

Reaction to HS2 announcement

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If there's one thing everyone can agree on when it comes to HS2, it is the fact that the project has divided opinion.

Those backing the plans speak of the improvements to journey times between London and the north of England, the creation of jobs and the rebalance of the UK's economy.

Those sitting on the other side of the fence of the £100 billion project are concerned over the cost, exact route of the line and its impact.

Today Prime Minister Boris Johnson has revealed it will go ahead and he will restore discipline to the programme, with changes to the way HS2 is managed as well as a look for cost savings.

Among the announcements included:

- HS2 will go ahead to deliver essential North-South connectivity, greater capacity and shorter journey times, with construction for Phase 1 from London to the West Midlands set to begin in April
- Decision comes alongside new investment for vital local transport links as PM sets out his vision to overhaul the UK's transport network, including £5 billion to improve bus and cycle links outside London, as well as vital upgrades to local roads
- PM commits to accelerating progress on Northern Powerhouse Rail with an integrated plan to maximise benefits of rail investments across the North, informed by an assessment from the National Infrastructure Commission
- Reform package will improve governance at HS2 Ltd to ensure project is delivered better and more efficiently

Rail Business Daily has been looking at the reaction to the announcement.

“This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity”

Henri Murison, Director of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, said: “The North’s civic and business leaders have argued tirelessly that major infrastructure investment is so badly needed to provide the extra capacity urgently required on our rail network.

“Creating a delivery vehicle to build High Speed North as an integrated high-speed network North to South and East to West, provides the best way to rebalance our national economy and secure the benefits of shared growth in turn, attracting investment in the shortest possible time.

The Oakervee Review has set out how a process can begin swiftly for HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail, to be best configured together with the wider existing network to create a joined up new and upgraded railway for the North – taking up the ambition of the Victorians and being as bold as they were. It is the only way we will create the capacity we need to unlock the benefits passengers on packed local trains, get freight off the roads and provide the connectivity which is a pre-requisite of closing the North – South divide for good.

“This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity; to create a truly balanced Britain that works for everyone. Integrating HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail is the first step – a bold, decisive, forward-looking step that I am heartened the government has finally chosen to take as politicians across both major parties here in the North have campaigned with us for.”

“It’s time to stop debating and start delivering”

British Chambers of Commerce Director General Dr Adam Marshall said: “The decision to proceed with HS2 was a long time coming – so it’s great news for businesses, investment and growth in many parts of the UK.

“It’s time to stop debating and start delivering the new capacity and connections that HS2 will bring to our communities and businesses.

“While progress on the first phase of HS2 will be celebrated, the government’s decision to review parts of the route beyond Birmingham will unsettle business communities in the Midlands and the North. The case for many of the transformative transport, regeneration and investment projects planned in the North and Midlands depends on the full project going ahead.

“Business communities will continue to campaign for delivery of the full HS2 route. If ministers want to achieve their aim to ‘level up’, they must not let down some of the areas that have given HS2 their full-throated support.”

“Investment in alternative schemes would deliver for larger economic gains”

Dr Richard Wellings, the Institute of Economic Affairs’ Head of Transport said: “The decision to go ahead with HS2 is deeply disappointing.

“With the predicted costs ballooning to £106 billion, the costs are now likely to exceed the benefits. And the project is highly unlikely to transform the North in the ways that have been promised.

“Investment in alternative schemes – such as incremental improvements to existing infrastructure in northern towns and cities – would deliver far larger economic gains.

“The additional announcement of £5 billion spending on buses and cycle routes is another poor use of taxpayers’ money. Many bus services outside London are already running almost empty and the new ones are unlikely to attract enough passengers to be economically viable.”

“A decision that could unlock a new golden age of rail”

Darren Caplan, Chief Executive of the Railway Industry Association, said HS2 will not just boost the UK’s economy and connectivity, but will also enable other major rail infrastructure projects to be delivered too.

He spoke on BBC Radio 4’s Today Programme:

“We must now get on delivering”

Sir John Pearce, East Midlands, Midlands Connect Chairman, said: “HS2 is the only shovel ready infrastructure project that can future-proof our rail network, keep rail travel affordable and bring our country together in an environmentally-sustainable way. We must now get on delivering this once-in-a-century upgrade of our rail network to level up the economy and unleash the potential of the Midlands and the North.

“HS2 is already a catalyst for huge regeneration in Birmingham city centre; now, we can get on with bringing the same transformation to the areas around the other Midlands’ HS2-connected stations: Interchange near Solihull, Stafford, Stoke-on-Trent, Crewe, the East Midlands HS2 Hub station at Toton and Chesterfield.

“We must now make sure that the benefits of HS2 are maximised through proper integration with regional transport strategies like our Midlands Engine Rail (MER) proposals, using the capacity released by HS2 to introduce 700 additional rail services every day, vastly improving journeys for millions of commuters who use the existing network.”

“HS2 was always going to be a game-changer”

Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, said: “I am delighted that the Prime Minister has given the go-ahead for HS2, meaning we can now get on and reap the considerable benefits from this once-in-a-generation infrastructure project.

“I want to see the next phase of construction works get started immediately for the Birmingham to London link, with progress made on the lines to Manchester and Leeds as soon as possible.

“HS2 was always going to be a game-changer for the region, particularly because of the impact it is going to have both on employment and our local transport network. Not only will HS2 create tens of thousands of jobs for local people – both directly and indirectly – but it is also going to free up vital capacity on our local rail network, meaning we can run more reliable and frequent local commuter services.

“HS2 will put us at the heart of the UK’s transport system, and we will be able to attract big-name companies to the region – following in the footsteps of HSBC UK who moved its headquarters to Birmingham following the original announcement.

“As Boris said today, we do need to make sure that we find savings to bring the cost of HS2 down, and we need rigorous management to make sure that we get it built as soon as possible.”

“Much needed capacity to our railways”

Matthew Fell, CBI Chief UK Policy Director, said: “The Prime Minister’s decision to back HS2 is exactly the

sort of bold, decisive action required to inject confidence in the economy. It sends the right signal around the world that the U.K. is open for business.

“HS2 shows the government’s commitment to levelling up the nations and regions of the UK. The project will bring jobs, new homes, skills and investment to the areas of the country that need them most.

“Once built, HS2 will bring much needed capacity to our railways and help to realise the government’s promise of an ‘infrastructure revolution’ for the North, Midlands and beyond.

“The time for debate over HS2 is over and the time for delivery is now.”

“Crucial to level up the economy”

Dan Jarvis, Mayor of the Sheffield City Region, said: “I welcome today’s announcement from the Prime Minister. HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail are crucial to level up the economy and provide vital upgrades to our creaking Victorian infrastructure. We must ensure they benefit South Yorkshire and unlock prosperity and better connectivity right across our region.

“The decision to review Phase 2b, which includes the route through South Yorkshire, gives us the opportunity to look again at the impact of HS2 on communities in our region. The Government needs to ensure this review is undertaken thoroughly but speedily so we can minimise disruption. I’m acutely aware that some of our local residents now face further uncertainty and are unable to plan for the future. I will be meeting with the Secretary of State today to discuss these matters in more detail.

“We need urgent investment in South Yorkshire’s wider transport infrastructure so we see improvements in the short term. The Government must use the Budget to invest in shovel-ready projects in South Yorkshire. This means approving our full Transforming Cities funding bid, which will enable us to improve our rail, bus, walking and cycling network. We also need clarity on the Government’s plans to invest in buses so we can halt the decline in services in South Yorkshire.”

“Climate emergency will not be solved by making the nature crisis worse”

Nikki Williams, The Wildlife Trusts’ director of campaigns and policy , said: “Nature is paying too high a price for HS2. We urged the Government to re-consider in the light of The Wildlife Trusts’ report which evidenced the serious risk that HS2 poses to nature – and to take notice of over 66,000 people who wrote to the Prime Minister asking him to review HS2. Today’s announcement means that it is more critical than ever that the whole project is redesigned – before HS2 creates a scar that can never heal.

“It is vital that HS2 does not devastate or destroy irreplaceable meadows, ancient woodlands and internationally important wetlands that are home to a huge range of wildlife, from barn owls to butterflies. Green and sustainable transport is vital, but the climate emergency will not be solved by making the

nature crisis worse.

“As HS2 contractors get on with bulldozing and building, the public can help wildlife by being alert to works near them. Contact your local Wildlife Crime officer if you believe HS2 Ltd or contractors are undertaking works without permission. Wildlife Trusts along the route will continue to advise and engage with HS2 Ltd locally.”

“Resulting improvements will lead to economic growth”

Dr Jenifer Baxter, Chief Engineer at the Institution of Mechanical Engineers said: “The Institution of Mechanical Engineers is delighted that the Government has retained confidence in the benefits of the HS2 project. The resulting improvements to both north-south and east-west flows in the North of England will lead to economic growth, modal shift from road and air to rail for both passengers and freight. This will provide significant benefits for reduced greenhouse gas emissions and reduce pollutants that contribute to poor air quality.

“The routes minimise the impact of construction on the operation of today’s railway with opportunities to investigate how the high-speed rail link can be delivered with minimal environmental impacts. For example, more refined modelling using information from High Speed 1 might indicate where some expensive tunnelling may be avoided.”

“HS2 will bring people, businesses and communities closer together”

Will Wilson, CEO, Siemens Mobility, said: “As a long-term supporter of HS2, Siemens Mobility Limited welcomes today’s announcement that this vital project has been given the green light by the Government.

“HS2 is a once in a lifetime opportunity to level up the different regions of the UK, playing its part to close the 40 per cent productivity gap that exists between London and the north of England. It will serve as a strategic asset for the rail network and the UK economy for generations to come.

“With faster, more frequent services and the introduction of new direct services, HS2 will bring people, businesses and communities closer together. As a high capacity, fully electrified rail service, its construction is also essential for the UK reaching our net zero carbon emissions target, with the expectation that it’ll take more than 2.5 million trucks’ worth of cargo off the road.

“The connectivity provided by HS2 is essential to our ongoing business success. Ensuring strong rail links east and west is as important as increased linkage to London for continued investment into the UK. This includes our new rail manufacturing plant in Goole, Yorkshire.

“Siemens Mobility Limited looks forward to continuing our work with UK suppliers and partners to realise the full potential of HS2. HS2 gives us and our suppliers increased confidence to continue our investment in technology and skills in the rail sector – something which is essential for the successful delivery of the project.”

“There is no other viable alternative to the project”

John Smith, Managing Director for GB Railfreight, said: “I am delighted and relieved the Government has given the green light to the project. HS2 will be the first new railway constructed north of London for over a century, creating much needed capacity and connections across the North and Midlands. There is no other viable alternative to the project, as both the Oakervee Review and the Prime Minister have acknowledged.

“By signing off on the scheme, the Government has committed to expanding capacity beyond just passenger services. The decision will free up extra capacity on the West Coast Mainline which will help the growth of rail freight, supporting economic growth across the UK and helping the delivery of the Government’s targets to decarbonise the economy by supporting the shift of freight from road to more sustainable rail services.

“Delivering HS2 will, in the long term, support the UK’s regional cities and towns to prosper and connect to other surrounding areas. I applaud the Prime Minister for making the right decision rather than delay any further.”

“HS2 is essential to tackling systemic congestion in the UK transport system”

The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) has warmly welcomed the Prime Minister’s confirmation that HS2 is to go ahead in full.

A statement reads: “While welcoming the announcements on transport services and infrastructure, CILT urges the Prime Minister to ensure that, in parallel with HS2 Phase 1 and in advance of HS2 Phase 2b and HS3/NPR works, investment is also committed to improve the number and size of trains that can operate on existing routes, particularly Trans Pennine.

“CILT understands that it may take up to 20 years for the full benefit of the new lines to be realised and it is essential that existing routes continue to be enhanced to provide a better service to passengers in the meantime. This is particularly important for those routes which have little interaction with HS2.

“The benefits of HS2 are even greater for freight. Britain’s manufacturers, retailers and ports are keen to move more of their goods by rail. This will accelerate as the implications of achieving Net Zero carbon by

2050 become clearer.

“The Institute’s belief is that electric trains carrying goods on the trunk haul, linking with electric-lorries for final delivery to customers in towns and cities, offers an attractive option for near-full decarbonisation of the supply chain once goods reach the UK.

“Well ahead of 2050, more capacity for freight is needed on our north-south main lines as well as on east-west routes and particularly Trans Pennine.

“The M62 is one of the busiest HGV corridors in the country but it is very difficult to move containers arriving at northern ports across the Pennines by rail due to capacity and height restrictions. UK ports and their customers are keen to divert containers off of the M62 and onto the railways, but are currently unable to do so in significant numbers because of increasing infrastructure constraints.”

Photo credit: HS2