HS2 Ltd's Restoration of the Chilterns National Landscape

Current Position

HS2 construction continues at a pace with different sections already nearing or reaching completion. Landscape restoration and wildlife mitigation is a requirement of the HS2 Act, though currently only outline plans, which accompanied Schedule 17 planning applications, are available.

Once land has been restored, areas not required for operational use will be disposed of. Arrangements will be needed for the transfer of areas that cannot be returned to agriculture to other uses, potentially wildlife conservation.

More detailed plans, associated with 'bringing into use' approvals, alongside details of a land disposal policy, are expected in the first half of 2026.

Our concerns

We are concerned that at this late stage, no plans, or a budget, currently exist to ensure that both land disposal and land restoration are planned and executed in a strategic, well-managed and cost-effective manner.

Without coordination and oversight, land restoration is likely to take place in a haphazard manner as construction of different phases reach completion. The current landscaping and highways plans submitted for schedule 17 review appear disjointed and un-coordinated. This will be compounded by the piecemeal release of land even within individual sites as 'temporary' construction roads and other areas are retained for rail infrastructure operations. As a result, we anticipate that different contractors will be responsible for different restoration works.

Within the Chilterns, the tunnel vent shaft sites, will be the first locations where landscape restoration will take place. Restoration is due to be completed by the end of 2025.

Specific concerns include:

- Lost opportunities to secure the best landscape scale restoration and nature recovery, including coordinating and joining up individual actions.

  These opportunities include the Wendover and North Link footpath and Greenway proposals described within the Chilterns Detailed Design Principles commissioned by the HS2 Chilterns Review Group and approved by HS2. At present, no accommodation for these proposals is included in design plans.

- Failure to integrate noise mitigation measures into landscaping particularly North Wendover, Aylesbury and Calvert

- Poorly thought-through restoration works that will be challenged by local and national stakeholders.

- Poorly executed restoration leading to delays or expensive retrospective correction.

- Poor value for money of allocated budgets due to inefficiencies and rising costs.

- A lack of clear and costed plan for on-going management and maintenance or any indication of which organisation will take on long-term maintenance.

- With land disposals occurring at different stages, how can we ensure that these areas will be appropriately and sustainably managed into the future?

Opportunities

Done properly, the effective restoration of the affected areas of the Chilterns National Landscape, can deliver multiple benefits, including the following:

- As 'relevant authorities', HS2 Ltd, its contractors, local authorities and other relevant bodies, will fulfil their new responsibilities under the strengthened duty of section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 for all public bodies to "seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area" of National Landscapes such as the Chilterns.

- Coordinated landscape restoration - in accordance with an agreed overall plan that respects National Landscape character, local wildlife habitats and species and provides the optimum noise and visual impact mitigation that is most likely to be supported by local communities and other stakeholders.

- Recent design discussion (Leather Lane overbridge) has been welcomed by local stakeholders and undoubtedly, an effective landscape restoration panel will reflect positively on the organisational reputation of all those involved.

- Restoration funds will be used effectively and efficiently.

- Opportunities for long term sympathetic management of land by appropriate individuals or groups will be realised.

Proposition

We propose that the Chiltern Society, the Chilterns National Landscape, Wendover HS2 Mitigation Action Group and other stakeholders, in cooperation with HS2 Ltd and its contractors, form a Landscape Restoration Panel to agree and oversee a comprehensive restoration plan for the Chilterns National Landscape. The panel will offer expert opinion as plans develop and a source of advice as those plans are presented for schedule 17 review and during their implementation.

The Panel will review land disposal policy and offer guidance as to the most appropriate management for different types of land being disposed of.

Panel membership will likely include representatives from the following:

- HS2 Ltd
- HS2 Ltd's contractors

- DfT
- Natural England
- Chilterns National Landscape
- Chiltern Society
- Wendover HS2 Mitigation Action Group
- Buckinghamshire Council
- BBOWT

The Panel may invite other local stakeholders to attend discussions pertinent to their areas of interest or landholdings, as appropriate.

The current Chilterns Review Group provides a model for how such a panel might operate.

The Landscape Restoration Panel would require support and funding from HS2 Ltd. The Panel might meet quarterly. Members input costs would be reimbursed by HS2 Ltd through existing or new mechanisms agreed in advance. It is anticipated that such costs will be modest in relation to the funds required for restoration and will represent a saving overall by reducing or removing the need for separate ongoing engagement with these stakeholders and mitigating the other risks set out above.

As lead Panel members, the Chiltern Society, the Chilterns National Landscape and HS2 Ltd. would agree Terms of Reference for the Panel which, in essence, will work to secure the timely and cost-effective restoration of the Chilterns National Landscape.

Neil Jackson
Conservation and Landscape Officer
Chilterns National Landscape
njackson@chilterns.org.uk

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