

Conservative Transport Group

A Special Interest Group of the Conservative Party

The Future of High-Speed Rail – our holding position at the 2011 Party Conference

In the aftermath of the completion of the Consultation on HS2, there is a very strong case for revising the route of HS2, and changing the way in which our national high-speed rail project is managed.

The polarisation of the debate over HS2 is highly damaging to the economy. The proposed route has attracted fierce opposition from highly educated groups of residents affected by the route through the Chilterns. Many of these people have the skills to challenge the business case and the determination to give their time and energy to opposing all aspects of the route.

This divisive polarisation is also extremely damaging to the Conservative Party at a time of great challenge in working in coalition with Liberal Democrats to improve the current economic situation.

If HS2 proceeded as currently planned, the extremely vociferous opposition to HS2 would not diminish. Rather it is likely to increase with every possible means being taken to prevent HS2 from being built. That will add considerably to the overall costs and delay construction.

If HS2 were cancelled, the increasing demand for rail travel is not going to go away even with punishing increases in rail fares. So it is prudent to assume that within a very short time Network Rail will prepare plans to increase capacity. The route that Network Rail might propose might be very similar to that proposed by rail campaign group Railfuture in their submission to the HS2 Consultation, and found at: <http://www.railfuture.org.uk/tiki-index.php?page=High+Speed+Conference>

'A Better Railway for Britain' by groups opposing HS2 does not answer the question of meeting the expected increase in demand for rail travel. Many of the better suggestions offered are planned to be implemented in the near future anyway and the proposed West Coast Main Line timetable does not provide an adequate level of service for WCML intermediate stations. But its real failure is that without new capacity between London and Rugby (e.g. as per Railfuture cited above) the lack of capacity for growth will seriously damage economic performance.

We welcome the report 'High Speed Rail. Is everyone on board?'. We consider that the scheme, which the Secretary of State has taken over from his predecessor, has a number of serious flaws in the way it is being managed that are highlighted in this paper. These include the way in which HS2 is being developed separately from, as opposed to being integrated with, the current rail network; the lack of clarity on how HS2 fits in with national transport and economic strategies and the inability of HS2 Ltd to communicate the benefits of HS2 in a manner proven to win public support.

We hope that the Secretary of State will look sympathetically at the evidence of this report, much from supporters of high-speed rail, and introduce the changes to the management and direction of HS2 that he considers will succeed in guaranteeing the success of HS2.

There are many persuasive reasons why HS2 should be changed.

1. HS2 is seen by the public to be very expensive and any way of reducing the cost without losing the benefits needs to be carefully examined.
2. HS2 does not deliver a sufficient carbon emissions reduction for such an expensive project.
3. The direct and indirect benefits from building HS2 need to be spread over a much wider area.
4. HS2 needs to interconnect with the current rail network much more than is shown in the current plans for HS2. This is really important for Birmingham where the high speed rail platforms are a good 10 minute walk for a fit person without luggage and longer for others: and the track layout is designed to prevent through services between London and Wolverhampton via HS2, thus losing much of the benefit of high speed achieved at high cost.

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5. HS2 needs to show that rail services from the North of England to international gateways, namely frequent direct services to Heathrow airport and to European cities via the channel tunnel, can be better delivered than is shown in the present plans.
6. HS2 must demonstrate much more convincingly its potential to reduce the economic divide between the North and the South.
7. HS2 must demonstrate far better the opportunities for job creation within the UK, not only in construction but also in the manufacturing of trains by British based factories, including in the Midlands and the North.
8. HS2 in its present form is opposed by a number of highly respected groups who have formed the 'Right Lines Charter'. It is understandable that environmental groups should support the 'Right Lines Charter'. That Railfuture, a group far more supportive of rail development than anyone connected with either HS2 Ltd or the DfT, supports the charter suggests that something serious is wrong the present HS2 plans.
9. Opposition to the building of any new railway line or road can be expected from residents along the route affected by it. But the very high level of opposition coupled with the highly challenging questioning of its business case perhaps indicates that it could be done better.
10. The Government instructions to HS2 Ltd required them to consider a link with Crossrail. This confuses the strategic objectives of the project. There are good reasons to suggest that linking HS2 to Thameslink rather than to Crossrail might have increased the number of people who could benefit from HS2.

There are promising signs that change may come.

Network Rail in their London and South East Route Utilisation Strategy have suggested that diverting the 'slow line' trains on the West Coast Main Line on to Crossrail might yield significant benefits, and appear to be very enthusiastic about it.

High-Speed rail campaign group Greengauge 21 have enlarged on that idea (High Speed Rail: Investing in Britain's Future - Greengauge 21 Consultation Supplementary Response) to suggest that a HS2 station at Old Oak Common would therefore not be needed (saving up to £1 billion) if HS2 to HS1 trains could use Stratford to access Crossrail instead.

The proposal for a direct rail service from Heathrow airport to Reading enlarges the catchment area of Heathrow and raises the potential benefits of routing HS2 via a station at Heathrow in a manner that HS2 Ltd or Dr Mawhinney were not able to contemplate earlier. Accepting that the routing of HS2 through Heathrow would be more expensive than the present route, saving the cost of building the proposed link between HS2 and Heathrow would go a long way towards covering that cost.

So there is a real chance that HS2 could serve Heathrow airport with its own station and a high frequency rail service to the Midlands and North that enhances the position of Heathrow as a leading international hub airport. This is what was proposed by the Conservative Party in opposition, the Bow Group and the Conservative Transport Group.

By serving HS2, there is the opportunity to re-route HS2 in a way that is less damaging to the environment and by doing so will not only win more support for HS2, but also reduce opposition.

4 routes were initially selected for HS1, but none of these was chosen as the right route. With only one route proposed for HS2, there is a much lower chance that this HS2 route is the right route.

Our conclusions are that the Government should start by

1. **Accepting and implementing all the recommendations by Greengauge 21** in 'High Speed Rail: Investing in Britain's Future - Greengauge 21 Consultation Supplementary Response'.
2. A serious re-examination of the case for **routing HS2 via Heathrow** and how this can be integrated into airport development policy with high level input from the airline industry.
3. Integrate HS2 with the West Midlands rail to give **better interconnection at Birmingham** and to provide direct connection with the high-speed network at Coventry and Wolverhampton.

The Secretary of State has inherited HS2 from a previous administration. He has already demonstrated his ability to lead by requiring HS2 Ltd to link to Heathrow and connect HS1 and HS2. We support him in leading the changes that are necessary, even essential, in ensuring the HS2 not only succeeds but also delivers its full potential economic growth.

Graham Nalty
Honorary Secretary, Conservative Transport Group