

GMStopHS2 Newsletter

Update post Petitioning and the Second Reading of the Hybrid Bill

Since the second reading of the Hybrid Bill was passed in the House of Commons confirming the principle of the High Speed link between London and Birmingham on 28 April (with only 34 Conservative and 14 Labour MP's voted against the second reading), the main focus of everyone has been petitioning as all petitions had to be registered in Parliament by last Friday, 23 May.

In spite of the short timescale, a total of 1925 petitions were registered. These were 4 times the number for Crossrail and nearly double for HS1 which led to 645 undertakings given for Crossrail and 205 petitions were heard in 84 sessions in the Commons (and 293 in the Lords). For HS1 there were 71 sessions for the HS1 petitions to be heard. This means that there is much work to be done by Parliament. Part of the success in producing so many numbers of petitions came from the local pop in sessions, including that run by HS2AA in Chiltern District offices.

The Sunday Times focussed on the petitions in an article in which the Chair of the Select Committee said it was important all those that were eligible to petition were given full consideration. The article went on to point out that MPs can order modifications, increased compensation or other measures such as noise barriers. Lastly it features one of the first petitions to be published from a Little Missenden resident who had petitioned for a tunnel under the AONB to preserve it.

As all petitions to Parliament have to be published, some interesting petitioners are appearing including HS1 (on disruption to St Pancras station), many public companies including Royal Mail, Land Securities, Seagro (formerly Slough Estates) St Modwen, and J Sainsbury on their properties and workplaces. Several county and metropolitan councils, including 5 London boroughs, Coventry and 4 county councils as well as many of our local parishes, the Chiltern conservation Board and the Chiltern Society have all petitioned. (See <http://www.hs2amersham.org.uk/Resources/Petitions/Index.htm> for links to AONB petitions)

Hearing the Petitions

Plans are being discussed about how the Select Committee will handle the whole process and HS2AA and StopHS2 were asked to appear before the committee. In particular they drew attention to two important matters affecting petitions, the need for an independent review of evidence produced in the petitions and the role of HS2. The Select Committee should not rely solely on HS2 for evidence especially in the light of the shortcomings of their work to date. Some 40% of the route still has to be surveyed and the Environmental Statement is still incomplete in many other respects.

It is thought that the process to be adopted will be announced in early June and could give as little as 5 days notice for petitioners to appear before the committee. The present thinking is that petitions will commence to be heard from the north and then move down the route and will start in early July.

In the meanwhile HS2 are tasked to engage with petitioners to try to reach agreement over the mitigation proposed. Judging by their recent meeting with the Chiltern Conservation Board, HS2 will need to change their arrogant attitude to hope to reach any agreements. At that meeting HS2 refused to countenance 3 proposals to reduce the spoil by tunnelling, not dumping it in the AONB and find alternatives to remove it without using local roads, just maintaining their proposals to dump spoil were to allay local concerns about lorries on local roads. They could not justify their own proposals on spoil, saying it was all in the environmental statement but could not identify where it was.

Let us hope that their political masters will, in the light of the UKIP vote, tell them to listen more carefully to the public when they meet to discuss and seek to reach agreement on petitions.

Tunnelling Options

I understand in the petitions there are four tunnel options being advocated locally, namely

- a) the detailed and costed T2 option for a fully bored tunnel to the north of Wendover and with an intervention gap at Durham Farm that was prepared by Chiltern Ridges Action Group and accepted by HS2 from an engineering perspective in the Environmental Statement;
- b) an extension of the existing proposed tunnel to Leather Lane to avoid damage to Mantles Wood and the green cut and cover tunnel past South Heath;
- c) a three bored tunnel through the whole of the AONB, in which the third tunnel provides the required escape route so avoiding an intervention gap; and
- d) a new tunnel route through the whole of the AONB, commissioned by Chiltern District Council to adopted the best the best option from a tunnelling perspective, reducing the unnecessary gradient of the existing route.

Other Legal Developments

Progress continues about HS2 on three other legal fronts, the Major Projects Authority (MPA) non disclosure challenge and legal cases under the Aarhus Convention and the Safeguarding action.

On the Governments refusal to release the MPA report on HS2, a judge has been timetabled to hear the judicial review of that refusal to release that Report.

In conjunction with Hillingdon council, HS2AA have delivered their case taking the failure to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment under the Aarhus Convention and a date in the High court has been set for early June before Mr Justice Ouseley to hear the safeguarding action.

Media Coverage

Inevitable the media coverage has dropped recently. The most interesting item that I have seen apart from the Sunday Times referred to above and a Sunday Telegraph that featured HS2, was the opposition in the Civil Engineer, the trade magazine for the industry. For two weeks running it has included critical articles on HS2 entitled "How did we end up with High Speed 2" and "High Speed Rail is fundamentally flawed"

The former was written by a civil engineering principal at High Speed UK, an organisation that is developing alternatives for the UK network. In it he questions how we ended up with HS2 which only has 2 tracks and services 3 cities and fails to any CO2 reduction that are required by the 2008 Climate Change Act

The second article by a former chief executive of HS1 argues the case for HS2 is flawed because HS2, unlike Crossrail, has failed to obtain public support notwithstanding changing the justification for the scheme. It has become an engineering project rather than a railway project.

The latest Major Projects Authority report from the government, which was issued the day after the European Elections (which was a good day to bury bad news) still rates HS2 at Red/Amber alert, the second worse assessment. It reports the successful delivery of HS2 is still in doubt as there are major risks in a number of areas that require urgent action.

Costs for HS2 continue to grow out of control. It has been reported that the costs of consultants have exceeded the budget by 86% already

Lastly HS2 have now taken a third director, a programme director, along with a chief executive and a Chairman from Network Rail, at a salary of £330,000 no doubt not budgeted for either. How much more will be spent on those jumping ship!

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Postscript

My HS2 inbox is considerably less at present and so these newsletters will be less frequent but I will alert readers where necessary to important developments as they arise. I am now taking a welcome holiday!

Mark Ladd