

Northern leaders call for greater devolution and rail investment certainty

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The North's leaders have called for a strengthened role overseeing the region's railways and certainty on committed Government investment.

Speaking at a meeting of the Transport for the North (TfN) Board today (9 June), political and business leaders said they cannot continue to wait for the Government's Integrated Rail Plan – expected to outline commitment to HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) and other major rail projects – and that the Plan should fully incorporate the North's priorities.

Members heard how further work on Northern Powerhouse Rail had reduced infrastructure costs and increased the projected benefits. They also discussed how rail investment and electrification was fundamental to tackling climate change, creating jobs and unleashing the North's economic potential.

Submission of the business case for Northern Powerhouse Rail is now dependent on the content of the Integrated Rail Plan, anticipated to set out the scope, funding and delivery mechanism for the project, run jointly by TfN and the Department for Transport.

Speaking following the meeting Tim Wood, Interim Chief Executive at Transport for the North, said: “The North has already set out its vision for the future in a transport strategy that all of our leaders are signed up to. Now we need clarity and firm commitment from Government on delivering that strategy, which we expect to come in the form of the Integrated Rail Plan.

“We’ve set out our clear priorities to create a Green Economic Revolution in the North and our railways – including HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail – are at the heart of that vision. We’re now working with Government and the national agencies, such as Network Rail, to ensure that the investment programmes we put forward are committed to and then delivered alongside TfN.”

The Board also said that northern leaders and Transport for the North – as the Government’s statutory partner on transport in the region – have an integral role in overseeing the railways and that this should be the basis of further devolution as the rail industry is restructured nationally. It follows publication of the Government’s white paper on the Plan for Rail, which will see the creation of Great British Railways as a single national organisation to oversee track and train.

Members were reassured by representatives from the Department for Transport and Network Rail, who said that work to establish Great British Railways in shadow format in the next year will closely involve TfN and regional leaders. Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham said that, as well as having a seat on the Government’s Advisory Council to help establish the new national organisation, the North should also be making the case for direct oversight of rail services spanning the Pennines to ensure national attention is not focused elsewhere.

Tim Wood added: “As the Government’s statutory partner on strategic transport for the North, not only are we committed to making the Williams-Shapps plan work, we are uniquely placed to make this happen quickly – to the benefit of our residents and businesses.

“The national approach must not be a missed opportunity for further devolution, giving the North’s leaders greater oversight of services and infrastructure investment. We look forward to working closely with Government to ensure local and regional leaders are at the core of reform of our railways.”

Short, medium and long-term investment in rail projects are outlined in Transport for the North’s Strategic Transport Plan and investment programme, a statutory plan adopted in 2019.

Photo credit: Transport for the North