

High Speed Rail

A briefing paper from 4NW, the Regional Leaders Board - March 2010

1. Executive summary

4NW has commissioned a study of the implications of High Speed Rail (HSR) for the Northwest region. This paper summarises the key reports that have taken place into HSR in the UK and highlights the issues for strategic planning and economic development for our region.

2. Introduction – issues for the Northwest

HSR refers to high speed trains operating on dedicated infrastructure, capable of travelling at speeds of up to 200 mph. Proposals for the UK have so far included the possibility of high speed services using both new and existing 'classic' rail infrastructure. The context for examining HSR options is the realisation that the existing 'classic' rail network, and in particular the West Coast Main Line, is reaching capacity.

In January 2009 High Speed 2 (HS2), a government owned company, was established to progress the development of a high speed link between London and the West Midlands, and possibly beyond. HS2 reported to Ministers in December 2009 and the Government is due to respond in March 2010. It is anticipated that a Government White Paper will set out a broader strategy to develop a national high speed rail network. The Government is expected to consult on its proposals with the regions later in the year and it is important that we start to consider our response now.

Evidence to date suggests that a HSR line serving the Northwest would bring substantial benefits. However, to ensure we are in a position to take full advantage a number of issues need to be considered, these include:

- What is the Regional Leaders Board view on High Speed Rail as a concept and what should the regional objectives be?
- How can local economic development strategies integrate the implications of HSR to benefit towns, cities and the region as a whole?
- At which locations should a HSR link stop in our region?
- How should HSR influence our wider planning for roads and public transport?
- How important is it that the HSR line links to other parts of the country e.g. east of the Pennines?
- What should be our priorities for new or improved services to the existing 'classic' network?

3. Summary of High Speed Rail studies

The two most significant reports on HSR in the UK have been carried out by Network Rail and Greengauge 21. Both reports were published in September 2009 and both recommended that the next high speed route (the first, running from London St Pancras to the Continent is designated HS1) should serve the Northwest via the Midlands. In addition to these reports, a position statement by Northern Way concluded that “evidence to date consistently suggests that a high speed line from London to Manchester should be the first stage in a national network”. The Northern Way also stressed the need for an eastern line to be developed to prevent “distorting business investment decisions.”

There is broad agreement between the Network Rail and the Greengauge 21 studies.

- There is a clear case for a West Coast high speed route as the first stage of a national network based on value for money and capacity constraints on the existing lines
- The economic case for only building the line as far as Birmingham is weak as should go at least as far as the Northwest to make financial sense and even more so by extending to Scotland
- Both reports recommended High Speed services to Manchester with high speed connections to Liverpool (possibly using the ‘classic’ rail network)
- Network Rail’s report identified Warrington and Preston as stops on the route as well as termini at Liverpool and Manchester. Greengauge 21 did not specify any locations in the Northwest apart from Liverpool and Manchester reflecting the more strategic nature of its work.

4. Benefits and issues to NW region

a) Economic

The key economic benefits to our region would be:

- Time saving to business and other travellers through reduced journey times
- Increased productivity through better business to business connectivity
- Reduced crowding and increased services on a ‘freed-up’ ‘classic’ rail network
- Increased employment, output and income in cities with greater connectivity

b) Environmental issues

- Shift of passengers from car and air transport to rail with climate change benefits
- Impact on existing public transport to connect to the HSR service
- Impact on highway network
- Will greater ease and speed of long distance travel encourage more journeys to the overall detriment of the environment?
- Construction impact of the new line

5. Locations to be served

There is a balance to be struck between securing the benefits of HSR and the number of locations the route(s) can serve directly. The more station stops along the

route, the lower the journey time benefits, as the trains losing time between slowing down and accelerating for stops, as well as the duration of the stop itself. The case for additional stops can only be made where there is sufficient passenger demand to offset the longer journey time and cost of supporting infrastructure.

Questions of exactly which locations will be served by High Speed Rail are detailed in nature. They often cause concern and result in debate which is premature at this stage before the publication of the White Paper by Government. The consultants report will include a number of scenario tests based around station locations, these are to inform the work and are for future debate as and when the regional response to the White Paper is developed.

6. Implications for the 'classic' network

High Speed Rail would divert significant demand from existing rail services which could create the opportunity to provide additional services on the 'classic' network. This could result in additional services throughout the Northwest from Cheshire to Cumbria and more frequent services on existing routes.

7. Funding and political issues

The primary source of funding for a scheme on this scale is likely to need to come from central government. It is important that this is not at the expense of already planned improvements such as the Manchester (Northern) Hub and improved Trans-Pennine services.

At a Regional Leaders Board debate on the issues of HSR held in Wigan on 12 Feb, there was clear concern that although the case for HSR had been clearly made, it would be difficult to maintain as a high priority against a background of severe cuts in public spending which ever party forms the next government.

Next steps

- 4NW has commissioned Steers Davies Gleave to undertake a study of the HSR options and issues and undertake consultation with key stakeholders
- A selection of possible routes will be modelled to assess economic and environmental impacts
- A review of the expected Government White paper will be made to brief the Leaders Board
- Material will be produced to support the Leaders Board in the anticipated regional consultations.
- The Steer Davies Gleave report will be used to support the anticipated regional response to consultation on High Speed Rail later in the year.

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