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Thank you to the High Speed Rail Group for inviting me here today. It's inspiring to see so many industry leaders gathered in one place, all working hard to push UK rail forward, amidst the many challenges we face.

This room is full of people who know that the future of rail in this country is not just about the next timetable update or the status of the 16:05 from Dewsbury; it's about keeping Britain moving, connected, and prepared for the future.

Rail has long been part of our national story. Britain was the birthplace of modern rail, the first to make steam-powered trains a commercial reality in Stockton and Darlington in 1825. In 1830, we launched the first intercity rail service between Liverpool and Manchester. And whilst preparing for this speech an interesting fact is that the Swansea and Mumbles railway first moved passengers on rail as far back as 1807.

Those early journeys weren't luxurious. Imagine being pulled by horses five miles along the Swansea Bay, over bumpy, exposed carriages, with little to protect you from the elements. Yet these initial, humble journeys marked the beginning of something extraordinary.

Today, things have certainly changed. Engines are faster and more reliable and for the most part they run on electricity instead of hay. And we've moved well beyond those open carriages, replaced with modern amenities like heated carriages, plug sockets, and comfortable seats— though admittedly, we're still not quite there with the Wi-Fi...

And while a two-shilling fare may be a thing of the past, the next chapter in UK rail is full of promise. We currently find ourselves with an incredible opportunity to shape the future, to make it faster, more accessible, and—critically—to make it work for everyone.

Rail is a cornerstone of modern British life, and at Campaign for Better Transport, we're committed to supporting its growth. We want a transport system that connects people, supports a clean environment, and drives a thriving economy. The work you do and the challenges you tackle are deeply linked to that vision, so I'm here to say we're proud to stand alongside you, helping to advocate for the future of rail.

Having joined the world of transport 10 years ago, I've learned quickly how many obstacles this industry faces. Frequent changes in Transport Secretaries, Chancellors, and prime ministers have severely impacted rail. We've seen the stalling of critical projects, and the destruction of others in the last few years – something that doesn't sit well with any of us. How can we move forward with vision if we are constantly dealing with redirection?

This instability is stifling progress, delaying projects, and creating uncertainty. For the rail industry to truly flourish, we need a vision that endures beyond any single election cycle, or any one minister. The public deserves a modern, integrated rail system, Investors deserve a stable plan for growth. And as industry leaders, our job is to make sure rail projects have the political and financial support they need, unimpeded by short-term political shifts.

Our country needs a transport strategy that has clear, long-term goals. Our railways must be resilient, prepared for future challenges, and positioned to be an integral part of a greener, better-connected Britain.

Take High Speed 2. Over the course of the last decade one of the most uttered three letter acronyms in British politics – or should I say decades. HS2 has become a critical focal point in this conversation, as it represents the type of transformative rail investment we need. When it was first conceived, leaders like Gordon Brown and Andrew Adonis, saw HS2 as the backbone of a new, high speed rail network that would link our regions and support local growth. It was intended to deliver long-term, far-reaching benefits to our country—not just in transport but in creating jobs, fostering skills, and reducing regional inequality.

And yet, today, we find this vision under threat. HS2 has been scaled back, halted north of Handsacre and the industry is back to waiting on decisions, likely now to be known at the Spending Review next year. This is the largest infrastructure project in Britain's recent history. Why should it be treated like a line item in the next budget rather than the critical investment it is? We need stability and predictability for our infrastructure projects to thrive, not uncertainty

Completing HS2 isn't about prestige—it's about utility, about making sure our rail network keeps up with demand and serves the entire country. It's also about competitiveness. France, Germany, and Spain all have extensive high speed networks, while we lag behind with just 108 kilometres of high-speed track. France has over 3,000 kilometres; Spain, 4,000. The world is moving forward, and we must not be left behind.

Investing in roads is a false economy, with increasingly yields diminishing returns—recent road projects returning as little as £1.14 for every pound spent—rail offers better value and greater benefits. Rail investments provide up to £2.50 in economic value for every £1 spent on the system. In 2019, rail contributed

£43 billion to the UK economy. HS2 and similar projects are the types of investments that pay dividends for generations to come.

We cannot underestimate the power of engaging the wider public in understanding the full scope of benefits these projects offer.

Of course, political instability and indecision have played a significant role in delaying progress, but we, as stakeholders, must acknowledge our collective responsibility. We haven't done enough to articulate how major infrastructure projects like HS2 and others aren't merely local services but national assets with benefits that ripple outward.

Too often, these initiatives are seen as benefitting only frequent rail users, rather than the wider economy. Few outside of this room know what rail's impact on the economy is, but we do.

The upgraded signalling between Huddersfield and Manchester, the expanded loading gauge between London and Dollands Moor, and the creation of a new high-speed line—these may seem like specialised upgrades, but their benefits extend to job creation and regional growth. Yet, these broader advantages can be challenging to communicate in a way that resonates with the wider public.

Let's take congestion. How many of the public realise that every HS2 train could potentially take up to 1,000 cars off the M40, reducing bottlenecks on the M25, long before we even consider the impact on the M6? These are tangible, daily improvements that make lives easier and commutes quicker.

And Euston. A vast infrastructure improvement here isn't just about new platforms or a plush station. It's about a brand-new dedicated line connecting London to the North. When people can grasp that, they can see HS2 not as a single line but as an entire corridor of opportunity stretching from Euston to northern cities, expanding access and shrinking travel times and fares for all.

We should also share the benefits that aren't immediately apparent but are essential—like the impact on freight capacity and local services. With HS2 in place, more train paths will open for Northampton, Rugby, and Coventry, creating faster, more reliable and more frequent connections into London. Beyond that, reducing reliance on road transport means fewer HGVs clogging up motorways, which translates to better air quality for millions of people living along these routes. It's then that the green dominos can start to fall.

These stories are the stories we need to tell. They make our projects not just rail improvements but investments in quality of life, environmental health, and economic resilience. By communicating these benefits more effectively, we build not only public support but a stronger shared vision for the future of transport across the UK.

For us at Campaign for Better Transport, rail isn't just about getting from A to B; it's about creating opportunity. We published a report called "Left Behind Neighbourhoods" a few years ago. It uncovered some shocking statistics: 84% of the most deprived areas in England have worse-than-average connectivity, with half of their rail stations closed during the Beeching cuts. So what does this mean? It means thousands of people across the UK remain cut off from the opportunities that good public transport can bring—access to jobs, education, and community life.

These people deserve better. Look at the success of the Dartmoor Line in Cornwall, which reopened to great fanfare and quickly surpassed ridership targets. It's a lifeline for the communities it serves, transforming access and opening up new possibilities. The demand for more connections, more options, and more reliability is there—and we owe it to these communities to bring the rail network back to them.

With every line that we reopen, with every community that gains access to rail, we're creating a stronger, fairer UK. Research shows that investment in rail connectivity directly reduces inequality and improves outcomes in education, employment, and quality of life. This isn't just transport policy—it's a 'how we make a better society' policy!

To achieve these goals, we must be open to new methods of delivering rail projects. Public-private partnerships, which have driven success in countries like France and Spain, offer a compelling model, when executed correctly.

In France, these partnerships have enabled the government to bring in private investment, reducing public burden while ensuring projects remain on track. The AVE high-speed network in Spain, has reduced travel times, brought people closer to opportunities, and even shifted travellers away from planes in favour of more sustainable rail.

At Campaign for Better Transport, we work closely with French and Spanish experts to learn from these successes. By inviting private companies to assist with the process, like we've seen on High Speed 1, we reduce the burden on the exchequer. High Speed 1 exists and is the only successful delivery of high-speed rail so far. That brings 427 million pounds annually of benefit to the UK economy – boosting tourism to the south coast and through the channel tunnel.

If we build HS2 up to Crewe or Manchester under a similar PPP model, we're likely to see equally strong results. With an expanded service, fare revenue is shared among a larger number of passengers, keeping costs lower and reducing public expenditure. But these partnerships aren't just about economics—they're about forging strong, resilient systems that deliver results, not just for passengers but for the wider public. And when we talk to the public, they aren't fussed who delivers these schemes – just that these schemes are delivered.

This alignment with the private sector, underpinned by a stable policy framework, assures investors and electors of success. The agreements that are signed, focus on performance, sustainability and efficiency – ensuring that projects are delivered on time, and with certainty of completion.

At Campaign for Better Transport, we want to be your partner in this transformation and help you get these projects across the line.

For over fifty years, we've championed public transport, we advocate for reliable and affordable rail service that meets the needs of communities. Our reports have tackled issues like the impact of poor connectivity, proposals for fare reform, and the importance of creating equitable, accessible transport systems that benefit people's lives.

Too often, rail makes the headlines for delays, price hikes, or shortages. But we have success stories to celebrate, and it's crucial that we highlight them.

Look at the Elizabeth Line. Once labelled a "white elephant," it now accounts for one-sixth of all rail journeys in the UK. One sixth...! Those headlines about the delays at Bond Street dried up almost instantaneously when trains started running through those tunnels.

As more lines open— be it the Northumberland Line or East-West Rail—there's every reason to believe they'll exceed expectations. And when they do, we will be there to help celebrate these milestones and communicate their impact widely.

Last year, in honour of our 50th anniversary, we launched "Better Transport Week." It was an opportunity for operators, manufacturers, MPs, and government officials to come together and celebrate the successes of rail. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and we'll continue to host it every year, because highlighting rail's achievements—big and small—is crucial to changing

perceptions. It's not just about commending each other's work; it's about building a culture of pride around rail travel.

To close, let's remember that our work in rail is about so much more than transport. It's about access, opportunity, sustainability, and a vision for the future. Rail connects us to what matters most: jobs, education, culture, and most importantly, each other. High speed rail is the 21st-century answer to our ever growing need to become a more connected, resilient nation, and our task now is to ensure this vision is realised.

Let's move forward boldly, even in the face of setbacks. Let's remember that rail isn't just infrastructure—it's a lifeline, a means of bringing people closer together, of building a greener and more equitable world. Campaign for Better Transport is here to amplify your achievements, champion rail's potential, and stand beside you every step of the way.

Thank you again to the High Speed Rail Group, and thank you to all of you who continue to drive this vision forward. The journey may be difficult, but the destination— a high-speed, integrated rail network that serves everyone—is well worth the effort. Together, we can ensure that Britain's railways continue to connect and inspire for generations to come.