

New chance for CrossRail

The Government claims it has given the "green light" to development work on plans for two major new rail links across London.

£150million is being allocated for to allow the original East-West Crossrail project could be modified in the light of different attitudes to routes and regeneration and to see how many details of the design need to be changed.

In addition, and in parallel, a feasibility study will be undertaken on a North East-South West (Wimbledon-Hackney) link.

The work will be done by the Strategic Rail Authority and Transport for London and is due to start immediately.

In answer to Parliamentary Questions from Lord Sheppard and David Lidington, Transport Ministers Lord Macdonald and Keith Hill said that the High-Level Group (the Minister for Transport, the Mayor and the Chairman of the SRA) which was set up to develop a co-ordinated approach to London rail projects, had agreed on the next steps to take forward the SRA's report on London east-west rail links.

Lord Macdonald and Keith Hill said: "The Strategic Rail Authority sent the report on their extensive study into the issues relating to rail travel on an east west axis across London to the Secretary of State on 20 December 2000.

"Work will start immediately on project definition and design development of a central, cross-London rail link, the tunnel section of which could follow the alignment of the CrossRail scheme.

"The work will look at alternative service patterns and access to Heathrow. This will lead to a recommendation on the option to be taken forward.

"At the same time, work will start on a feasibility study of a south-west to north-east London rail link, the tunnel section of which could follow the alignment of the Chelsea-Hackney scheme. This work will be taken forward jointly by the SRA and TfL, under the guidance of the High-Level Group."

Transport Minister Lord Macdonald said: "This demonstrates our commitment to the development of rail schemes in London. This is a first step and there is much work to be done to identify the best options, but today's decision represents real progress towards providing

London with a world-class rail network." Minister for London Keith Hill said: "I am delighted to announce this step forward in improving rail links across London which I am sure will be welcomed by commuters across the south east."

The SRA report, commissioned by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott early last year, concluded that London is near to capacity in terms of the current national rail network, the central termini and the Underground.

This infrastructure, even supplemented by committed schemes, will not deliver the expected growth in passenger and freight demand over the next decade or so.

The report recommends the consideration of a package of schemes, of varying sizes and impacts, to overcome these problems.

In producing the report, SRA has taken as a priority the identification of schemes which provide significant additional capacity in the central area to reduce congestion, improve access and network capacity in key regeneration areas, support the development of a network of strategic interchanges, provide effective routes and operating conditions for freight, and provide fast and effective access to and from Heathrow.

Transport for London, Railtrack and London Underground have participated fully in the study, and the report takes into account the Mayor's objectives as set out in his emerging transport strategy.

New cross-London routes

The next steps relate to two of the schemes assessed in the report.

The report concludes that effective relief from overcrowding in the centre cannot be achieved by upgrades of existing infrastructure.

New cross-London links are required. Two possible schemes, based upon the already safeguarded CrossRail and Chelsea-Hackney routes, are identified for further work.

The central link is a network based on a new tunnel from Paddington to Liverpool Street, with intermediate stations at Bond Street, Tottenham Court Road and Farringdon.

While this alignment is similar to the CrossRail proposal, the position of the portals and the design of the stations are likely to be different. The announcement means the immediate start

of work on project definition and design development, to identify the most effective route, including the possibility of a Heathrow connection, and service patterns.

Under the Government's 10 year plan - Transport 2010 - £150million has been allocated for preparation costs for an east-west rail link.

This will fund the project definition and design work which will take about 14 months.

This will lead to a recommendation on the option to be taken forward.

No decisions have yet been taken about the most appropriate process for obtaining powers.

At this early stage it is difficult to estimate when the construction of a cross-London link might begin, but it is unlikely to be before 2005-6.

The aim is for a link to be operational by the end of 2010.

The 10-year plan assumes the project will be financed by the private sector. In advance of detailed economic appraisal of the options it is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the costs.

Almost £3.5billion is included in the plan as a broad indication of the costs of the infrastructure and new rolling stock.

Public support is assumed to be provided in the form of ticket revenue following completion of the investment, but will depend on the precise project and on negotiations with the rail industry.

The south-west to north-east link feasibility study will look at a route connecting Wimbledon to Leyton and Finsbury Park, via Clapham Junction, Victoria, Tottenham Court Road, King's Cross and Hackney - with a new tunnel similar to the Chelsea-Hackney proposal.

The announcement follows the report's recommendation that a feasibility study of this route should be undertaken in parallel with the central link project definition work.

The high-level group

There are a large number of national rail schemes being progressed or proposed in the London area.

They range from relatively minor track improvements to major schemes such as Thameslink 2000 or the proposal for cross-London links which are the subject of today's announcement. None of these schemes is completely stand-

alone; they all have interfaces with each other. And in most cases they interface with London Underground or with bus and street issues.

They need to be taken forward in a co-ordinated manner. While recognising the statutory powers and responsibilities which fall to the mayor and SRA, the High-Level Group was established by Lord Macdonald to ensure clarity on objectives and priorities.

The group aims for the development of a co-ordinated strategic approach to London Rail projects in general, and to oversee programme co-ordination for the work on those projects.

The group is a formal tripartite structure chaired by Lord Macdonald, with the mayor and the chairman of the SRA.

It is ironic that if CrossRail had been completed during the 1990s as it should have been, it would now be handling 12% more passengers than even the most optimistic of the original estimates.

"Estimates predict that CrossRail could accommodate 187 million passengers per annum or 600,000 commuters every weekday, increasing the overall seats in London's existing rail arrivals by 15% and thereby significantly alleviating capacity constraints on London's besieged transport system," said Westminster Councillor Louise St John Howe.

Now it is suggested by the transport consultants Maunsell and Arup that CrossRail could be expanded into a London regional metro by 2010.

They suggest a tunnel under Kensal Green cemetery - where Isambard Kingdom Brunel is buried - to link the West Coast main line to the Great Western.

In the east, they suggest a fly-over at Forest Gate so CrossRail could link into the London, Tilbury and Southend line.

In Parliament, the MP for Poplar and Canning Town said that CrossRail should be diverted into Docklands rather than making Stratford the hub in the east.

He said: "There are already capacity problems on the Docklands rail and public transport network which must be addressed to fulfil sustainable regeneration potential."

Transport Minister Keith Hill said: "There are a number of potential routes for the central tunnel and more particularly for national rail destinations."