

Dear Prime Minister,

Amid the Covid crisis, there is a decision looming about the most significant infrastructure project ever seen in this country. The future of HS2 is critical to the North and the Midlands.

A failure to deliver it in full, all the way to Leeds via Toton and Sheffield, would be a massive missed opportunity to create hundreds of thousands of jobs, attract major investment and stimulate huge economic growth to create a more balanced, fairer economy. Moreover, it would leave your flagship levelling up ambition in tatters.

In February last year, you committed to delivering HS2 in full. The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) was then tasked with investigating how best to integrate HS2 Phase 2b with other projects, including Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) and Midlands Engine Rail (MER), as well as upgrades to the existing network. The NIC failed to do this – instead pitching projects against each other, suggesting cutting the Eastern leg through the East Midlands and Yorkshire and onto the North-East. Sacrificing parts of the network of new lines now would short-change millions of people across this country who after years of waiting would be left with a second-class service.

As business leaders, we are clear – the scale of the opportunities a High Speed North and Midlands network would create are only possible if HS2 is delivered in full. While we are heartened to see the progress that has been made on the Western leg, the commitment to the Eastern leg is far less apparent since HS2 Ltd stopped work on it over a year ago. On the East, the delivery of HS2 and supporting investments would lead to approximately 150,000 additional jobs in Leeds City Region, Sheffield City Region and the East Midlands region. Each year of delay costs the North & Midlands £4.9bn – growth is being held back by uncertainty.

The growth strategies of Leeds City Region and Sheffield City Region, both with HS2 at the heart, would provide more than £70bn to those city region economies, with the potential for almost 10,000 new homes and more than £5bn of private sector investment. Toton would be home to a state-of-the-art Innovation Campus; bringing together universities, start-ups and established businesses, creating up to 10,000 highly-skilled jobs and a network of surrounding garden villages. Critically, though, those benefits are lost if Toton is not connected to routes North – to Sheffield, Leeds and on to the North East.

These transformational regeneration and growth opportunities do not come along very often. Major investment in infrastructure, which the North and Midlands have not seen since the Victorian era but has been delivered in London and the South East, would be the catalyst for a North as prosperous as London; the Midlands rivaling the South East for productivity and job creation. It is not just those towns and cities on the route. HS2 and NPR are essential to increase capacity and create better rail connections in places like the Humber, Teesside, Lincolnshire and the North East.

As businesses, connections with our market, suppliers and exporters are very important. HS2 will link our great towns and cities in the Midlands and North contributing to local, regional and national prosperity that will be at the heart of a strong Global Britain. Private sector investment is crucial to realising the benefits of infrastructure. After suffering from decades of underinvestment, HS2 and regional transport plans will be the catalyst for greater flows of private investment, already coming forward but which risk being pushed back with growth cut in the construction sector.

The Integrated Rail Plan is your chance to move on from Covid to what the future of the UK should look like. Levelling up parts of the country that have seen traditional and considerable underinvestment, and that would benefit from a plan for growth. The opportunity to reaffirm your commitment to HS2 in full is within your grasp. Businesses in the North and the Midlands stand ready to capitalise on the opportunities an integrated high speed network would provide and help rebuild the economy. This decision is vital to the future of this country, and it rests with you now.