

An Even Higher Profile Period for HS2

The high profile of HS2 has continued unabated with the Institute of Directors issuing a very critical report and then significant criticism was made in the Public Accounts Committee. The “fightback” from the Government is HS2 is not about speed now but capacity and the future economic benefit.

Regardless of severe and increasing criticism HS2 are ploughing on with announcements about how the countryside will be affected, more land taken and the road strategy proposed.

The Government Fightback is Changing Track now

In maintaining HS2 is not just speed but capacity problems on the railways in the future (but it was planned and originally justified on the basis of speed!) the Government have not explained how or where these capacity problems would arise. The Secretary of State also stated criticisms of the cost benefit ratio as madness, even though the Government uses it for assessing transport projects.

On capacity the DfT had refused to disclose figures for the West Coast mainline (WCML) until the Judicial Review when they confirmed the average capacity figures were 52% on average whereas Paddington and Waterloo are nearer 90%. Growth in travel on the WCML was only 0.6% in 2012.

Increasing the number of carriages in a train and a fewer first class carriages would solve forecast capacity problems for many years to come. So where are these capacity problems HS2 will solve?

On economic growth and report from KPMG, immediately one of the Governments own advisers challenged it in the FT “Government adviser shoots down case for HS2”, labelling the claim of £15 boost to the economy as fanciful. Robert Peston on the radio the day it was released pointed out major caveats existed at the end of the report (ignored key criteria including constraints on the availability of skills and the property needs to support this growth but he did not mention the report took no account of costs). Prof Overman of the LSE’s criticism was “on my reading the report is technically wrong and possibly out by orders of magnitude. I can imagine why the Government has rushed out this report but it would appear to add very little if anything to the debate”

The Institute of Economic Affairs said “the lossmaking project fails the commercial while standard cost benefit analysis shows it to be extremely poor value for money. The government has therefore employed consultants to boost the economic case for the scheme” and” finally the report also conflicts with experience in other countries that dominant national cities benefit more than regions”

Lord Berkley, a former Labour transport peer and chair of the Rail freight operators, has dismissed ministers claims that HS2 will free capacity on the railways and stated it would lead to a capacity crunch on parts of the system. “The government are bulldozing through a badly designed project that just doesn’t link up properly with the existing transport network.”

The Effects of HS2 and Consultation

HS2 are about to hold what they have just announced will be the last of the Community Forums. This is due to those involved now becoming redeployed to manage the petitioning process!

They have told the County Council some aspects of their transport strategy for building HS2. These include a new roundabout on the B 485 Chesham road and a Stoke Manderville bypass but no full details will be forthcoming until the Environmental statement is published. Bucks CC have however said that the effects on roads will be more widespread than most had expected.

They have also advised that road heads to hold spoil in initially will be created in several places and surplus spoil from the cuttings through the AONB will first be used for landscaping and noise bunds, then sold or given away, and the rest dumped at three unspecified sites, one between South Heath and Kings Ash, yet again ignoring any protection of the AONB. These sites have not been identified as they had not yet approached the landowners. One other site is at Calvert and this has provoked further criticism articles in the press that the landtake for HS2 has been understated.

Compensation Re-Consultation

The government have just announced their renewed consultation on Compensation but for phase 1 only. The consultation ends on 4 December and local Road shows will take place at Missenden Abbey on Tuesday 15 October (12-8pm); Chalfont St Giles Memorial Hall on 29 October (12-8pm) and Wendover memorial Hall on 2 November (10-5pm)

Potential schemes that may be introduced are express purchase, sale and rent back of properties that will be demolished, either a property bond scheme (for rural properties only) or a voluntary purchase only for property within 120 meters of the line, an alternative sale and rent back or a long term hardship scheme depending on personal circumstances not whether a property is blighted. There is nothing for blight that construction works will cause.

Public Accounts Committee Report

This very critical report was released last week. It criticised the business case the DfT has presented with "decisions based on fragile numbers, out-of-date data and assumptions which do not reflect real life" Furthermore the estimates of costs and benefits are still far from finalised and the pattern so far has been for costs to increase and benefits to decrease.

The DfT aim the hybrid bill for phase one by the end of this year, and to get Royal Assent by March 2015 but the committee report casts doubts on the timetable to push through the legislation that would grant permission for the project, saying it "appears unrealistic and overly ambitious".

Business Opinion

In a letter to the press 8 chief executives of major construction companies accepted the challenge for the industry to build HS2 to budget and £42.6 million is adequate.. Naturally keen to pander to get work, it defies credibility that they are content to accept contracts based on 2011 costings for a project for which the detailed design has yet to be made; no doubt like in most large construction contracts they expect to make their profits from variances decided by the client (the DfT)!

Recent Polls in the Media

A recent poll in the Sunday Times reports that 55% of people oppose HS2 now, but 61% in Scotland and 60% labour voters and 59% in the Midlands and Wales oppose it and the Guardian poll latest figures is 75% support scrapping HS2. A Guardian also describes HS2 as not being the Olympics but the Afgan war of British politics as there is no debate whether it makes sense!

The **Supreme Court Appeal** is due for 15 and 16 October when 5 Judges will hear this appeal, with a majority decision going forward, on a lack of Strategic Environmental Assessment and a second EU Directive - the Environmental Impact.

Conclusion

The principal organisers of AGAHST and Stop HS2 have just written to all action groups thanking us for all our support (with demonstrations, fundraising petitioning and writing to MP's) and saying what has been achieved is amazing. Politicians across the parties have come out against it now and polls indicate the majority of people in country believe it should not be built.

Thank you all

Mark Ladd

