

Dear Sirs,

As a reasonably regular professional contributor to the sum total of knowledge in the planning and transportation fields in the UK, I feel duty bound to offer my comments on this matter, even though I am now only an irregular user of the transport infrastructure of the north of England. I am equally aware of the composition - at least the headline names - of the panel appointed to consider the presentations, and the probability of their leaning in a particular direction - more of the same failed policies of the past fifty years. If only because they have nothing else on the table, and their reputations are not those of innovators; having held high office for many years, with the present results, how could they be? They may even be part of the problem; standing in the way of any solution.

The 'Northern Connectivity' problem is merely a regional manifestation of the fact that the transport infrastructure of parts of the north has reached the kind of saturation levels previously only seen in the south, with the small added complication that there is a range of not very large hills in the way of many inter-nodal routes. This has, as in the rest of the UK, resulted in the gradual stretching of journey times year by year, irrespective of the money invested in transport infrastructure. It has to be added of course that the 'North' was liberally dosed with Dr Beeching's patent medicine, something the south, particularly London, was not. So there are no significant commuter rail services, and certainly no 'Network South East'-style standard 12 car trains at ten minute intervals on all routes, and absolutely no mix of stopping, semi-fast and fast trains as seen on the Brighton Line, for example. Nor any four track railways (Stockport excepted) to run them on. Nor the subsidies that permit such extravagance to run into London.

That said, it is clear that the road network, especially the M62 corridor west of the A19 (which I take to include the M58, M60, and M61, and the M6 betwixt Preston and Stoke), and the A1 corridor north of Scotch Corner (basically Teesside and the former Durham/Northumberland coalfield) struggles to cope at peak periods. This road network takes at least 98% of the total traffic, using the DfT's own figures, so it is clear that any 'more of the same' approach will only have an effect if it means more roads. Quadrupling the capacity of the rail network in the North would have almost no effect, though that would mean only going from three coach class 165's to 12 coach ones between Manchester and Leeds. Except that it is a) unaffordable, and b) would still be so slow (its a 65mph railway at best, via Standedge, perhaps 90 via the longer Calder Valley route), as to ensure that few more would use it. Unless the prices were cut by at least 80%. Which means subsidies that hmg are determined not to provide. On that, at least, I am in agreement with hmg.

So rail is unaffordable, and probably pointless in its current guise, since it will not address the problem. There is probably space for more roads, but whether that would do anything substantive apart from - or even - cope with future increases (as current capacity enhancement projects are targetted to do), is a very moot point. Some places, such as the Calder/Hebble/Roach corridor would struggle to insert new road capacity without taking out the railway or canal, or both, due to the narrowness of the valley floor. Over much of the rest of the north roads could be built; some of the grandiose plans of the 1960's - the A66 for example - remain just that - grandiose plans, but that would mean cutting swathes through areas of outstanding natural beauty on the one hand, and the urban fabric on the other. The fiction that light rail - Manchester Metrolink or Sheffield supertram - which are both really street running heavy rail without a freight option, could provide a solution - is just that - fiction. Light rail in its current guise is as unaffordable as heavy rail, and the evidence of the last two decades (or Edinburgh) proves that.

What then, are the options for the future?

The first - and most important - point to be made is that we are not short of infrastructure - lines of route. We just utilise them exceptionally poorly. We have only one intensive transport mode - the bicycle - and have done our best to get rid of it in my lifetime. So investing in the bicycle, which means segregated quality routes (of which we have none in the UK) with approach controlled signals for priority over all other traffic. And lots of other cycling aids... This is cheap, extremely cost effective, and will do a lot for reducing the carbon intensity of land transport. Its available now, and all we have to do is spend a little on it - perhaps no more than a few hundred million. Less than a new station in a big city...

The second point is that rail transport has never competed with the pneumatic tyred road vehicle (it's had a hundred and twenty five years to do so and has lost at every turn), so there is no point in bothering with current rail. DfT statistics suggest that more conventional rail (heavy or 'light') will actually increase transport carbon emissions, not reduce them.

The third point is that new road capacity on the scale required to solve the congestion problem is probably unaffordable in terms of both cost and public acceptability, and whilst it might work, experience since 1960 on building new road capacity shows emphatically that it does not. More of the same is a recipe for failure, as sure as any devised by man.

The fourth point therefore is that the only practical way forward (as opposed to sideways or backwards being classed as forwards), is to take the lesson of the bicycle and look at low cost, high line of route capacity transport options; making whole orders more use of the existing infrastructure. That will work, and if we plan it right, it will cut transport carbon emissions as well.

The most obvious one is Second Generation Rail (2GR). Of which you will not have heard. The idea however, like all significant innovation, is simple; get rid of the coned wheelset (on which current rail depends) and use the technologies of the road motor vehicle to bring the cost of rail down by 90%, the weight of rail down by 90%, the energy consumption of land transport down by 99%, the cost of infrastructure down by 90%, the cost of maintenance down by 90%. Or more. That makes rail-based transport affordable, enables it to be door to door for passengers and freight, enables it to share infrastructure without restriction, enables overall speeds to be doubled or tripled, enables it to compete with the road vehicle. And win. More to the point, it will require nothing more than pump-priming from the public purse; setting up the necessary operational regime to enable the private sector to set-to and make transport work. Which government - and it has controlled land transport de facto since 1914 - patently cannot.

This isn't rocket science, just a hard-nosed look at the failures we are currently wallowing in, and a belief that we can do a lot better. Have to do a lot better.

Yours Sincerely,

Owen Jordan.

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