

High Speed Rail Phase 2a: Why the current proposals are bad for Staffordshire's existing and future railway links

Executive summary

Staffordshire currently has very good train services to/from London via the West Coast Mainline (WCML) with travel times to London Euston station ranging from 77 minutes for Stafford and 85 minutes for Stoke on-Trent.

The frequency of trains to/from London is also good. Stoke-on-Trent is provided with two trains per hour (tph) and Stafford at least 1tph in each direction according to the weekday timetable that operated prior to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The current combined total of more than three express trains per hour to/from Staffordshire's two main rail destinations will be dramatically reduced once the western arm of HS2 is fully operational.

These services will be replaced by a single HS2 classic compatible express train per hour in each direction that will be shared between Stafford and Stoke-on-Trent and will terminate at Macclesfield, instead of at Manchester Piccadilly.

The existing Pendolino services to Manchester and Liverpool will no longer run to avoid providing competition to HS2 services to the same destinations. HS2 services will be operated by the franchise holder of the West Coast services (currently Avanti) when HS2 opens. It is very unlikely the operator will run express trains in competition with its flagship new service.

Worryingly, even the token HS2 classic compatible service is very vulnerable to being cut from the timetable before it starts to operate. This service was included in the original plan when HS2 schedules were based on the assumption that London Euston would have a capacity of 18tph. However, signalling limitations have reduced this capacity to 14tph.

In addition, multiple design constraints at Euston will mean that its opening to HS2 services will be delayed by at least three years. This will mean that Old Oak Common will initially operate as the London terminus of HS2, which will cut capacity to just 10tph.

The proposed location of the Phase 2a construction railhead and operational maintenance base on the Norton Bridge to Stone Railway will exacerbate the risks to the planned future HS2 service between Stafford and Stoke-on-Trent.

This line also has the dubious honour of being the only railway in the UK to have its capacity reduced by HS2, which means that Staffordshire's local rail network will not be able to run additional services once HS2 has opened, nor gain any benefit from the promised capacity improvements created by HS2.

Given the negative impact of HS2 on Staffordshire's train link to London, it is vitally important that the County be allowed to take advantage of the freeing up of train paths on the WCML and its branch network once HS2 opens.

To do this the proposed Stone Railhead/IMB-R must be relocated from the strategically important Norton Bridge to Stone Railway.

SRCG has identified an ideal alternative location for the Railhead/IMB-R that would have the advantage of connecting to the former Newcastle (Stoke) to Market Drayton Railway less than 1 mile (1.5km) from the WCML at Madeley.

The site at Aldersey's Rough is far superior from an engineering and environmental perspective, has excellent access to the M6 for ease of construction, would save £93 million and at least two years of construction time, and would avoid HS2 wasting £500 million on unnecessary facilities at Ashley on Phase 2b (West).

Aldersey's Rough can be implemented at the behest of the Secretary of State for Transport via an order of the Transport and Works Act 1992; provision of which is incorporated into Clause 49 of the Phase 2a Hybrid Bill.

This change would be the catalyst required to extend the reopening of the Newcastle (Stoke) to Market Drayton Railway the additional 8km back to Newcastle-under-Lyme, and subsequently an additional 2km to Stoke station.

The rail transportation benefits from reopening this line, in combination with the planned changes that will accompany the arrival of HS2 in Crewe, have the potential to transform the economy of the Potteries conurbation and provide significant spin off benefits to most of Staffordshire.

The support for this line reopening is also consistent with the Government's aspirations for levelling up the country, and its desire to invest in the railway infrastructure of the UK.

The key beneficiaries from reopening the Newcastle (Stoke) to Market Drayton Railway include:

- Keele University and its Business and Innovation Park because of its proximity to the route of the railway and from the reopening of Keele station.
- The former coal mining areas that form the western villages of Newcastle Borough, together with the town centre of Newcastle-under-Lyme from the reopening of railway stations.
- The villages of Madeley, and potentially Whitmore, from the reopening of their former railway stations, together with nearby outlying areas by the creation of new car-free travel opportunities.
- The city of Stoke-on-Trent by the creation of new direct rail links to the cities and towns of the North West and North Wales, as well as to key transport hubs such as HS2 at Crewe, Manchester Airport and Liverpool docks.
- Staffordshire Moorlands from the reopening of the Leek line and stations along the route.
- East Staffordshire from improved rail links across the Potteries conurbation and improved connection to the towns and cities of the North West.
- The rail corridor between Stoke-on-Trent and Stafford via Stone from the reinstatement of train services at local stations, including Barlaston, and the potential to open new local services and stations at development areas along the route, such as Trentham and Meaford.

The first step to achieving these benefits is the inclusion of Amendment 4 in the Phase 2a hybrid bill and its requirement for Staffordshire residents to be consulted on local transport provision and improvements in rail connectivity.

It is therefore in the interests of residents and businesses across Staffordshire and the Potteries conurbation that MPs support the inclusion of Amendment 4 when the hybrid bill is debated in the Commons in January 2021.

Stone Railhead Crisis Group
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