

BLACKBURN AND DISTRICT TRADES UNION COUNCIL

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Response to Transport for the North's consultation on its Freight and Logistics Strategy

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft "Freight and Logistics Strategy".

As the Lancashire County Council/ Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council "East Lancashire Transport Masterplan observed: "...there is a strong belief locally that East Lancashire is poorly connected, with both road and rail networks making it difficult for people and goods to move around. Whilst road links to the west and south are reasonable, connections to the east are less so...". We add that our general reaction to Transport for the North plans and announcements is that they appear to "backwater" East Lancashire and see it as something of an unsolvable cul-de-sac.

We think that this would not apply if policy makers thought of East Lancashire in terms of it being in many ways equivalent to a city, albeit a fragmented one. In terms of economic activity, the analogy is not so far off - except that we lack a "city centre economy".

From our perspective, the points that stand out in the draft "Strategy" are those that highlight the underdevelopment of East/West – West/East connectivity. The strategy notes that:

"East–West road connectivity is also a significant barrier for future growth in the North, and a key constraint to agglomeration and transforming the North's economy. Currently the M62 is the only motorway standard East-West road link across the Pennines between Derby in the Midlands and Edinburgh in Scotland".

And:

"For east-west traffic, there is currently relatively little rail traffic. There is at present no gauge-cleared route suitable for container traffic. The small number of trains that run are for Construction Aggregates and Biomass".

It notes that one of the problems identified is "a shortage of warehouse capacity (especially rail connected warehousing)" and "the inability of rail to carry containers east-west across the Pennines or elsewhere in the North".

We believe that these East/West – West/East issues are a particular problem for East Lancashire, but a problem whose solution would not only improve connectivity to and in our area but contribute to resolving the wider issues identified for the North altogether. In short, we hope we could be a corridor for alternative trans-Pennine routes for both road and rail. These would ease pressure on existing links and rebalance the whole of the North West, helping to prevent the Manchester/Leeds axis from becoming an overheated bottleneck and giving a new pathway that would be open to Central and West Lancashire.

The "Strategy" does not seem to us to go beyond the already published "Investment Programme" when it comes to any hope of actual projects.

For road: *"These include A1 and M6 connectivity and dualling schemes, port access work both locally to the ports and wider connecting infrastructure such as the A66 and A1079 and river crossings, access to airports such as Carlisle Lake District and Liverpool John Lennon, M62 improvements which currently connect warehouse clusters and improvements that connect the North to other areas such as the A15 into Lincolnshire and the A19" – so nothing, so far as we can*

see, that addresses the “full stop” at Colne at the end of the M65 (other than a reference to improving the road between M65 and Skipton).

For rail: *“These include port related gauge enhancements and access for the Port of Hull, Port Salford, Liverpool and Teesport”*. The *“Skipton – Colne Route re-instatement to improve connectivity between East Lancashire and North/West Yorkshire”* is in the “Investment Programme”, but not the proposed establishment of a rail freight terminal at Huncoat nor the desirability of a direct rail link between Liverpool and Blackburn.

These “nots” are, on the contrary, what we would wish to see emphasised and given a higher place on the road and rail infrastructure “shopping list”:

1. The SERLAP plan, which includes not only re-establishment of the Colne-Skipton rail link but also the building of a freight terminal at Huncoat;
2. A direct rail link between Blackburn and Liverpool; and
3. Addressing the “abrupt end” of the M65.

1) Skipton to Colne

A huge amount of work on this proposal has already been done by SELRAP – the Skipton and East Lancs Rail Action Partnership, and local businesses are currently raising money to pay for a business case for the Huncoat freight terminal part of it.

As Hyndburn MP Sara Britcliffe commented in a House of Commons adjournment debate on 21/05/2021, the proposal for re-opening the Skipton to Colne railway line has, as part of its rationale, that it should be accompanied with the establishment of a freight terminal at Huncoat.

"The location of the Huncoat freight terminal" she said, "is perfect and, if realised, it would be a major step forward in making connectivity more viable. Many important stakeholders in the north have already recognised the potential of a Huncoat freight terminal, as they recognise the significant role it would play in increasing distribution capacity for the movement of goods across the north-west".

In their 2019 paper "The Case for Expanding the Rail Network" the "Campaign for Better Transport" commented that the re-opening "has the potential for local, regional and freight services". Network Rail's 2017 "Freight Network Strategy" said: "whilst the Skipton to Colne reopening is not proposed as a standalone freight scheme, the existence of another trans-Pennine route would almost certainly provide benefits to rail freight", perhaps underestimating the extent to which the freight element has always been a component of the case presented.

Miranda Barker, from the East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce, was reported in the "Lancashire Telegraph" of 07/12/21 as saying: "It's important for the competitiveness of our businesses, they need to export their freight to Europe and to the world, and we're just too expensive and too slow right now. We need this to make sure the UK can compete and to make sure we are decarbonising our transport system. If we move containers from road to rail, we save 76 per cent of the carbon emissions. It makes sense on so many fronts and we need this campaign to build."

2) Liverpool to Blackburn

We believe that from the late C19th until the 1960s there was a direct rail connection between Blackburn and Liverpool.

So far as we can see, the possibility of reopening this connection is not one that is normally given any consideration in regional transport strategies, a sort of presumption being that we would be happy simply to have improved links to Manchester (and Manchester Airport). It is correct that we do want such improvements but having a more convenient passenger link to Liverpool would also strike us as desirable. (As organisations, for instance, some of our affiliates have their regional centres in Liverpool rather than Manchester).

The old connection was via Ormskirk to Liverpool Exchange. It seems to us that the modern equivalent would be via Ormskirk and Bootle to Liverpool Central. The track still seems to exist, depending on the configuration of the junction at Lostock Hall.

In freight terms, such a line of travel would have the advantage of connecting to the Bootle Branch line and its new freight connection with the port of Liverpool. It would thus seem to be an ideal freight compliment to the Colne=Skipton reopening, establishing a direct new trans-Pennine route from the Port.

3) East/West - West/East Road links

The A6068, as it passes through the North Valley area of Colne, carries traffic of around 25,000 vehicles per day including over 1,300 heavy goods vehicles. Not surprisingly, this causes severe problems, with congestion and delays throughout much of the day. In the peak hours, the congestion is among the worst in Lancashire. The standing traffic affects local air quality, resulting in a declared Air Quality Management Area, and the road effectively severs the North Valley housing areas from all amenities in Colne.

The situation is a long-standing East Lancashire bugbear, but there is perhaps a lack of consensus on the way forward – with preferences ranging from “pushing the motorway east” across the Pennines, to link with Keighley, Bradford and Leeds and then either the M62 or the A1(M), to a more modest “bypass” of Colne – the most popular route somewhat counter-intuitively sending traffic north up the A56 towards Skipton.

The local Borough Council, Pendle, is worried by talk of future motorway plans because of their experience of the effect that “freezing” land and property can have in the planning stage.

Considerations of improving the Yorkshire/East Lancs road link always seem to have focussed on the idea of what to do from the current end of the M65.

We wonder, however, if an alternative might be to consider whether there might be an alternative route for improvement along, or mirroring, the route towards Halifax, and then Bradford and Leeds, using either the A646 or the Long Causeway (or a mixture of both)?

Whatever the details, it is these three areas of intervention that we would wish to see given a greater prominence and sense of urgency in any forward plans seeking to express the interests of “the North”.

Karen Narramore, Secretary, 18.01.22