



## **HS2 PHASE 2b: CREWE TO MANCHESTER DRAFT HYBRID BILL – POST-FIRST READING**

### **Representations of Pickmere Parish Council in relation to the principle of the scheme**

**March 2022**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1 Pickmere Parish Council has considered the evolving proposals for HS2b since the inception of the project. It has consistently objected to the principle of the proposal as well as to many of its design features. Its fundamental objection to the project has been on the basis that the economic case for the project, and in particular the benefits it would bring to the Northwest region as well as to this part of Cheshire, has never been satisfactorily justified, particularly in relation to the long-term damage to the environment and the communities of the region that the project will bring.

2 This objection has over time been strengthened as it has become increasingly clear that:

- The implementation costs of developing HS2a have been grossly underestimated, leading to substantial over-expenditure. This must inevitably have reduced the finance available for implementation of Phase 2b, which brings with it the risk of exacerbating the damaging effects of 2b on the environment and communities of the NW region, as economies have to be made for instance in the provision of mitigation works.
- The gravity of the ground condition issues that arise in Cheshire have still to date been insufficiently evaluated; it is believed that as investigations continue it will be realised that the costs of physical implementation of the project in the affected areas will have substantially to increase.
- It appears clear that Government's consideration of the project so far has failed to take account of its carbon emissions and climate impact. If they were to be properly accounted for they are likely both to reduce the potential economic benefits of the project (by requiring reductions in the capacity of the proposed network) whilst increasing further the costs of the project (by for instance taking greater account of its environmental impacts).

#### **IMPLEMENTATION COSTS AND BUSINESS CASE**

3 The current HS2b project is based around seeking a certain passenger capacity and providing an ultra-high specification in relation to train speed. However, whilst the passenger capacity assumptions which form the basis of the project have never been accepted by this Council (and the Council is conscious that various scheme changes as a result of environmental assessment and other

past representations have actually resulted in the likelihood that the passenger capacity of the scheme has been reduced thereby further impacting on its overall viability) the Coronavirus crisis has resulted in very wide-ranging changes in attitudes toward home-working and the need for face to face business meetings. The Council considers that this will impact how business is carried on after the crisis has passed and will consequently further reduce the demand for ultra-high speed capacity between this region and London.

4 The Dept of Transport stated in statistics published in December 2021 that distances travelled by rail in Great Britain increased steadily from 1983 onwards, after a period of relative stability since 1960. This steady increase reached its all-time peak in 2018, with 2019's level being similar to that of 2018, before declining by 80% to 16 billion passenger kilometres in 2020. The latest DoT figures published in February 2022 stated that rail passenger usage was about 64% of pre-pandemic levels, and that leisure travel had recovered more than weekday travel. The Strategic Outline Business case remains vague about these impacts but adopts an 'optimistic' view as to the recovery in pre-pandemic travel patterns. It may be argued that it has no option but to adopt such a view, as without it the business case for the project will be even more inadequate.

5 The Government's Infrastructure and Projects Authority is the national centre of expertise for infrastructure and major projects, and sits at the heart of government. It rates projects into 5 categories, from red to green, with each providing an indication of "the likelihood of successful delivery and level of associated risks".

6 The Authority reported in July 2021 that "At this year's snapshot (end of March 2021), 41 projects were rated Green or Amber/Green (22% of the GMPP) and 51 projects were assigned Red or Amber/Red (28%), while 84 projects (46%) were Amber (see Figure 5).....there are 7 projects rated as Red, but 3 of these projects have joined GMPP this year. **Out of the remaining 4 projects, only two have remained Red compared to last year's Annual Report, the Crowsnest Programme, and HS2 phase 2b.**" [our emphasis]. Normally one might expect projects over time to move from a 'red' category to one of the less troubling categories as the scheme is developed, but the fact that HS2b remains in the red category, at this stage of the project, is extremely concerning and indicates a level of uncertainty with regard to its viability – particularly bearing in mind factors such as the unknowns with regard to the costs of dealing with ground conditions in this part of Cheshire, as further discussed below.

7 Other substantial holes remain in the business case for the project. Much play is made of the benefits of securing a station at Manchester Airport; this has substantially influenced the routeing of the railway as it passes through Cheshire and toward Manchester. However, it is clear that, although a new station has been assumed, no agency, least of all Manchester Airport Group, seem at all willing to fund its construction, together with all the infrastructural change it will require in the area of the Airport. Should the Airport station not proceed, the whole routeing of this part of the railway needs to be questioned.

8 In addition, objectors have continually reported to HS2 Ltd the potential difficulties in taking the railway across both the remnant and the still existing salt deposits of Cheshire. The town of Northwich has historically suffered from major construction issues as a result of the salt caverns that lie beneath it; these caverns spread relatively widely over this part of the county. However only 3 of the 23 known caverns have been grouted (i.e. appropriately filled to secure some level of stability),

yet even so a recently built retail development in the town centre (built over one of the caverns that has been grouted) is now suffering a significant subsidence problem arising from the ground conditions that exist.

9 Despite the warnings, HS2 Ltd has not surveyed the length of the railway's route through this part of Cheshire and remains unaware in any detail of the considerable difficulties that construction of the project is likely to bring. Even if adequately constructed it is likely that over the whole life of the railway, it will at the least have to be the subject of frequent backfilling/relevelling works as parts of the line continue to subside into the geology below.

10 The declining business case for construction of HS2B will get worse as detailed geological investigations proceed (presumably after the Bill has received its second reading). This clearly means that the overall project cost will increase substantially beyond the figure currently accepted by Government. That suggests to us that the project should not proceed in its current form. As a corollary, the community of Pickmere also fears that if the project proceeds, and if, as seems certain, its costs significantly exceed current estimates, that economies will be made in terms of the mitigation measures that will be undertaken to try to improve the impacts of the railway upon local communities.

11 Covid is not the only new factor that gives rise to additional doubt about the business case for the project. The energy consumption of the proposed railway will be immense – the most recent estimate being that HS2 alone will require about 2/3 of the electricity the current rail network uses. That is a significant factor in itself, but of course we have a new and hitherto largely ignored change in circumstance with regard to the volume and the cost of energy in the UK, and the continued resilience of such provision into the future. This factor on its own brings into question even further the business case for the project.

## **EFFECT ON COMMUNITIES**

12 The Council's view is that the local impacts of the proposed scheme are being completely subsumed by the emphasis spuriously being placed on the hypothetical overall national economic benefits of the scheme. Local communities are simply to be seen as 'casualties' in the achievement of a project that will not secure the benefits that its proponents describe. HS2b will never serve most of the communities through which it passes – it will only, at best, despoil them, and at worst destroy them.

13 At the very least, the price that local communities have to pay in terms of their local environment and living conditions throughout the construction period, and then afterward with the final scheme, will not be recompensed by the small amounts of tree-planting etc that the scheme currently incorporates. There should be recognition of the scale of impacts that communities are going to suffer and that there is at the least a need for substantial local community gains to overcome the community losses. These do not exist in the current scheme. Further in the particular case of Pickmere, the lack of mention in the various HS2B bill proposals of the Parish's Village Hall (which lies close to the route) and Pickmere Lake, a local beauty spot and attraction for thousands of visitors annually, attests to the lack of care and concern that HS2 Ltd have taken in preparing their proposals.

## FORM OF THE SCHEME

15 The clear PR message that accompanies the scheme is that it will provide high speed rail travel up to the Northwest of England. However, It may be observed that the strong likelihood is that the section of the railway running through much of Cheshire will be constrained by:

1. its passage over the brine fields, as mentioned above, followed by:
2. its negotiation of two effectively right-angle curves as it is approaching Manchester Airport,

such that its speed will be significantly reduced for a considerable section.

16 High speed is therefore a misnomer!

## MORE DETAILED OBJECTIONS

17 Without prejudice to its objections to the project taken as a whole, the Parish Council has strongly objected at every stage to a number of the detailed elements of the proposed scheme as it passes near to and through the parish, including seriously detrimental impacts on the local environment due to:

- the wildly excessive engineering solutions that have been proposed to solve local road-re-routing issues etc.
- the impact of heavy construction traffic on this rural parish throughout the long construction period – noise, disturbance, traffic danger and pollution; this is ever more evident as the project is firmed up; the Parish Council will be submitting objections to these aspects in relation both to the Environmental Statement and also at the petitioning stage.
- proposals that have been hinted at but never detailed, for the ‘improvement,’ i.e. widening, of local country lanes to accommodate the substantial construction traffic that will seek to use the parish’s small-scale road network, much of which is subject to a 7.5 tonne limit. This will destroy for ever the rural nature of much of Pickmere parish.

18 Further, it has been apparent at every stage of the long-running consultation process for HS2b that HS2 Ltd has consistently failed in its duty to provide sufficient and clear information on its proposals, and to demonstrate how it has taken the comments, objections and suggestions of local organisations and communities into account. Among our current complaints is the issue, as part of the current plans package, of plan and profile maps which are dated 2018 and on which communities are to base their comments. On enquiry to HS2 Ltd. It appears that whilst there may have been amendments to the scheme since 2018, there is no right of public access to such proposed alterations.

19 However, our critique continues with the overwhelming nature of the paperwork that has been provided: **370+** documents to review and cross-reference for our short (10.6km) section of track. Not only must we sadly reflect upon the number of trees sacrificed to produce this profligate amount of paper, we also want to highlight that the sheer volume of information and the forensic work that needs to be undertaken to make any sense of it, is a masterclass in the **‘drown with information, hamper meaningful consultation’** engagement strategy.

20 The Parish Council believes that the fundamental need for the North – both North West and North East regions – is to solve the east-west inter-connectivity inadequacies that have existed for centuries. In terms of this region, solving those problems should be uppermost, and the potential benefits of improved linkages to London and the south should have a second priority.

21 The Council believes that a better and more economically justifiable and viable solution would be one focussed on achieving a satisfactory Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) network, with linkages to HS2b being those which suit NPR requirements at least as well as they suit HS2b, and that at the least HS2b should become a lower-specified project, seeking lower design speeds for instance than the current project. This could mean that it is able to adopt greater flexibility in routeing, track layout and gradients, thereby permitting reductions in the detrimental impacts it has on the environment and communities through which it passes. However, the Parish Council's preference is for HS2B to be cancelled and for a similar scale of budget to be employed to upgrade the existing rail infrastructure to secure the essential capacity objectives.

## **CLIMATE IMPACTS**

22 The current HS2b proposals are based around an objective of securing ultra-high speeds. This means that the route is very much constrained by the requirement to maximise straights and minimise curves and gradients. This clearly impacts substantially on routeing and land take. Further there is evidence that as train speeds increase, they become less and less efficient in terms of energy and resource use and impact more and more on the environment. Using HS2's own figures, even after 120 years, HS2 will produce a net increase in greenhouse gas emissions just in terms of operation, ignoring the carbon cost of its construction.

23 Further, it seems irrefutable that the construction project will involve such an enormous volume of engineering inputs and techniques – in terms of tunnelling, bridging, changing landforms, concreting, building and widening roads, building other structures – involving the transport of all the materials involved in those processes (primarily by road) that the project's true impact can only substantially conflict with the Government's climate objectives.

24 Taking a different view of this aspect, no account appears to have been taken of the effects of climate change over the life of the proposed railway on its resilience. Just one aspect of this is the possibility of increased rainfall which will, in particular because of the existence and nature of the brine fields in this part of Cheshire, impact on the integrity of the ground conditions supporting the railway, with implications for its continued integrity and maintenance.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

25 In the context of seeking to minimise greenhouse gas emissions, and compliance with the Paris Agreement, a far more appropriate strategic response would be to develop a rail network into and across the North which seeks to maximise passenger rail use on a comprehensive basis, including for commuting into the larger urban centres, for cross-region movements (sadly very much restricted by the paucity of efficient rail connections at the moment), and for strategic connections to the Midlands and London. A network which gives priority to NPR and with secondary consideration being given to a newer, less radical and less environmentally damaging north-south railway would, it is believed, serve the region better in terms of economic efficiency, environmental acceptability, and the general living conditions of the Region's residents, inter alia reducing pressure on the region's

congested and heavily polluting road networks. Such a lower specification (but comprehensive) approach is even more necessary in the context of the capital project funding situation that the country will face as it emerges from the current Coronavirus crisis.

26 In conclusion, this Council believes that recognition of the economic needs of the North, as compared to those of the metropolis, has been very slow in coming. The Northern Powerhouse concept is welcomed but still needs to be brought to reality, in part through improvements to the region's infrastructure. HS2b will not address this objective. More important to the region is to solve its historical infrastructural deficiencies – in particular the inadequacy of its east-west transport links. The most crucial task in both regional economic and environmental contexts, and indeed in terms of national environmental targets, is to produce a step-change in the region's public transport linkages.

27 For all these reasons it is considered that the current HS2B proposal should not proceed.