

HIGH SPEED TWO – PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

By Wendover HS2 Campaign, September 2011 (www.wendoverhs2.org)

Introduction

A public consultation on High Speed Rail in Britain closed on 29 July, 2011. The consultation on the 250mph capable railway comprised a *detailed* route alignment from London to Birmingham, (Phase 1) and an *outline* “Y” shaped route to connect Birmingham to Leeds and to Manchester. The Government will decide by December 2011 whether or not to proceed with Phase 1 at a present value cost of c£17billion and a likely real cash cost of c£34billion. Detailed design and preparation of an Environmental Impact Assessment for Phase 1 would then be undertaken, culminating in the deposition of a Hybrid Bill in autumn 2013, and subsequent construction and commissioning from 2017 to 2026. Services beyond Birmingham would not begin until 2032.

Does the UK need a new High Speed Railway Line?

The government says there is insufficient capacity on the West Coast main line (WCML) to meet projected long term demand, and wants to reduce journey times to support “sustainable long term growth” and reduce “regional disparities”. Are these aspirations sufficient to justify the cost of around £51m for every UK constituency? According to HM Treasury’s *Green Book*, no policy, programme or project can be adopted without reviewing whether there are better ways to achieve the same objective. An efficient UK transport network is essential for a thriving economy, but major investment in a new HSR line surely needs a robust and defensible transport demand model. Research by HS2 Action Alliance concludes that over 90 per cent of rail projects have overestimated demand by an average factor of over two. Whilst passenger growth has increased from under 40 to over 60 billion passenger kilometres since 1995, it stagnated despite large increases in per capita GDP between 1952 and 1995. The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) says that HS2 Ltd’s economic case is based on much higher future passenger growth than most independent predictions, and taxpayers could face losses as happened with HS1 where passenger numbers were only one third of forecast. IEA criticises HS2Ltd’s assumption that business travellers can’t work on trains, (which affects time saving calculations), and suggests that with more convenient station locations, future WCML franchisees could offer competing services, reducing passenger traffic and lowering fares on HS2, but the Consultation assumes that average fares would be broadly similar.

IEA also notes that along the entire route of HS2, local authorities are already seeking subsidies to improve public transport around the new stations. The Consultation is unsure where economic benefits will accrue, admitting that they may be greater in London than in Birmingham, whilst lacking transparency to demonstrate how all parts of the UK will benefit. (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, have no envisaged lines, yet all taxpayers will contribute). On the jobs front other means of increasing rail capacity and boosting local economies may be more cost effective than HS2, and certainly much quicker. This applies particularly in those regions a long way from the proposed northern ‘Y’ arms, or along them but without access to them. They are likely to see future investment and local jobs drawn elsewhere.

Risks and the Alternatives

The lack of consultation on a national strategy for a new HSR network prior to government asking HS2Ltd to narrow down route options on a London to Birmingham route, demonstrates the lack of an integrated transport policy. In a time of severe recession this risks jeopardising future national competitiveness. However, evidence suggests that a WCML upgrade alternative to HS2, called RP2, could be delivered much earlier and at a fraction of the cost of a new high speed line from London to Birmingham, yet with a better benefit cost ratio. This option is dismissed briefly in the Consultation as causing too much disruption, despite the fact that the government recently announced various rail electrification programmes. As the IEA states, rising demand on the railways can be met by measures such as phasing out subsidies, abolishing price controls and making incremental investments such as introducing longer trains with fewer first class carriages. Speeds can also be increased significantly on existing routes. An upgrade alternative frees cash for investment in other priorities such as regional development, education and health.

No overhead-powered operational HSR currently operates anywhere at up to 18 trains per hour in each direction, (phase 2), nor above 220mph, hence HS2’s trains, signalling systems, evacuation and maintenance procedures all remain unproven. The recent fatal accident in China, where speed and train frequency is much lower, demonstrates the need for an independent review of the proposed HS2 Specification. The concentration on maximum possible speed for HS2, apparently to bring Birmingham International as close in journey times to London as London airports are, has created a straight line route cutting a deep swathe through the Chilterns area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, over 60mph faster than HS1. If this disregard for our national parks and heritage is repeated in phase 2, when the detailed route is announced, what other communities, forests, SSSI’s, wildlife, etc are at risk?

Phase 1 has few intermediate stations, and phase 2 is likely to have them only in the East Midlands and South Yorkshire. The new Birmingham station is a ten minute walk from Birmingham New Street for passengers needing connections, whilst the Euston terminus already boasts two of the most overcrowded lines on the Tube network and the Mayor has concerns regarding any increase in size. Taxpayers may be forced to find billions more to build additional infrastructure to cope with extra passengers. Meanwhile, rail passengers throughout Scotland, England and Wales are at risk of fewer, more crowded services on existing lines, whilst those who are distant from a planned HS2 station, will continue to wonder how HS2 will benefit them. Members might agree that the case for one or more new high speed rail routes, as part of a holistic transport policy, requires an independent inquiry. They might also wish it to consider the need for such ultra high speed; the use of tilting technology to permit more curving routes; following motorway corridors to minimise environmental damage; more stations allowing connections with a greater number of regional centres; incorporating quicker, cheaper, but potentially equally beneficial rail upgrades across the nation.