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## **Fix the Spine: Elevate the present, leave room for the future**

Dear Louise,

We the undersigned are writing to you as a coalition of transport experts and campaigners regarding Great Britain's high-speed rail network, and the urgent decisions the Government will need to take in the near future. As you will remember, the previous Government unilaterally cancelled much of the planned network, including the 'western leg' to Crewe and Manchester, and left the future of London Euston station (already well into construction) highly uncertain. You recently referred to the Conservatives' approach as 'reckless mismanagement' and 'incompetence'<sup>1</sup>. There is widespread consensus across the industry that the present situation is sub-optimal, with the Public Accounts Committee noting in January that, taking the HS2 project as it stands as a whole, building Phase 1 alone provides a Cost Benefit Ratio of less than one, representing "poor Value for Money to the taxpayer"<sup>2</sup>.

It does not have to be this way. As the High Speed Rail Group have highlighted<sup>3</sup>, the network we have under construction today still has the potential to deliver a transformation for the rail network and the wider economy, as well as form the foundation for future expansion to a wider network, leaving behind a legacy of long-term ambition and national revival. This new "spine", if delivered and exploited efficiently, with an eye on the future, can help the Government achieve its five missions<sup>4</sup> in the following ways:

1. **Get Britain Building Again:** Creating jobs through the supply chain, maintaining and growing skills and expertise, and providing more reliable, affordable and accessible transport by enabling a step-change in capacity on the wider rail network, boosting economic growth and productivity.
2. **Switching on Great British Energy:** Enabling people to move sustainably, both using the new network to travel between major cities (reducing demand for domestic flights), and by increasing capacity on the wider rail network for local journeys. High-speed trains can be powered by green electricity. Teams on the ground can continue to pioneer advancements in construction.
3. **Getting the NHS Back on its Feet:** Boosting capacity and reliability on the rail network will help the Government's mission to provide reliable, affordable and accessible transport for key workers, and enable more passengers to make the most of our rail network, reducing emissions and benefitting public health.
4. **Taking Back Our Streets:** Delivering a high-speed spine will provide a catalyst for rebuilding and improving key transport interchanges, as well as wider regeneration schemes in towns such as Crewe<sup>12</sup>, enabling us to build a public realm that is safer and more liveable for all.
5. **Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity:** Boosting capacity and reliability on the rail network will help the Government's mission to give everyone access to work and education, particularly outside London and the South East, helping to bridge the North-South divide.

We continue to believe that, in the long-term, extending the high-speed rail network to Manchester and Leeds will prove necessary and beneficial to increasing the capacity of the rail network, growing the economy, enabling sustainable modal shift and closing the North-South divide. However, we understand that, in the current political and economic climate, this is not something the present Labour Government is going to commit to. We are therefore focusing our letter on **four key asks** that can be delivered quickly, with existing legislation, and without huge upfront costs relative to what is already committed. These four key decisions will unlock the maximum possible benefit for the country of the high-speed spine under construction today, leaving the country with the solid foundation for a wider transport revolution.

Our **four key asks** are:

- Delivery of London Euston station phase 1 (six platforms), and the line to Old Oak Common, as the terminus of the high-speed spine.
- Safeguarding space at London Euston for the future delivery of phase 2 (a further five platforms), to enable future growth and the full exploitation of the high-speed spine.
- Delivery of a Stafford Bypass line from Handsacre to Crewe, fixing Britain’s biggest bottleneck.
- Safeguarding a future route between Crewe and Manchester.



### London Euston

Construction at Euston station has now been on standby since March 2023<sup>5</sup>, leaving a huge empty space in the centre of London, and holding up the delivery of the London-end of the network. This will result in extending the period for which Old Oak Common will form the temporary terminus, limiting the exploitation of the network's capacity to 6-8tph (from a design capacity of 18tph), damaging the commercial attractiveness of high-speed services and placing pressure on the Elizabeth Line. Further delaying Euston will not generate long-term savings; the National Audit Office reports this pause to Euston and other parts of the network has already driven up total costs by £2-3bn<sup>5</sup>. Further delay comes at an opportunity cost to our economy, undermining theoretical savings from seeking private financing for the station<sup>6</sup>. **We therefore call for the urgent resumption of construction of Euston phase 1 (with six platform) and the line to Old Oak Common.**

Under 'Network North'<sup>6</sup>, delivering Euston as a six-platform station without provision for future expansion would permanently limit the capacity of the high-speed spine to 10tph<sup>7</sup>, creating a barrier to future expansion. **We urge your Government not to allow Euston to be permanently constrained, by ensuring space is left in the future for a further five platforms (returning to the original two-phase approach<sup>7</sup>), with full grade separation in the approach to ensure maximum capacity and resilience.** Retail and housing can still be unlocked through over-site development, helping to deliver a £41bn boost to the economy by 2053<sup>8</sup>, but only with the benefits of high-speed connectivity delivered by opening the station. Returning to a two-phase approach will allow the upfront costs of delivery of the second phase to be deferred, without significantly delaying Euston's opening or constraining future growth, including the full exploitation of the high-speed spine's 18tph capacity in the future.

### Handsacre to Crewe and Manchester

Current plans to end the high-speed network at Handsacre will create Britain's biggest bottleneck through Colwich Junction and Shugborough Tunnel on the West Coast Main Line, where high-speed trains will jostle for paths with other long distance, regional and freight services. This is, according to the High Speed Rail Group<sup>3</sup>, "akin to funnelling a motorway onto an A road and then onto a country lane"; the severity of this challenge is also highlighted by the Public Accounts Committee<sup>2</sup>, the National Audit Office<sup>5</sup> and the National Infrastructure Commission<sup>9</sup>. There is a consensus that as things stand, HS2 Phase 1 will not improve capacity north of Handsacre, will in fact make timetabling more challenging, and could result in a reduction in seat capacity in absolute terms<sup>5</sup>. This bottleneck will stand in the way of meeting the (previous) Government's announced target to boost rail freight by 75%<sup>10</sup>.

**We therefore urge the Government to prioritise delivery of a Stafford Bypass line**, using the planned route of, and parliamentary powers for, the previously planned HS2 Phase 2a<sup>11</sup>. This line would enable the high-speed spine to join the West Coast Main Line south of Crewe, bypassing Britain's biggest bottleneck, and thus boosting capacity and resilience for high-speed, regional and freight services. It would further reduce journey times from London and Birmingham to Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and other northern destinations, and enable the remodelling of Crewe station to proceed as planned, benefitting all station users and catalysing regeneration of the town centre<sup>12</sup>. Bringing this programme forward now would provide these benefits as quickly as possible, potentially alongside the opening of the first phase of the high-speed spine, minimising disruption to the rail network and maximising value for money (see appendix 1).

We recognise that the Government is not in the position to commit to bringing high-speed rail to Manchester, and there remains discussion of what form such a line would take, including how it would interact with Northern Powerhouse Rail and what form Manchester Piccadilly station should take. Until a time when such decisions can be made, **we urge the Government to immediately reinstate safeguarding of the full route between Crewe and Manchester, and halt any sales of land.**

Conclusion

We stand at a major juncture, both with a new Government with its promise of change and economic revival, and a moment where key decisions will need to be taken on the next steps in the delivery of our high-speed spine. The Government have made it clear they will not immediately reinstate the full HS2 network as was previously planned. We have therefore focused our four key asks on what is urgent, what is affordable, what requires no new legislation, and what will enable the full exploitation of the network under construction today, delivering a high-speed spine that will enable a step-change in capacity and reliability on the rail network, boost the economy and cut carbon emissions. It will also lay the groundwork for a future Government to fully exploit and expand that network in generations to come. We urge you to consider these four asks carefully, and make the right decisions for our transport network, our economy and our environment.

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Leader of West Northamptonshire Liberal Democrats

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Rail Focus

**Greengauge 21**

**George Marshall**

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### **Appendix 1: Stafford Bypass line**

Our proposal for a Stafford Bypass line is an adaptation of the groundwork already done for HS2 Phase 2a between Handsacre and Crewe, which was cancelled in October 2023, despite parliamentary powers already being obtained to construct the route in 2021<sup>11</sup>. In 2019, the cost of the line was estimated at £5.9bn<sup>13</sup>. £1bn has already been spent on the project, according to the National Audit Office<sup>5</sup>, and the closing down of Phase 2 would cost another £100m and take three years. Therefore, as with HS2 Phase 1, a cost-benefit assessment should be made of the scheme which compares the remaining costs of completion (which could be reduced – see below) against the costs of cancellation, as well as the costs of creating Britain’s biggest bottleneck as a result<sup>3</sup>. A cost-benefit assessment must also consider the positive effects of bringing the scheme’s benefits forward in time.

There may be opportunities to reduce the costs of the delivery of the line by focusing on capacity rather than speed, as suggested by Chris Gibb<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, if construction of the line can be brought up to speed such that it is ready to open alongside the rest of the high-speed spine from Euston to Handsacre (as was planned prior to October 2023), costs could further be reduced by removing the need for a connection to the West Coast Main Line at Handsacre altogether. Finally, as Greengauge 21<sup>15</sup> have highlighted, there is an opportunity to revisit alternative options that were considered in 2015<sup>16</sup>, potentially reducing the length of new line needed by joining the West Coast Main Line further south of Crewe, but still providing the benefits of bypassing Colwich and Shugborough. Such measures should be considered, with previous work reassessed, though deviations from the HS2 Phase 2a plans could potentially require changes to legislation.

### **Appendix 2: Policy Alignment**

Our four key asks align with key takeaways of the High Speed Rail Group’s report, *Exploiting the Potential*<sup>3</sup>, maximising the high-speed network’s role as a foundation for a national network and maximising future expansion potential, addressing a key gap (“Britain’s Biggest Bottleneck”) and multiple key challenges (Euston uncertainty and rail freight growth risks).

Our four key asks align with Campaign for Better Transport’s policy position on the next steps for HS2<sup>17</sup>, agreeing on the halting of land sales, and laying the groundwork for future review of other cancelled high-speed rail lines, most significantly Crewe to Manchester.

Our call to prioritise the Stafford Bypass line aligns with conclusions by Greengauge 21<sup>15</sup> on the need for urgent prioritisation of this section, including consideration of potential alternatives.

Our call to prioritise the Stafford Bypass line and safeguard land for further extension to Manchester aligns with Chris Gibbs’ proposal for a ‘New Northern Line’ to ensure optimum operability of the high-speed network<sup>14</sup>, and Mayor Andy Burnham and former Mayor Andy Street’s proposal for a new line fill the gap between Handsacre and Northern Powerhouse Rail at High Legh (and thence onward to Manchester)<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Louise Haigh, Twitter: <https://x.com/LouHaigh/status/1815761816061931607>

<sup>2</sup> Public Accounts Committee:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43184/documents/214904/default/>

<sup>3</sup> *Exploiting the Potential*, High Speed Rail Group: <https://www.rail-leaders.com/wp-content/uploads/High-Speed-Rail-Exploiting-the-Potential.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *Getting Britain Moving: Labour's Plan to Fix Britain's Railways*: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/GETTING-BRITAIN-MOVING-Labours-Plan-to-Fix-Britains-Railways.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> National Audit Office: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/hs2-update-following-cancellation-of-phase-2.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Network North (Department for Transport):

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65290f8669726000dccf78b/network-north-transforming-british-transport-print-version.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> HS2 Phase 1 Full Business Case, Department for Transport [10tph was planned when Euston Phase 1, with six platforms, was built]: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fc51d7b8fa8f54755392863/full-business-case-hs2-phase-one.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Camden Council: <https://news.camden.gov.uk/hs2-euston-station-regeneration-can-add-41bn-to-the-national-economy--report/>

<sup>9</sup> Infrastructure Progress Review 2024, National Infrastructure Commission: <https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads/NIC-IPR-2024-Final.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Department for Transport: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-ambitious-target-to-grow-rail-freight-by-at-least-75>

<sup>11</sup> HS2 Phase 2a: High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) Act 2021:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/high-speed-rail-west-midlands-to-crewe-bill>

<sup>12</sup> Cheshire East Council:

<https://moderngov.cheshireeast.gov.uk/documents/s74783/1.%20Crewe%20Hub%20Area%20Action%20Plan%20Publication%20Draft.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Integrated Rail Plan (Department for Transport):

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62389f1ae90e07799cd3de47/integrated-rail-plan-for-the-north-and-midlands-web-version.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Chris Gibb, LinkedIn: [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/chris-gibb-34554a45\\_a-new-approach-for-hs2-activity-7200166748136910849-IIRa/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/chris-gibb-34554a45_a-new-approach-for-hs2-activity-7200166748136910849-IIRa/)

<sup>15</sup> Greengauge 21: <https://www.greengauge21.net/wp-content/uploads/GG21-West-Midlands-%E2%80%93-Crewe-the-key-choices.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> See the “High Cost Alternative Option”, Rail Alternatives to HS2 Phase 2a, Department for Transport/Atkins: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a804c0bed915d74e33f99d2/rail-alternatives-to-hs2-phase-2a.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Campaign for Better Transport: <https://bettertransport.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2407-hs2-position-paper.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Manchester Evening News: <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/new-cheaper-train-line-best-28854094>