

High Speed Rail

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With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the Government's plans for the development of a national high speed rail network, and on the proposed route that we will put forward next year for public consultation.

One of the Coalition's main objectives is to build an economy which is more balanced both sectorally and geographically, that will deliver sustainable economic growth while delivering on our climate change targets. Investment in infrastructure, and transport infrastructure in particular, will be a key part of that approach.

To deliver economic growth and carbon reduction we must provide attractive alternatives to short-haul aviation, while addressing the issue of scarce rail capacity between the city centres. Network Rail has calculated that by 2024 the West Coast Main Line will effectively be full, with no further enhancements that could reasonably be made to meet future demand.

The Government believes that the best long-term solution to these challenges is the development of a national high-speed rail network. Our proposed strategy is for a Y-shaped network, to be delivered in two phases: the first a line from London to the West Midlands, and the second the onward legs to Manchester and Leeds with connections to points further north via the East and West coast mainlines.

Our proposals would provide an unprecedented increase in capacity on the key north-south routes out of London, through a combination of new infrastructure and released capacity on existing lines.

Reliability would be improved and journey times between major cities would be slashed. Central Birmingham would be brought within 49 minutes of London – potentially less for non-stopping trains – and within 1 hour 5 minutes of Leeds. The released capacity on the West Coast Mainline would offer the possibility of commuter frequency fast services to London from places like Coventry and Milton Keynes.

By running trains seamlessly onto existing inter-city routes, our proposed network would also bring Glasgow and Edinburgh to within three-and-a-half hours of London - fast enough to induce a major shift of passengers from domestic aviation. In the longer-term, we will also explore with the Scottish Government the options for further reducing journey times to Scotland.

The development of a high speed rail network has been a key factor in our decision on additional runways at London's airports, and that is why we have said from the outset that any such network must be linked to our principal gateway airport and integrated with the European high speed network via HS1. In June, I asked HS2 Ltd to carry out additional work on such links. I have studied that work and the recommendations of Lord Mawhinney's review. I have also examined Arup's proposals for a transport hub near Iver.

I have concluded that a spur to the airport, running on the surface close to the M25 for part of its length, is the best option. It is lower-cost than the other options considered by HS2 Ltd, keeps journey times between London and Birmingham to a minimum, and retains the flexibility to be extended into a loop in future. In order to deliver the best possible value for taxpayers' money, I propose that a spur be constructed as part of the second phase of the network, opening at the same time as the routes to Manchester and Leeds. I have today asked HS2 Ltd, to carry out further work on such a spur route, with a view to public consultation later in this Parliament alongside the routes to Manchester and Leeds.

For the period prior to the opening of that second phase, high speed rail travellers to the airport would be able to change to fast Heathrow Express services at Old Oak Common, where there would also be a direct interchange with Crossrail.

With regard to a link to HS1, HS2 Ltd's report identifies that a connection can be made via a new tunnel from Old Oak Common to the North London Line near Chalk Farm, from where existing infrastructure can be used to reach the HS1 line north of St Pancras. This proposal is significantly cheaper than any other option for a direct link, and would enable direct trains to run from the midlands and the north to Europe, without affecting existing service levels on the North London Line.

Such a tunnel can only be constructed before the Old Oak Common interchange comes into operation, so this link will be included in the phase one scheme put forward for consultation.

Mr Speaker, the Government believes that the construction of a high speed rail network will support economic growth and the rebalancing of the UK economy. But we recognise that the proposed line will have significant local impacts on the areas it passes through. And that we have a duty to do everything practically possible to mitigate those impacts.

That is why, since my appointment as Secretary of State, I have reviewed the proposals of the previous administration. I have looked at the case for High Speed Rail, at the corridor options for a north-south route, at the different route options put forward by HS2 Ltd and in detail at the route option recommended in its March report. I have reached the conclusion, as the previous administration did, that the route option recommended in March represents the most appropriate general alignment for the High Speed Railway between London and the West Midlands. However before finalising the detailed route that I am publishing today for consultation, I travelled the length of it and talked directly to local authorities, property owners, many of the protest groups and their Members of Parliament, as well as commissioning additional work on the options for improving the proposed alignment.

As a consequence, significant amendments have been made to both the vertical and horizontal alignment, and to the proposed mitigation measures. In total, around 50% of the preferred route proposal published in March has been amended in some respect.

I am confident that solutions have now been found which can significantly mitigate the impacts of the railway at local level which, when properly understood, will reassure many of those who have been understandably apprehensive about the potential impact on their lives and their property values.

For instance, in Primrose Hill, work to identify the most appropriate locations for the necessary vent shafts has shifted the proposed tunnel, and thus also the vent shafts themselves, to the north, away from the most sensitive areas of this part of London, locating them alongside the existing railway.

Between Amersham and Wendover, opportunities to cover section of the proposed cutting to create a 'green bridge' and longer 'green tunnel' have been incorporated into the route design to reduce its visual impact and avoid severance of public rights of way.

At Hartwell House, by moving the alignment away from this historic property, HS2 Ltd have been able to ensure that the line would not be visible from the House itself and that additional earthworks and planting can be undertaken to further reduce visual and noise impacts.

And in the most northerly section of the route, an improved alignment has been identified which would move the line further from Lichfield.

But, Mr Speaker, despite our best efforts at mitigation, we will not be able to avoid all impacts on property values. Where a project which is in the national interest imposes significant financial loss on individuals, I believe it is right and proper that they should be compensated fairly for that loss. So I have asked my officials to prepare a range of options for a scheme to assist those whose properties would not be required for the construction of the railway, but who would nonetheless see a significant diminution of value as a result of the construction of the line. The forthcoming consultation will include proposals for such a scheme, which will sit alongside the statutory blight regime which covers those whose properties would need to be taken to build the line.

I am publishing today on my Department's website and placing in the library of the House, a set of reports by HS2 Ltd which set out for each route section the options considered and the changes proposed, together with detailed maps showing the revised preferred route from London to the West Midlands in full. This route will form the basis for the public consultation, which I expect to begin in February next year.

When the consultation is launched, I will also publish a revised business case; a full Appraisal of sustainability; noise contour maps; and route visualisations; all of which can only be completed now that the final preferred route for consultation has been determined.

Let me be clear, the consultation will encompass the Government's strategy for a national high speed rail network, the choice of corridor and the detailed line of route that I have outlined for the initial London to West Midlands phase.

As part of the consultation process, roadshows will be held along the length of the preferred route from London to the West Midlands to ensure that local people have the opportunity to find out more about the project and to discuss specific concerns with those involved in developing the scheme.

Mr Speaker, it is my view that a high speed rail network would deliver a transformational change to the way Britain works and competes in the 21st century,

It would allow the economies of the Midlands and the North to benefit much more directly from the economic engine of London, tackling the North-South divide more effectively than half a century of regional policy has done, expanding labour markets and bringing our major conurbations closer together.

The consultation exercise we will launch in the New Year will be one of the biggest and most wide-ranging ever undertaken by Government and I urge all Hon. Members with an interest to participate and to encourage their constituents to do so.

These proposals have the support of political and business leaders from all parts of the United Kingdom, and I hope they will gain cross-party support in this House.

Mr Speaker, I commend this statement to the House.

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