It’s great to be here in Newcastle, in what is my first visit to the North-East as Transport Secretary. And let me start, first of all, by thanking Martin Tugwell for the invitation.

Transport for the North is a valued partner, a tireless champion of boosting connectivity across the region, both in public and in private. And your conference today will be a reminder, to anyone who needed it, that the success of the UK is increasingly tied to the success of the North of England.

And, to you Lord McLoughlin, or Patrick as I know you better, although frankly for the first large number of years that I knew him, he wasn’t called Patrick, he was called ‘Chief’, as we call the Chief Whip. It was a job he carried out so effectively, overseeing party discipline, that it all but guaranteed my attendance here today. There seems to be a theme of former Chief Whips becoming former Transport Secretaries.

Like Patrick, I was part of the government that, almost a decade ago, actually launched the northern powerhouse. The idea that by pooling the region’s talent, leveraging its fantastic academic institutions, and connecting its great urban centres, we wanted to turn individually strong northern cities into a collective unit, that was greater than the sum of its parts.

It was an unashamedly ambitious target. And we knew it wouldn’t happen overnight.

Yet despite the turbulence of recent years – from a global pandemic to now a war on the continent of Europe – there has never been a question of our commitment to the North ever being placed on the backburner, as some have claimed.

In fact, we redoubled our efforts to boost connectivity, accelerate devolution and revive former industrial heartlands into new engines of economic growth.

The spirit of that original mission, which we launched 9 years ago, is still alive today. A fundamental belief that a better connected, well-funded, and strongly represented North of England isn’t just essential for this region, but for the stronger economy the whole country needs.

We all know the benefits of improved connectivity. The investment it attracts, the jobs it creates and the talent it retains. So even in this tough fiscal climate – where last November, the Chancellor had to make difficult, yet responsible, decisions to restore economic stability – we protected transport infrastructure spending across the North.

Take major roads. Across the region, we’ve invested £2.5 billion in the Strategic Road Network over the past 3years. Including upgrades to the Newcastle-Gateshead Bypass, improvements to the A63 at Castle Street in Hull, and just last year, completing the £110 million A1 Scotswood to North Brunton scheme. These will not just increase safety and connectivity, but reduce congestion, which acts as a drag on our economy.

But we’re also giving people alternatives to the car.

Our National Bus Strategy, and I agree about the importance of buses – around twice as many journeys are made by bus than rail. Our National Bus Strategy transfers greater control over fares and timetables to local authorities, while giving operators the freedom to invest and innovate.

And it’s working. Because not only have I welcomed the North-East’s and North of Tyne’s Bus Service Improvement Plan, today, I can confirm they will receive £118 million this year to deliver improved services for passengers.

Now our commitment to buses stretches across the region, and indeed across the country. Last month, I extended both the Bus Recovery Grant and the £2 Fare Cap, which continues our support for a sector that’s still recovering from the pandemic.

Here in the North-East, we’re also delivering a better railway with services on the East Coast Mainline bouncing back after the pandemic, with LNER the fastest recovering operator over the last 18 months. We’ll soon roll out single-leg pricing for tickets across the LNER network, giving passengers more flexibility in how they travel. And with the new Azuma Intercity Express Trains having been built in Newton Aycliffe, passengers in the North-East are riding on trains built in the North-East.

But that’s not all. Open access operators such as Lumo are providing greater choice in this city, by making use of extra capacity on the network. And on the Tyne and Wear Metro, passengers will soon ride on a new fleet of modern trains, thanks to an investment of over £300 million from my department.

But today, I am delighted to put right an historic wrong that’s lasted for 60 years. I can confirm we will reopen the Northumberland Line next year, making available the necessary funding that will build 6 new stations across the route. Connecting towns such as Ashington and Blyth to Newcastle, and breathing new economic life into those communities, delivered in partnership with Northumberland Council.

Now, across the North, local leaders have long called for more ambitious rail infrastructure spending, as was touched on – and this government has answered that call.

And I think it’s worth saying that any government has to be honest. Easy promises, to get applause at events and conferences like this around the country, are not credible if people don’t have plans to pay for them. Ministers also have a duty to the taxpayer to set out well thought-through, costed promises.

This government is committed to the £96 billion Integrated Rail Plan that we set out, which will deliver high speed rail to Manchester and transform journeys across the Pennines. And work is already underway. Like between Church Fenton and York, which includes some of the busiest stretches of railway in the North. A combination of electrification, track replacement and modern signalling will lead to faster and more efficient journeys for passengers. It’s part of the major upgrade to the 70-mile Trans-Pennine route, which is a central government commitment that surpasses what we spent on Crossrail.

However, one thing is obvious. Even that investment, the single biggest investment since the creation of the railways right here in the North-East, will be quickly forgotten if operators deliver services that aren’t up to scratch. And if passengers are regularly let down by industrial action, as a result of the unions refusing to put reasonable pay offers to their members.

The Rail Minister, Huw Merriman, and I have made it clear to the relevant Managing Directors that services on Avanti West Coast and Trans-Pennine Express routes must improve. It’s good to see Avanti weekday services are starting to improve, but there is more to do so passengers don’t face the unacceptable levels of disruption of the past 9 months.

But also, if trade unions continue to reject pay offers and refuse to undertake reforms that are accepted in any modern industry, then it will be impossible to provide consistent and reliable services for passengers. It is not a debate about privatisation or nationalisation; it’s about building a modern railway which works as one coherent system, in partnership.

Patrick spoke about my George Bradshaw address, and that was about partnership between the state doing that part of the job that it needs to do, and the private sector doing its part to get more passengers back on the railway. It’s about improving the passenger experience, and getting more revenue. That’s the only way we will build a sustainable and long-term railway. One which isn’t at the mercy of antiquated working practices that prevent a reliable 7 day a week railway, or which hold us back from creating resilient infrastructure.

Reform won’t just benefit passengers and freight customers, but also the workforce, who want to be part of a growing and sustainable industry, which can fund the pay rises that they expect. Almost the entire industry recognises the need to move forward, including the TSSA, whose members recently accepted a 5% plus 4% pay offer over 2 years.

It’s a great sadness that the RMT have refused to put that same offer to their members, seemingly intent on thwarting the modernisation of the railways. My message to them is simple: reconsider. A best and final pay offer has been made. Your members deserve the final say. Let them make that decision in a referendum.

Now, I’ve spoken about what we’re delivering for the North, but just as important are the powers we’re devolving to the North. Over 75% of the region is now covered by devolution deals, including the North-East, which will form a new Mayoral Combined Authority under a single Mayor, and with a £1.4 billion settlement to fund local priorities.

You don’t need to look far to see what a determined and empowered Mayor can achieve. Ben Houchen has revived Teeside International Airport from the brink of closure. And opened the largest freeport in the country, which will attract investment and jobs. What Ben and others are doing across the North is important to me. Not just because, as a small and big ‘c’ conservative, I’ve long championed the principle of more power in local hands. But because as a constituency MP in rural Gloucestershire for almost 20 years, I empathise with those who feel that Whitehall doesn’t always understand the transport needs of local communities.

So whilst central governments must always ensure value for money for the taxpayer, I firmly believe more decisions should be made by local people, in local areas, and for local needs. So, through the Levelling Up Fund and Sustainable Transport Settlements, we’ve made over £3 billion in funding available for regional leaders to transform local transport, according to their priorities. That will lead to upgrades to the Sheffield Supertram, more cycling and walking schemes in the Tees Valley, and better bus routes between Leeds and Wakefield.

But even the idea of a central government pulling the strategic levers from London feels outdated. That’s why we’ve set up Treasury North in Darlington; the National Infrastructure Bank and a Department for Transport office in Leeds. All clear signs that this government is putting northern people and businesses at the heart of how this country is run.

Finally, let me mention how transport is delivering the sustainable economic recovery the country needs.

The Prime Minister has reiterated our commitment to the 2050 net zero target – both through words and action. We now have departments of state dedicated to net zero, to science and innovation, and, in the case of the DfT, to transport decarbonisation. It means, right across Cabinet, decisions are being made to drive green growth.

For transport, the source of most emissions is our roads. So, to support the rising popularity of electric vehicles, I’ve announced £56 million in public and industry funding to ensure local authorities can transform the availability of charging infrastructure. And this includes funding for 9 local authorities in the North, such as Durham and Sunderland.

We’re cleaning up buses too. The City of York and West Yorkshire authorities will be able to introduce over 30 new British made zero emission buses, thanks to a share of a £25 million investment I announced last week.

However, we cannot overlook the North-East’s critical role in this future of clean travel. Look at what’s happening in Teesside. Thanks to DfT funding, its Transport Hub is exploring how we use hydrogen to power some of our heaviest forms of transport.

And industry is taking note, with BP and Protium already announcing plans for large scale green hydrogen production in the area. And with Port Clarence and Wilton International set to be the sites of new Sustainable Aviation Fuel production plants, this very corner of the country is powering a new green industrial revolution, 200 years after powering the first one.

So, increasing connectivity for the North. Devolving more power to the North. And decarbonising our economy, led by the North. That is our commitment to this region.

And we cannot afford to fail. Because to grow the economy, to deal with the cost of living, and to win the race to net zero: the UK economy must fire on all cylinders.

And it will be this government: led by the first Conservative Prime Minister from a northern constituency for over half a century and armed with a historic electoral mandate from the North, that will build on the foundations laid over the past 9 years. Ensuring the North’s best years aren’t consigned to history, but actually lie ahead.

Thank you.