

Move to boost transport connections across the whole of the UK as interim report of Union Connectivity Review published

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson has today set out his vision to build back better from coronavirus by boosting transport connectivity across and between the whole of the UK, as part of ambitions to truly level up across the country.

The Government will also consult on cutting air passenger duty on internal UK flights, and will commit £20m to develop plans for upgraded rail, road, sea and air links.

The measures were announced following the interim report of Sir Peter Hendy's Union Connectivity Review, published today. In June, Sir Peter Hendy CBE was tasked by the Prime Minister with exploring ways in which transport can better connect all parts of the United Kingdom.

Sir Peter Hendy's report sets out how a UK Strategic Transport Network would help deliver this ambition. Such a network would significantly expand and upgrade direct transport connections in the UK across road, rail, sea and air, helping to reduce delays and bottlenecks and stimulate economic growth. Improving rail links helps cut carbon emissions, and so as well as considering how transport links can better connect the UK, the Prime Minister will consider their environmental and social impact – taking into account how they will improve the quality of life of the people that use them.

The potential network will now form the main focus of Sir Peter's continuing investigations, with his final report in the summer looking to identify specific transport upgrades that could form the backbone of the network's ambitions.

To jump-start some of the projects identified by Sir Peter, the Government has today committed £20m towards exploring the development of projects, such as:

Improved rail connectivity between the North coast of Wales and England

Upgrading the A75 between Gretna, Dumfries and Stranraer, a key route for south-west Scotland and Northern Ireland but almost entirely single-carriageway.

Significantly faster rail links from England to Scotland, including looking at options to enhance the West Coast Mainline

Rail improvements in South-East Wales building on ideas from the Welsh Government's Burns Commission

The Government is also announcing that the consultation on aviation tax reform, announced at Budget 2020, will be published in Spring 2021.

The consultation will include options to change the APD treatment for domestic flights, such as reintroducing a return leg exemption or creation of a new lower domestic rate.

In addition to looking at the case for increasing the number of international distance bands, we will

continue to decarbonise domestic aviation as part of our ambition to reach net zero, including through mandating the use of sustainable aviation fuels. All domestic aviation emissions are captured in carbon budgets.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, said: “It’s now time to build back better in a way which brings every corner of the UK closer together. We will harness the incredible power of infrastructure to level up parts of our country that have too long been left off the transport map.

“This pioneering review by Sir Peter Hendy gives us the tools we need to deliver on our ambitions for a UK-wide transport network that encompasses sea, rail, and road – and I also want to cut passenger duty on domestic flights so we can support connectivity across the country.”

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said: “As we build back better from Covid it is more important than ever that we level-up every corner of our great country.

“Quality transport infrastructure is key to achieving that, which is why we are committed to boosting connectivity and bringing communities across the UK even closer together.”

The UK Government will work closely with relevant devolved administrations on development studies. For example, the UK government will work closely with the Scottish Government on any feasibility study on the A75.

Sir Peter has spoken with over a hundred organisations and received nearly 150 submissions to his call for evidence. As a result, he has been able to identify some of the most pressing issues for connecting all parts of the UK.

Sir Peter Hendy CBE said: “Devolution has been good for transport but it has also led to a lack of attention to connectivity between the four nations, due to competing priorities and complex funding. A UK Strategic Transport Network could resolve this, with its core objective centred around levelling up across the whole of the UK.”

The Government will receive the final UCR recommendations ahead of the Spending Review, where it will consider and confirm funding plans for delivering improved connectivity across the UK.

The review into boosting the transport options connecting the UK sits squarely at the centre of the Government’s levelling up agenda, with focus on providing high-quality transport infrastructure to communities that have been passed over for investment in previous decades a key pillar of the plans.

While the review looks to the future, the Government continues to support current Union connectivity measures and recently provided a further £4.3 million to fund a two-year extension to the vital flight route between City of Derry Airport and London Stansted – beginning on 1 April which will boost local economies on both sides.

Responding to the government’s publication of the interim findings of the Union Connectivity Review, Andy Bagnall, Director General of the Rail Delivery Group representing train operators, said: “Funding to look at

developing better rail links between England, Scotland and Wales rightly recognises the key role trains will play in a future decarbonised transport network. Rather than considering a cut to air passenger duty in isolation, government should ensure there is a level tax playing field across cars, planes and trains with each paying according to the environmental impact they have. This would encourage people to make greener choices to get from A to B such as taking the train.”

Darren Caplan, Chief Executive of the Railway Industry Association, said: “It is positive to see the Government set out ideas for new rail investment, including better connections from HS2 to Scotland and North Wales and higher capacity on the East Coast Main Line. Rail has a vital role to play in the UK’s economic recovery from Coronavirus and in achieving net zero by 2050, but to do so it needs certainty on planned rail schemes, like HS2 Eastern Leg, Northern Powerhouse Rail and the Midlands Rail Hub, as well as visibility of upcoming rail enhancement schemes, and the decarbonisation and digitalisation of the network.

“The rail industry looks forward to working with the Government to take these forward, supporting jobs, investment and economic growth as we emerge from the Coronavirus pandemic.”

Tim Foster, Interim Strategy and Programmes Director at Transport for the North, said: “The North must be at the heart of the mission to better connect the whole of the UK and level up, investment in our infrastructure is critical to improving key routes across our borders to Wales, Scotland and further south. It’s positive to see the early rail and road projects highlighted by the Review strongly aligned to those in our own infrastructure pipeline for the North.

“Long-term commitment to a transformed rail network for the UK – including Northern Powerhouse Rail and HS2 – must also now form the backbone of better connections across the union. Doing so will deliver more rail capacity and increase reliability, as well as cutting carbon emissions and driving recovery of our economy.”

Photo credit: Network Rail