
Treading a fine line

The proposed route of the new railway line from London to Birmingham passes through an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and very close to two National Trust properties. So what are we doing to protect landscapes and communities?

Ben Cowell, Deputy Director External Affairs, explains the Trust's position:

High Speed 2 (HS2) is the proposed new railway line from London to Birmingham and beyond. The project is controversial and the National Trust, while opposed to the chosen route, has decided we should not wade into the rights and wrongs of the project as a whole. However, we do think we have an important role to play in ensuring that special landscapes and communities are protected, particularly where our properties are affected, and that what eventually gets built is as good as it can be. The Government is due to bring forward legislation to build HS2 in 2013, and throughout this process we shall reserve the right to petition Parliament for the scheme we would like to see implemented.

Infrastructure is a challenge

The National Trust exists to look after special places for ever and for everyone. Yet it does not do so in a vacuum. Sometimes circumstances arise that challenge our ability to care for places according to our usual methods.

Major infrastructure projects – new roads, railways, airports and so on – can represent one such challenge. An estimated £500 billion-worth of investment by 2020 is currently 'on the Government's book' to replace exhausted power stations, upgrade transport networks and meet carbon-reduction targets. Infrastructure projects create jobs and help businesses to thrive – vital in today's economic climate. But they also need to be physically located somewhere, and this is where the potential for conflict with our aims can sometimes arise.

In the past we've been affected by road and airport schemes some of which have involved the compulsory purchase of our land, others have involved visual or noise impacts.

Nevertheless, there are usually ways in which places can change and adapt in order to accommodate new features without destroying their essential spirit. The task for the Trust is

to safeguard special places and, increasingly, we think this is an occasion when we can achieve the best results by engaging with the Government and developers to mitigate the impact of the development.

The best possible design

With HS2, the principal difficulty for the Trust arises when the line leaves London. In order to get to Birmingham it passes through the heart of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It also crosses the park at Hartwell House near Aylesbury, a Trust property that operates as a Historic House Hotel and is renowned for its beauty and tranquillity.

Many people locally are devastated at the upheaval the line will bring. It is difficult to blame them, not least those who are set to lose their homes or livelihoods as a consequence. Compensation is, of course, on offer, but sometimes no price is enough to match the value of the places that we cherish most.

Setting aside the wider economic and transport arguments around the project, our aim with HS2 is to try to find the best possible design and mitigation for Hartwell House, the Chilterns and, importantly, for the people of Aylesbury and its surrounding communities. So, we have been talking to local stakeholders to devise a scheme that blends the railway line into the landscape as much as possible at reasonable cost to the taxpayer.

Our proposals include acquiring additional land either side of the railway line to give room for the necessary landscaping and other measures. These include a 600m 'land bridge' for the route as it crosses through the Hartwell House Estate and next to Fairford Leys. This would involve building the land up on either side of the line, then placing a lid on top, with vegetation and tree planting covering it. Wide, landscaped embankments which would screen trains and conceal noise barriers and security fencing would also feature. If the scheme goes ahead we hope that the Government will include our proposals and that these will have wider benefits, if the principles behind them can be adopted elsewhere.

Our key players: who's doing what?



1. Dominic Cole, Landscape Architect

What is his role?

To come up with the creative NT vision for the landscape surrounding the path of HS2.

His track record

Dominic has 'walked the line' in the Aylesbury Vale, taken in vast amounts of background information - archaeology, historic landscape setting, community requirements, topography, access, etc - and raised people's sights with a vision.

His biggest challenge

As HS2 passes very close to the major population of Aylesbury and cuts through the estates of Hartwell House and Waddesdon, Dominic has to find ways to incorporate HS2 into the landscape and provide adequate noise/visual mitigation.

What he hopes for

'That this vision for incorporating HS2 is adopted in the eventual design and supported by the local community.'



2. Richard Spoor, Rail Engineering Consultant

What is his role?

Richard has a clear understanding of the Trust's position despite being pro-HS2 in principle. He is lending professional advice to the Trust's negotiations with HS2 Ltd, and answering questions from local residents. He has shown Trust staff around HS1 and provided insights into high-speed rail infrastructure based on visits to high-speed lines in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Italy.

His track record

Richard is a respected veteran of the rail-engineering world, and is a former President of the Permanent Way Institution.

His biggest challenge

Explaining that the UK needs major improvements to its north-south transport infrastructure for its future, and that a well-engineered high-speed rail route is the best option.

What he hopes for

'That the line will be built taking into account environmental measures such as those being proposed by the National Trust.'



3. Kate Ahern, Landscape Planning Consultant, Land Use Consultants

What is her role?

Kate is a steady hand helping to steer the Trust through HS2 Ltd consultations and environmental impact assessments. She is also helping us ensure that the landscape through which the railway line will run is understood and protected, and provides the strategic thinking and evidence we need to challenge HS2 Ltd in our negotiations.

Her track record

Over 20 years' experience as a landscape planner and manager. She has received awards for her policy research and delivery of landscape planning projects.

Her biggest challenge

Recognising the many values and attachments this area has for people and ensuring that these are respected in any final scheme design.

What she hopes for

'A scheme that creates a better integrated, connected and functioning landscape than that which existed before HS2. A landscape that extends beyond the narrow corridor of the rail line itself.'



4. Claire Graves, Trust Senior Project and Stakeholder Manager

What is her role?

Claire talks to as many people as possible within the communities to ensure that what the Trust asks for is what other people also want. She leads negotiations with HS2 Ltd on design and mitigation for the route around Aylesbury, and manages all of the Trust's work related to HS2.

Her track record

Claire has worked for the Trust for five years and started work on HS2 last April, fresh from being Press Officer on our Planning for People campaign.

Her biggest challenge

Balancing the variety of needs and wants of our neighbouring communities and stakeholders with what might be achievable. Ultimately, taxpayers' money will be spent on HS2 and mitigation measures, so the Trust has to be realistic - and reasonable - about what we ask for.

What she hopes for

'In my dream world, if HS2 goes ahead, that it causes minimum impact on people and delivers some benefits - new access and amenity spaces, connected habitats and environmental gains, tourism and business opportunities.' ➔

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Birmingham

• Claydon House

• Waddesdon Estate

• Hartwell House

• Coombe Hill

Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

• London

View of the Aylesbury Vale countryside and an outline of the proposed HS2 route



Questions we are often asked

Q. How is the National Trust affected by HS2?

A. The proposed route of HS2 takes it past Coombe Hill at the north-west boundary of the Chilterns AONB. Where the rail line emerges from a green tunnel at Wendover, the portal and emerging line will be clearly visible from Coombe Hill. The route then passes through the estate at Hartwell House. It continues around the Waddesdon Estate, and will be visible from the manor, before it continues past Claydon House. The likely position of the maintenance depot at Calvert means there will potentially be light pollution. Impacts of construction are not yet known, but among the issues of noise, vibration and dust is disruption to roads and the knock-on effect on access to our sites.

Q. What is the Trust's policy/position on transport?

A. We don't have an official position on transport. We exist to protect special places for ever, for everyone. As a charity, we just don't have the resources required to research and inform an overall, national approach to transport infrastructure. We do, however, respond to individual infrastructure proposals on the basis of their impact on our places.

Q. The business case for HS2 doesn't stand up - what's the Trust view?

A. It is not within the National Trust's remit to comment on the business case for HS2.

Q. Why is the Trust working with HS2 Ltd?

A. While we're opposed to the proposed route of HS2, if it is to go ahead, we are keen to make it the best scheme it can possibly be with the least possible negative impact on people, the environment and our properties. To achieve this, we are taking the opportunity to engage with HS2 Ltd while there is room for negotiation over the design and mitigation of the line. We are talking to local people and organisations to understand the concerns of everyone, which are reflected in our ongoing negotiations with HS2 Ltd. If you have any questions, email them to HS2@nationaltrust.org.uk



HS2 will pass close to both Hartwell House (top left) and Waddesdon Manor (top right). Above Landscape Architect Dominic Cole's drawing shows how the impact of the line could be mitigated near Hartwell House

High Speed 2: key moments

March 2010:

- Transport Secretary Andrew Adonis announces proposals for a high-speed rail network. A new 335-mile (539km) Y-shaped rail network would, the Department for Transport claims, bring the West Midlands within about half an hour of London, and deliver journey times of 75 minutes or less from Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester to the capital.
- The first phase of the programme would link London with Birmingham and details of the route were recommended by the company it set up in 2009 to advise on high-speed rail services between London and Scotland, High Speed Two Ltd (HS2 Ltd).

September/October 2010:

- HS2 Ltd publishes its high-level assessment of the two options for a national high-speed rail network. It concludes that a Y-shaped network would deliver substantially higher benefits than the alternative - the 'reverse S'. This would take a high-speed route to Manchester and West Yorkshire.
- HS2 Ltd publishes its report on options for reducing the environmental impact of its recommended route north of the Chilterns.
- The National Trust is aware of the implications of a route via the Chilterns AONB and affecting four Trust properties at Coombe Hill, Waddesdon, Hartwell and Claydon.

February 2011:

The Transport Secretary launches the high-speed rail consultation which will run until 29 July 2011.

July 2011:

National Trust and Historic House Hotels Ltd submit a formal response to the high-speed rail consultation. This raises objections in principle to a route that crosses the Chilterns AONB and will dramatically affect the setting and amenity of a number of historic properties.

January 2012:

- Decision to proceed with development of a national high-speed rail network announced.
- Route for phase 1 (London to West Midlands) announced.

Spring 2012:

- National Trust project established to achieve best possible mitigation for the line. Work starts on developing relationships with local community groups and stakeholders, including MPs, Buckinghamshire County Council, Aylesbury Vale District Council and parish councils.
- Consultation on draft Environment Statement, dealing with assessment of impacts that include noise, visual impacts, landscape impacts and impacts on cultural heritage. National Trust submits representations.

Summer 2012:

National Trust appoints a team of consultants to help give technical steer for negotiations with HS2, including a landscape character expert, landscape architect, rail engineer and noise expert (see panel).

Autumn 2012:

- Consultation on compensation proposals and safeguarding of the phase 1 (London to West Midlands) route.
- National Trust proposal for HS2 route around Aylesbury confirmed and presented formally to HS2 Ltd.

Spring 2013:

- Agreed compensation policy in place.
- Consultation on Environmental Statement for phase 1 (London-West Midlands).

Late 2013:

Introduction of a hybrid bill to provide necessary powers to construct and operate phase 1 (London to West Midlands) of the railway.

Early 2014:

Consultation on preferred route for phase 2 (Leeds, Manchester and Heathrow).

Late 2014:

Government's announcement of the chosen route for phase 2.