has to be a solution for Birmingham to Manchester that is more than the West Coast Main Line.

"The group (private sector group) wants to complete its work by March so they are really on with it and have looked at infrastructure around the world. It's delivering more than I thought and is exceeding my expectations at this point in time. From our point of view we are really adamant that the West Coast Main Line can't take this strain."

The work is centred on the strategic economic case for connectivity between the two regions, and the potential private sector funding models and interventions needed to accelerate both connectivity and growth.

The proposals are looking at three broad options, the West Coast Main Line being upgraded, bypasses put in to get around bottlenecks and pinch points, or a completely new line.

The Greater Manchester Mayor said: "There are some leading industry players involved in the group and we've got some momentum behind it because there cannot be a Birmingham to Manchester sized hole in the transport plan for the country.

"You cannot run HS2 into Birmingham and then let the West Coast Main Line take the strain because it won't be able to take the strain because it is full and the M6 is full and unless we improve Manchester to Birmingham connectivity and capacity we are going to have transport headaches for the rest of the century. We made that point very clearly together to the Department for Transport and we received a fair hearing."

Last month the Transport Secretary Mark Harper announced that he was formally lifting the safeguarding directions for HS2 Phase 2a between the West Midlands and Crewe, releasing the land for sale, which could cause issues should the option of a new line be pursued.

Commenting on whether this could change following the mayors' plans, Andy Burnham said: "In our last meeting (with ministers and Department for Transport officials) we didn't get into the detail of safeguarding land or land release. Personally, I absolutely think options should be kept open so we can do this as quickly as possible without having to release land back or buy it back. They have got an open mind and are prepared to discuss it with us."

Speaking to Rail Business Daily at the Transport for the North Annual Conference, Huw Merriman, HS2 and Rail Minister, said: "The meeting was an opportunity for the mayors to come and explain what their thinking was and what they were looking to do and when they were looking to come back to us with more detail. The Prime Minister has been quite clear, the plan is that HS2 will not go further than the Midlands and instead all of that money gets recycled across the regions.

"We also plan to lift safeguarding for the rest of the HS2 route to go into Manchester and the Leeds section for the summer. In terms of the land sale itself we will ensure we sell the land so the taxpayer and indeed the communities that will be impacted get the best value from it. There are a series of tests that have to be met and if they are met then that land can be sold back to the original seller and they will get first refusal on it.

"At the moment there is only one plan on the table and that is the Prime Minister's Network North plan so

there is nothing else for me to compare it to and under that plan we dispose of the sale of land. We await to see what plan the two mayors may come up with but the Prime Minister has been clear HS2 is not going ahead and we have a programme of land sales and we are looking to get that together and then dispose of it."