

Tyne to Tees a breeze

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By Ross Smith, The Journal



A revolutionary magnet-powered 311-mph rail link could be created in the North-East - taking travellers from Tyneside to Teesside in 12 minutes.

Council bosses will announce today how they are launching a study into the possibility of a maglev system between the two conurbations.

Association of North East Councils (Anec) chairman Mick Henry will make the statement at a conference in Newcastle on the region's transport needs.

A group of senior local authority figures will form a working group to consider the planning and funding implications of the link, along with the potential social and economic benefits. If it is considered worth pursuing, a full-scale feasibility study into the technical requirements will be initiated, drawing in a broader group of figures from the region.

The aim is to start the work straightaway, with the hope of influencing thinking ahead of the Government's long-term strategy document for rail, which is due to be published later this year.

Gateshead Council leader Coun Henry said last night: "This is local government being a bit visionary. The study will ask if this is a bit of a dream, or if in fact it's an idea that has legs."

The study will be announced at the Anec conference which will be addressed by the Government's Rail Minister Tom Harris.

It will also involve Alan James, the Northumberland-based project leader of Maglev champions UK Ultraspeed.

He said the Tyne-Tees link could carry the equivalent of 40,000 car journeys each day. It could also be linked to spurs which would serve Wearside and Durham Tees Valley Airport.

A high-speed North-South rail route through the North-East has been a key goal for Anec since last summer.

Though Sir Rod Eddington was lukewarm on the prospect in his landmark review of the UK's transport needs last December, Anec bosses are adamant the idea is still on the table.

And they were relieved the Eddington review did not endorse Network Rail deputy chief executive Iain Coucher's claim last year that a high-speed line should go up the west of the country, bypassing the North-East.

Creating a Tyne-Tees maglev link would put the North-East in prime position to be included if a national route were to be developed.

Coun Henry added: "We don't necessarily agree with Eddington - and lots of people don't - that we don't need high

speed ground transport.

"If you link it to the Stern report on climate change than it is critically important."

Dr James said: "I wholeheartedly welcome the bold and decisive step that Anec have taken in putting the North-East into the maglev era.

"The move is in the spirit of railway pioneer George Stephenson and engineer Charles Parsons.

"It's no surprise to myself that it should be the North-East that blazes a trail. The region has demonstrated that it has the capacity to do it again."

Gliding above the tracks

Maglev trains do not run on rails, but instead glide above magnetic tracks at speeds of 300mph.

A 19-mile route has been built in Shanghai, China, with a second 60-mile track being developed in the country.

There is also a 20-mile test track in North-West Germany, which was the scene of a horrific 125mph accident in September last year, in which 23 people died. It was the first fatal accident involving the system, and was initially blamed on human error.

A national line has been mooted in the UK, weaving from London through Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Tyneside to Scotland.

Its proponents have estimated the system could be set up for a cost of £16bn.

If introduced it would enable passengers to get from Newcastle to London in 100 minutes and to Edinburgh in 40.

A typical vehicle would be 10 carriages long and carry up to 840 passengers.

A maglev train operating at 60% capacity would generate 40 grammes of carbon dioxide for every kilometre travelled by one passenger - compared to 60 grammes for a conventional high speed train and 275 grammes for an aeroplane. It also operates in near silence.

Members of Anec - which includes all the region's 25 councils - voted unanimously last year to back a North-South high speed rail route. They were supported in a Commons motion welcoming the decision, tabled by Tyne Bridge MP David Clelland.

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