

20 February 2015

GMStopHS2 Newsletter

Progress on Petitioning on the Hybrid Bill

The Select Committee have not sat this week due to half term. The timetable for hearing petitions over the next 3 months is that the Select Committee expect to hold the last hearings in the week commencing 23 March, giving the Select Committee little time to wrap matters up and make decisions on evidence heard so far before Parliament is dissolved on 30 March for the election. They will have heard petitions up to the Bucks County boundary before Parliament is dissolved.

The majority of the Committee have substantial majorities in their constituencies and so are likely to continue; the exception being Michael Thornton, the Lib Dem MP for Eastleigh, who won the by election on Huhne's imprisonment, by 1771 votes

We understand that the Select Committee having visited the Colne Valley and Hillingdon area on 15 January, and have agreed to return at a future date in view of what is involved. They may hear some petitions from this area, but not Bucks CC, before Parliament is dissolved

Considerable media coverage was obtained (BBC, ITV, Sky, Daily Telegraph and Guardian) when Alex Rukin, (the son of Joe the major StopHS2 campaigner) appeared before the Select Committee. He was reckoned to be the youngest petitioner to Parliament. His petitioning points included HS2 are poor at maths as their figures do not add up and they cannot read maps as there were errors on their presented mappings.

Giving evidence to the Select Committee, the HS2 chief engineer has just admitted that freeing up capacity, one of the key present claims for HS2, means cutting out all 10 hourly long distance trains out of Euston in an £8.3 billion rail cut. The effect of this is that some 30 towns and cities such as Wolverhampton, Stoke, Warrington and others, will lose their fast trains to London. Only Milton Keynes will be able to benefit from the new capacity available from his evidence.

Compensation News

The Select Committee have considered the revised compensation scheme (the Need to Sell scheme) and proposed that there is a testing of the latest scheme for 6 months or so before its success is considered by the Committee. In the meanwhile campaigners are asking sellers to put their houses on the market at pre blight levels to demonstrate that these prices cannot be achieved. As some agents are refusing to do so, this should be recorded in writing as evidence to the Select committee.

The Select Committee received the Government's response to the compensation issues, that had been raised on the Property bond 2 months earlier, just before the Need to Sell was announced. As it contained many errors, ignored the advice from their own consultants PWC, and contained no explanation of their costings on the bond, the Select Committee were not impressed at the response They have received HS2AA's severe criticism and correction of errors and must revert to this issue.

Political Developments

During a private members bill seeking a referendum on HS2 it was noticeable that no MP's turned up to support HS2. John Hayes, MP, the Minister of State for the DfT, in dealing with

problems of HS2 causing destruction of the second oldest pear tree in the country, proposed “a new arboreal study to see if the Pear Tree could be moved”, even though the environmental impact study stated that “translocation of the tree is extremely unlikely to be successful and is not proposed.”!!!

He went on to say that ancient woodlands are an important part of our natural heritage and need to be protected wherever possible and the best way of doing so is to avoid them whenever possible. Let us call his evidence, daft as some of it was, in support of the tunnel to protect Mantles Wood and Sibley’s coppice as well as the rest of the AONB.

Over the last year or more there has been intense lobbying by AGAHST (the action groups against

HS2) amongst politicians and their advisers that resulted in an independent report that identified the weaknesses in the case for HS2 citing many aspects of the project and the vanity element. In particular it identified the much greater opportunity cost for better use of the finance involved.

For this report Fabian Society was the preferred Think Tank for the project that researched the views of northern stakeholders towards HS2 due to its close working relationship with the leader of Labour's policy review. In particular, the author of the report, released last November, acts as a key external policy adviser to the leadership team. The findings and arguments fed into the review beginning last spring. The research drew out contrasting views from principal stakeholders in the very cities that are scheduled for HS2 stations, including whether other transport projects would be higher priorities. The findings were unequivocally negative towards HS2.

We understand that this report has been successfully circulated to a wide number of key opinion formers within the Labour Party, senior civil servants and respected independent economists. All now recognise the failings of HS2 and so are focussing on the opportunity of alternative uses of the funds, e.g. paying down the National Debt and regional infrastructure investment.

However Ed Milliband was enthusiastically vague about HS2 when interviewed about Labour’s plans for apprentices on the radio.. He said they were very enthusiastic about HS2 and it gives value for money but clearly they would not support it at any cost. Any cost was undefined, so was how they proposed to control costs or decide at what level they would control/kill it. All in all we are heading for another classic blunder of government as there is no way costs can be controlled once work starts unless it is to cancel phase 2.leaving the UK with an even bigger white elephant.

Press and Media

Following the publication of the Fabian report, Paul Johnson head of the influential Institute of Fiscal Studies, made a negative comment in his column in the Times.

An article this month in the Financial Times headed “Critics set on halting HS2 Gravy Train in its tracks” also picked up a number of these key identified points in its interview with Simon Kirby, the chief executive in his expensive Canary Wharf headquarters office. These included

the record of value for money on high-speed rail is unsubstantiated, especially on shorter distances in the UK; and

HS2 will largely be a replacement service for business travel on the existing west coast mainline where first-class carriages are often nearly empty,

The article also includes quotes that

“HS2 is very high risk and is a gravy train for consultants, involving banks, lawyers and Government officials”;

a standard line could do the job much cheaper (HS2 is not good value for money);

HS1 has failed to regenerate Kent with the employment rate lower in the South east than before HS1 was introduced etc

HS2 are now promoting the work as attracting companies who have never worked in the UK; another potential recipe for disaster. Their latest timings are quoted as Royal Assent by late 2016 and work to start in 2018. The DfT have not achieved any announced dates yet on this project.

Amersham Drop in Day

The Amersham HS2 action group are holding a drop in information day, along with details of other Amersham local development plans, on developments on HS2 including advice from petitioners, progress on the bill, compensation proposals, views on HS2 from around the country, details of local and national campaigns etc. It is being held at **Amersham Free Church, Woodside Road, Amersham from 11.00 to 17.00 pm on Saturday 28 February.** Do drop in.

Mark