

Nottingham Friends of the Earth

Briefing on HS2

August 2019

Nottingham Friends of the Earth – Background Briefing on HS2

This Briefing is based on three main sources. Firstly, a 2019 report by the New Economics Foundation which looked closely at HS2 and its alternatives. (1) Secondly, from its own research from various organisations and news sources. Thirdly, by judging HS2 against critical standards that give us all a richer life and future – the supply of good public transport and alternatives to road transport, the need to protect the environment and the need to cut air pollution.

Also see Friends of the Earth’s national Briefing: The Opportunity Costs of HS2. (2)

The disadvantages for UK rail travellers.

HS2 aims to provide a new high-speed rail line between London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. It is a railway for business travellers not commuters. A whole new system of very fast trains serves less people. Slower trains serve more places and more passengers. The main problems of congesting and overcrowding on today’s railways are on commuter routes.

There are alternatives.

The Government had claimed to want to rebalance the economy. So it is regions such as the north of England, the Midlands, south Wales and central Scotland that should be prioritised for investment first before London centric schemes. (1)

The NEF recommends a large package of measures which should take priority over HS2. These include electrification of much of the North of England network, electrifying the Midland Main Line, re-opening some closed lines, quadrupling track in many places, freight expansion, investment in rolling stock.

Protecting the environment and tackling climate change.

The Government’s Transport Infrastructure Strategy has 4 priorities. Climate change is not amongst them, despite the fact that this Strategy says “the need to combat climate change is one of the most significant challenges of our time”. (3) Traffic needs to reduce by 20% by 2030 to meet the UK’s international climate change commitment even with a rapid transition to electric cars.

HS2 directly damages 10 SSSIs, 153 Local Wildlife Sites, 42 proposed Local Wildlife sites and 41 ancient woodlands. More than 300 further sites (including 42 ancient woods) are at risk from indirect impact such as noise, pollution, shading and dust. (4) Tunnelling may help to lessen the impact in some places but this type of work can still affect hydrology, soils and have other associated impacts. A detailed Environmental Statement for Phase 1 undertaken by HS2 Ltd attempted to quantify the damage and offer some mitigation in compensation for sites of ecological importance lost along the route, committing to ‘no net loss’ of wildlife habitat. However analyses of the route suggests that the current mitigation proposals are flawed in design and will not achieve ‘no net loss’.

Notts Wildlife Trust fears a wide range of habitats will be destroyed or damaged, including rare wet grasslands and ponds in the Erewash valley and limestone grassland on the edge of the County. 91% of the Toton Wildlife Site will be lost, and 4 hectares of

grassland at Hucknall Airfield Wildlife Site whilst protected species such as bats, barn owls, great crested newts, water voles and otters will also be affected.

17% of road transport emissions are from freight. Getting goods out of lorries and on to freight trains makes sense in so many ways. However, HS2 currently makes no provision for freight in their timetables and the high-speed trains actually make freight trains less possible north of Leeds and Manchester. (1)

Supporters of HS2 say it will take people out of planes and cars. Yet Department of Transport figures say only 1% of HS2 passengers would have been likely to have flown and only 4% would have driven. (5)

The Committee on Climate Change found transport to be the biggest sector for releasing greenhouse gases. (6) So deterring car and van traffic and, promoting walking, cycling and public transport should be a top priority for transport spending. An ultra high-speed railway is not the priority.

Failure to provide value for money.

The government had failed to carry out a national rail or transport strategy. The rail system was broken up and fragmented under privatisation and the government had absolutely no plan for the whole system. A current railway review refuses to include HS2 and current Network Rail projects. (1)

The initial cost of HS2 was £33bn which then rose to £56bn and an internal report for the government warns it could cost up to £90bn. (7a) Reasons include underestimating the cost of buying land, poor management, having to cancel a major contract due to conflict of interests. The Government itself has given it an amber/red risk rating for 6 years meaning it is at high risk of not providing value for money. Many experts say that if you change just one or two assumptions by a small amount eg passenger numbers it would be considered a red risk. A 2016 report to the government said it should be classed as red – in other words unachievable. (7b)

Not the best transport project to invest in.

Spending billions on this scheme takes focus and spending away from other key areas of transport. The Government's cycling and walking investment is only £1.2 billion over 5 years 2015-20. A proper level of funding would be £2 billion a year. (8)

Three times more journeys are by bus than train and they are the main mode of transport for the quarter of the population without a car. Buses are the most used form of public transport yet journeys have decreased by a fifth in the past 15 years outside London. Investing in trams and buses provides significant economic benefits. (9)

London benefits at the expense of Nottingham.

By HS2's own admission 40% of passenger benefits would accrue to London. Meanwhile 4 times as much is spent on current or planned transport infrastructure projects in London as in the North (10). London centric spending threatens the quality of life for everyone else. HS2 will deepen regional equality with its focus on London. Railway spending should be focused on reconnecting places that have been excluded from economic activity and national political attention.

Prioritising HS2 means electrifying the Midland Main Line (MML) had been shelved yet again. If money was spent on electrifying the Midland Main Line it could reduce CO2 emissions 40% from current levels, improve the reliability and the capacity of the service as well as shortening journey times. It would also bring economic benefits. The MML is the only mainline to London not electrified. (11)

Nottingham City Council has sought guarantees that HS2 will not downgrade the priority of MML electrification or mean less services direct to London. (12)

Latest News.

Boris Johnson has voiced doubts about the whole HS2 project. Since becoming Prime Minister he has appointed two people with totally contradictory views to help determine HS2's future. Firstly, he has appointed journalist Andrew Gilligan who has consistently criticised HS2 as a transport adviser. Secondly, he has appointed ex HS2 Chairman Douglas Oakervee to carry out a rapid review of the whole project. (13)

Conclusion.

HS2 had always been a seductive, glossy, project. Certainly a new south–north railway is not a bad idea but how it is done and for what purposes and for whose needs have never been openly debated. The failure of successive governments to have a comprehensive transport and rail strategy removes its shine. It can only be judged against what else we could do and what else we should do.

Expansion and improvement of the railway system should benefit the largest number of passengers, not just the relatively wealthy, those travelling long distance for business and those in London.

The Netherlands have an electric rail system running entirely from renewables. We could achieve such a system if we were not blinded by HS2 and failed transport strategies.

- (1) *New Economics Foundation (2019) A rail network for everyone: probing HS2 and its alternatives* <http://neweconomics.org/2019/03/a-rail-network-for-everyone>
- (2) *Friends of the Earth Briefing: The Opportunity Costs of HS2, March 2019:* <http://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/opportunity-costs-hs2>
- (3) *Department of Transport 2017 Transport Investment Strategy*
- (4) *The Wildlife Trusts. HS2 The case for a Greener Vision*
- (5) *Thynne & JHP 2013 Carbon Impact of HS2*
- (6) *Committee on Climate Change 2018 letter to Chris Grayling and Greg Clark – assessment of the Road to Zero Strategy*
- (7a) *Financial Times 5/7/2018 Leaked HS2 report claims scheme “fundamentally flawed”*
- (7b) *Financial Times 24/3/19 Ex Treasury chief says HS2 would fail cost benefit analysis*
- (8) *Sloman 2019 How more cycling and walking can reduce carbon emissions (Transport for Quality of Life and Friends of the Earth)*
- (9) *Tom Forth 2019 Birmingham isn't a big city at peak times*
- (10) *Guardian 20/2/17 More than half UK investment in transport is in London, says study*
- (11) *Arup (2011) The case for upgrading and electrifying the Midland Main Line*
- (12) *Nottingham City Council Response to the Department for Transport Consultation.*
- (13) *The Guardian 26/7/2019 Boris appoints arch critic of HS2 as an adviser*