

Fast forward to high-speed rail

By Graham Nalty

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At last! The Government has now committed to the building of a high speed railway network and has set up a company to advise ministers on the environmental, planning, capacity, value for money and funding issues on a high-speed line from London to the West Midlands.

This was announced by Transport Secretary Geoff Hoon in Parliament as part of a transport package that included building the highly controversial third runway for Heathrow Airport.

The High Speed Two company has a remit to advise the Government on:

- The route with any appropriate options
- Options for a Heathrow interchange linking to the Great Western main line and to Crossrail
- Options for access to central London and any other cities served
- Options for linking with HS1 and the existing rail network, including the potential for services to Europe
- Finance and construction

The Government also appears to be committed to developing a high-speed rail network with the incorporation of four further new companies, with Department for Transport civil servants as directors, to develop High Speed 3 to High Speed 6.

No announcement has been made regarding the remits of these companies at the time of writing, but I would expect that these companies would be concerned with extending HS2 north to Manchester, Leeds and Scotland.

The High Speed 2 company is expected to report to the Government by the end of 2009.

In the meantime, Network Rail is studying the capacity limitations on the main lines that radiate northwards and westwards from London.

The lobby organisation Greengauge 21 has initiated a study to determine how a high-speed network should be developed, which destinations should be served, the costs of construction and the economic benefits that could be delivered.

The Greengauge 21 study is being funded by a public interest group formed from local authorities, development agencies, and transport executives of the major cities together with the rail industry. Both these studies are expected to report during the middle of 2009.

This is a very big change in direction for the Government. Why has it happened?

Public support for high-speed rail increased substantially with the successful launch of High Speed



CHILDREN'S TRAINS: Japanese Railways East painted six high-speed trains last year with Pokemon characters as part of a joint advertising campaign with All Nippon Airways. The Pokemon craze swept Britain several years ago but is still alive and well in Japan. You can see more Pokemon train designs at www.jreast.co.jp/pikanori/shinkansen.html Picture: © Matthew Davis

One in November 2007 and that reflects great credit on both London and Continental Railways and Eurostar for managing the change so smoothly.

Greengauge 21 has been very persistent in promoting the benefits of high-speed rail in terms of increased economic activity which then created additional wealth. Their arguments are carefully researched and are convincing.

The Conservative Party has recently made a strong commitment not only to building high-speed railways, but also to cancelling the third runway at Heathrow if started.

The bold commitment made by Theresa Villiers at the Conservative Party conference was decided only very shortly before the conference and was kept free of leaks right up until it was announced.

The Conservative proposal to include Leeds in plans for high-speed rail adds a significant number of passengers to make the route even more profitable.

With the growing support for high-speed rail and the increasing opposition to the Heathrow third runway, the Government and the Department for Transport, were put in a difficult position.

The Scottish Parliament held an enquiry into high-speed rail services at the end of 2008 which produced a positive response from the respondents, in particular for linking Glasgow and Edinburgh to London and the rest of England.

A proposal by Arup for a Heathrow hub station on the Great Western main line that could be con-

nected into a high-speed railway from London to Birmingham had already won favour with the Conservative party.

The Government seem determined to build the third runway at Heathrow and the Arup Heathrow rail hub plus a high speed line from London to Birmingham must have appeared to offer a measure of mitigation against public opposition.

If the line from London to Birmingham is 10 miles longer via Heathrow than a direct route, it might only add three minutes to the journey time.

The boldness of the Conservative commitment to high-speed rail must have had a profound effect on the senior civil servants at the DfT and the Treasury who would have realised that by May 2010 they might be serving an administration supportive of high-speed rail. Being identified with opposition to high speed might not be good for their career prospects!

The current proposal is for a high-speed line from Stratford, St Pancras, Euston to Heathrow Hub on the Great Western main line and from there on to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds.

The big question will be whether to route the line via the Heathrow Hub, or to build a more direct route from London to Birmingham with spurs to Heathrow.

The question of city centre stations at both Birmingham and Manchester will raise the possibility of whether bypass routes need to be built for longer distance trains not stopping although in my opinion bypassing routes are not a good idea. Looking beyond Leeds,

the strong support for a high-speed line from the Scottish end may well see a start being made from there towards Manchester and Leeds.

Some high-speed proponents favour an east coast alignment from Scotland to London, citing the population of one million in Newcastle and Sunderland.

The east coast route adds half an hour to the journey time from London and the Midlands to Glasgow.

The population of Glasgow is about twice that of Tyneside and possibly more.

At some time in the future, there may be a need to build a faster and more direct route from London to Leeds, but also to link Sheffield to London in a shorter journey time than would be possible from Leeds to London on the high-speed line.

The ideas of a Transpennine and London-Bristol-Cardiff high-speed lines, corridor routes are also being studied by Greengauge 21.

High-speed trains offer much higher capacity and can access the existing railway, thus offering through journeys between places outside the high-speed network.

These are truly exciting times. High-speed lines should not be seen as an alternative to investment in the current network.

To make the high-speed network operate profitably, more investment in connecting services will be required.

When the high-speed routes are eventually announced, we must campaign for the better services we want on existing lines, and for through connections from the high speed lines.