



High Speed Rail: Investing in Britain's Future?

About HS2

In May 2010 the Government confirmed its commitment to a national high speed rail network. In principle, the project is supported by the three main UK political parties and the development of a high speed network is presented as 'a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the way we travel in Britain' (DfT, 2011).

The proposed high speed route takes the shape of a Y network and begins with London to Birmingham (phase 1) followed by extensions from Birmingham to Manchester and Leeds (Phase 2). The cost of the project is estimated at £32 billion and it is anticipated that, should the project go ahead, work will commence in 2017 with phase one operational by 2025. When completed the high speed lines will be capable of carrying trains travelling at speeds of up to 400 KPH (250 mph).

In support of HS2

The Government claims that the benefits associated with the development of HS2 are vast. Broadly speaking, HS2 is presented as the most effective way to address the capacity issues that affect the UK transport system while helping to rebalance the national economy thus closing the north-south divide. Further, it is claimed that demand for rail travel has risen by 40% over the past 15 years and this trend is forecast to continue (Greengauge 21, 2011). It is not expected that HS2 will absorb all of the future demand. Instead, HS2 will provide a premium fast service while existing intercity infrastructure and rolling stock will be redeployed in an improved intra and inter regional rail system.

High speed rail is also presented as a genuine alternative to domestic aviation which in turn is the basis of the claim that high speed rail will contribute to a reduction in CO2 emissions.

It is also noted by HS2 supporters that high speed rail is becoming the infrastructural mode and symbol of enterprise amongst global competitors. Thus, HS2 may be an essential lure for inward investment.

Against HS2

HS2 has generated much opposition and there is widespread criticism that the supporting claims are fundamentally flawed, especially from within communities likely to be directly affected by the creation of the railway system. HS2 has been dubbed a white elephant by the well organised opposition groups who claim that the business case is based on unrealistic assumptions. In short, it is argued that demand for rail travel is not set to increase at the rate that is forecast which is widely regarded as the foundation of the case for HS2. Additionally, it is asserted that elasticities of demand for rail travel will not support the expected premium of 25% for travel on HS2.

The potential for HS2 to promote economic regeneration is also regarded with much scepticism. Detractors are incredulous that a rail system serving just four city centre stations can address the regional complexity which bedevils the local economies along much of the HS2 line. Moreover, the role of HS2 in bridging the north-south divide is dismissed as naïve, the counterclaim being that HS2 will speed connections to London but not the other way around.

There is also much criticism surrounding the environmental case for HS2, namely that high speed rail will not cut carbon emissions and that the true environmental impact has not been assessed properly. Key environmental concerns focus on the proposed route which cuts through the Chilterns which is designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty. There are also concerns about the demolition of property and land take, loss of wildlife habitation and noise pollution.

The consultation

In February 2011 the transport secretary launched a consultation which closed in July 2011. It is claimed that the consultation is one of the largest and most wide-ranging ever undertaken by Government.

At present, the responses received are being analysed by an independent company who have been commissioned to produce a summary report which is due to be published in the next few months. The Secretary of State for Transport will announce the outcome of the consultation process and the Government's final decision on its strategy for high speed rail before the end of the 2011.

Other issues

The House of Commons Transport committee has been taking evidence on the case for HS2. So far, the committee have heard from various experts who have argued the need for a national comprehensive and integrated transport policy. Moreover, if we are to follow the method of other countries, the UK should orientate all national rail systems to the national airport network (HS2 will not directly serve any airport). The need for a regional perspective in rail services has also been argued at the Transport Committee. Wales in particular could be a net loser if the present model of HS2 is adopted. Finally, representatives of Scottish interests have suggested that construction of HS2 should commence in the north to ensure that the North South divide is addressed from the outset. Finally, a debate on High Speed Two is to be held in the House of Commons Chamber on Thursday 13 October 2011.