

**TRANSPORT AND WORKS ACT 1992
TRANSPORT AND WORKS (INQUIRIES PROCEDURES)
RULES 2004
NETWORK RAIL (STALYBRIDGE TO DIGGLE
(SADDLEWORTH) ENHANCEMENTS) ORDER**

**Summary of Needs Case and Project Benefits
Proof of Evidence
of
Mark Ashton**

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The Network Rail (Stalybridge to Diggle (Saddleworth) Enhancements) Order 12th May 2026**Summary of Needs Case and Project Benefits Proof of Evidence****1. INTRODUCTION****1.1 Qualifications and experience**

My name is Mark Ashton and I am responsible for Infrastructure Sponsorship, Consents and Stakeholder Management.

1.2 Role on the Scheme

1.2.1 As a Network Rail Sponsor, I have responsibility for securing all necessary consents and authorities for the TRU in relation to the W2B/C project of which the order submission is a component part.

1.3 Statement of Matters

1.3.1 The Statement of Matters ("SOM") was received from the Transport Infrastructure Planning Unit ("TIPU") in April 2026. The following matters will be dealt with solely in my proof of evidence and/or in conjunction with other witnesses:

- Matter 1 - The aims and objectives of, and the need for, the proposed Stalybridge to Diggle (Saddleworth) Enhancements works ("the Scheme"), including its effects on railway operations and whether all statutory procedural requirements have been complied with and sufficient information was available to parties about the Scheme.
- Matter 2 - The main alternative options considered by Network Rail and the reasons for choosing the proposals set out in the Order.

2. SCHEME INTRODUCTION

2.1.1 Section 3 of my proof introduces the Transpennine rail route and explains how the Order Scheme fits within the wider Transpennine corridor, alongside other component TRU projects. I then go on to describe the purpose and need for the Order Scheme.

2.1.2 Over the last 50 years the infrastructure capacity on the Transpennine rail route has been reduced as demand has fallen.

2.1.3 The W2B scheme route (Stalybridge to Standedge Tunnel), a component part of W2B/C (Stalybridge to Huddersfield) within the wider TRU programme, has a number of existing constraints affecting capacity, capability, performance and reliability. In particular, slow line speeds, location of the current Mossley station, existing bridge/tunnel structures and PROWs which intersect the railway.

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2.1.4 Interventions proposed through the Order Scheme (Stalybridge to Diggle (Saddleworth)), that sits within the wider W2B scheme footprint, will seek to address the existing constraints thereby improving the passenger experience and freight capability along the Transpennine route.

2.2 Purpose of the Scheme

2.2.1 The purpose of the Order Scheme, explored at section 3.3 of my proof is to increase capacity, improve journey time and reliability performance of passenger and freight services on the Transpennine route.

2.2.2 In order to facilitate the Order Scheme a number of works are required across the W2B footprint. These works are not only those applied for under this Order application but works consented and allowed for Network Rail via other consenting regimes.

2.2.3 I believe the Order Scheme together with the wider Scheme will deliver much needed improvements to the existing rail infrastructure - a key contributor towards delivering the overall TRU programme aims.

2.3 Need for the Scheme

2.3.1 Section 3.5 of my proof covers Economic Need, Need Post-Covid, Environmental Need and Level Crossing Safety Need of the Order Scheme.

Economic Need

2.3.2 Historic underinvestment on the Transpennine route has resulted in reduced infrastructure capability with slow journey times and weaker punctuality. That has been recognised in recent Secretary of State decision letters for related TWA Orders (including W3, E1 and E234).

Need - Post-Covid

2.3.3 Passenger demand on the Transpennine route will likely surpass pre-Covid forecast levels before the TRU Programme completes. Delivery of infrastructure improvements are required to address the current capacity, capability and performance constraints.

Environmental Need

2.3.4 Electrification of the route will lead to a reduced reliance on diesel services thereby improving local air quality, contributing to national and local climate objectives.

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Level Crossing Need

2.3.5 There is a clear safety need for the Scheme in relation to the closure of Stockport Road and Moorgate Halt level crossings. Network Rail has a statutory duty to reduce risks to members of the public so far as reasonably practicable.

3. REGULATORY AND POLICY BACKGROUND

3.1.1 Section 4 of my proof discusses the funding framework that underpins all rail enhancement schemes, noting the current funding status of the TRU projects, followed by a discussion on how the Government's funding and expectations are articulated through national guidance and rail strategy and why investment in the rail network in the Order Scheme is needed to align with national rail, transport, economic and sustainability policy, including the Government's Strategic Vision for Rail. This is then followed by Network Rail's statutory safety duties and policy approach to level crossing risk.

3.1.2 The government has articulated through national transport and railway policies the importance of the railway in growing the economy and socio-economic benefits that an enhanced and efficient railway can bring.

3.1.3 Through the Government's Rail Network's Enhancement Pipeline (RNEP) and subsequent business case submissions TRU has secured current committed funds from the government of £7.3bn.

3.1.4 Network Rail's policy is to close level crossings where possible, an approach also reflected through the Office of Rail and Road's health and safety strategy.

4. THE BUSINESS CASE AND FUNDING

4.1.1 This section of my proof comprises Funding for the Order Scheme, Strategic Context, Rebalancing the Economy, and Business Case Review.

Funding of the Order Scheme

4.1.2 The full benefits of TRU cannot be delivered without the Order Scheme. The business case relates to all projects of TRU and not just the Order Scheme. Noting that Network Rail and the Government have provided public commitments to fund the Order Scheme, subject to ongoing Value for Money tests.

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Strategic Context

4.1.3 It is clear from both a national and regional strategic context as outlined in a number of rail, transport, economic and sustainability strategy documents, the government is committed to improving connectivity between northern cities to promote growth.

Rebalancing the Economy

4.1.4 Investment in the north's key east-west rail artery linking the main cities of northern England will significantly contribute to the governments levelling up agenda. TRU, and the Order Scheme represent a direct example of targeted investment to support the governments aims.

Business Case Review

4.1.5 The Scheme does not have an individual business case, as an integral part of the of the TRU programme it has been assessed on that basis. The TRU programme has a positive Benefit Cost Ratio meaning the investment will return more money to the UK economy.

5. BENEFITS OF TRU**5.1 The Programme**

5.1.1 In this section, my proof sets out why investment in the rail network in the Order Scheme is needed to underpin and deliver the wider TRU benefits and breaks down how the Order Scheme contributes to the TRU programme aims.

TRU Aims

- An improved journey time for Leeds – Manchester Victoria of 42-44mins;*
- An improved journey time for York to Manchester Victoria of 65-67mins;*

*Note: the improved journey times represent the latest Client Development Agreement 4, April 25, TRU programme outputs.

- Capability to operate four 'express' and two 'semi-express' services an hour on the route;
- Performance of the Transpennine Route to be 92.5% (PPM) or higher each period.
- Freight paths/rights to be retained as existing, with larger freight containerisation capability (W12 gauge).
- A contribution to Network Rail's Decarbonisation Strategy and climate policy.

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5.1.2 The Order Scheme and wider W2B scheme contribute to the TRU aims through a number of principal interventions including;

- Optimised track and signalling,
- Structure interventions to provide clearance,
- New overhead line electrification,
- A new station at Mossley and remodelled station at Greenfield,
- The closure of two level crossings.

Further detail on the principal interventions is provided in Section 7 and 8 of the Statement of Case (NR30).

5.2 Order Scheme Benefits

5.2.1 The benefits of the Order Scheme are detailed in Section 6 of my Proof and summarised below.

- Improved passenger experience at stations.
- Electrification and freight capability.
- Level crossing safety.
- More trains.
- Faster trains.
- Decarbonisation of the economy.
- Improved connectivity.
- Reduced operating and maintenance costs.

6. EARLY SCHEME DEVELOPMENT

6.1 Strategic alternatives

6.1.1 My proof concludes there are no high-level strategic alternatives that would deliver the benefits required along the Transpennine route.

6.2 Future rail schemes

6.2.1 The Order Scheme and the wider TRU works are the first major rail infrastructure project in the North of England in the last twenty years. There are other rail schemes that may potentially be delivered through Northern Powerhouse Rail in the future, but these are still in option development and subject to full funding.

6.3 Scheme alternatives

6.3.1 Alternative options were considered in advance of progressing with the Order application. The option selection process is addressed in Chapter 7 of the Statement of Case (NR30). Further detail can be found in the proofs of Ms Emma Clarke [NR/PoE/EC/2.2], Mr Laurie Barbour [NR/PoE/LB/13.2], and Mr Lee Barraclough [NR/PoE/LB/11.2].

7. CONSULTATION

7.1.1 Section 8 of my Proof discusses how Network Rail has consulted widely on the Order Scheme in accordance with the TWA Rules. This section sets out the phasing of public consultation, phasing of focussed engagement, and ongoing engagement.

7.1.2 Formal consultation and engagement phases were undertaken as detailed in my proof and Consultation Report (NR07), including focused engagement and information events covering the majority of the Order Scheme, then extended to cover the addition of Moorgate Halt Level Crossing. Focused engagement was undertaken in recognition of the Order Scheme on Mossley Cottages and Manchester Road residents.

7.1.3 A considerable amount of effort has been made to take comments on board and feed them into the design of the Scheme. I am satisfied that consultation and engagement has been effective and in line with best practice.

8. OBJECTIONS REPRESENTATIONS AND STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT

8.1.1 Section 9 of my Proof details the fact that no objectors or those submitting representations have questioned the need case for the TRU.

8.1.2 Through the development of the Order Scheme, and wider TRU works, NR are required to, and have demonstrated the Order Scheme, as proposed, delivers VfM, and we have engaged and consulted extensively with stakeholders, including relevant parish councils.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1.1 The Order Scheme is key to unlocking the wider benefits of the TRU programme in providing faster journeys, more capacity, accessible stations and improved performance, contributing to the Government's levelling-up agenda, whilst providing a positive return to the UK economy for every £1 invested in the project.

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9.1.2 My Proof of Evidence demonstrates there is a clear and overwhelming needs case for the Order Scheme and that it will deliver transformational benefits to railway users and be a catalyst for growth across the North of England.

10. WITNESS DECLARATION

10.1 Statement of declaration

10.1.1 My proof of evidence includes my declaration as an expert witness which also applies to my summary of my evidence.



Mark Ashton

12th May 2026

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