



## *INDEPENDENT TRANSPORT COMMISSION*

*Britain's independent research charity for transport and land use policy*

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### **The Spatial Impacts of High Speed Rail: Learning from Europe Expert Panel, British Land, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014**

#### **The Event:**

The Independent Transport Commission (ITC) is running a major research project investigating the spatial effects of High Speed Rail (HSR). The current phase of this research project is exploring what we can learn from European experience about the impacts of High Speed Rail investment on cities and regions. Following a symposium in Lille in February 2014, which looked at evidence from various cities in France and the Netherlands, further study visits have been held during summer 2014. Once these have been completed a report will be compiled and launched at a symposium in the late Autumn.

As part of this phase of the project, the ITC has been holding a series of expert panels to review existing evidence and gather insights on key themes. The second of these panels was held on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014, kindly hosted by British Land at York House in central London, under the title 'capturing the added value and extracting community return'. The panel included a number of leading experts, including academics, architects, local government leaders, transport consultants and civil servants. The format of the event involved short presentations of evidence, followed by a structured discussion chaired by ITC Commissioner and project chairman John Worthington.

#### **Key points from presentations:**

A number of important issues were raised by the initial speakers:

- Dr Nicholas Falk, Director of URBED, explained that he believed the UK had much to learn from French infrastructure development. He noted that in recent decades France had seen huge investment in projects including tram schemes, High Speed Rail and urban form. As a result, he argued, provincial French cities had all seen significant economic and social improvements compared to their British counterparts. The French system had a number of aspects working in favour of good infrastructure investment, including strong local leadership through powerful mayors, the availability of low cost capital for local authorities, and an holistic appraisal and evaluation framework which encompassed a far wider range of criteria than the narrow cost-benefit analysis system used in Britain. Using the urban transformation of Montpellier as an example, Dr Falk noted that the French were good at capturing land value increases from transport investment, and also they recognized that the development of High Speed Rail was an ongoing process which required long-term vision.
- Peter Headicar, Reader in Transport Planning at Oxford Brookes University suggested that the widely dispersed and freestanding cities in France were different to UK conurbations, which actually had more in common with the Netherlands and Germany. He reflected on a recent visit to the Randstad in the Netherlands, an area that had seen recently substantial transport infrastructure investment. He praised the benefits that arose from making transport part of a grand spatial strategy, but expressed concerns about how future-proof these developments were. Pointing to the work of Glenn Lyons on future travel behaviour, he suggested that transport demand in a digital age would change dramatically, possibly making redundant the high-density and centralized urban developments he had seen. The difficulties of incorporating 'flexibility' into long-term transport and urban planning were significant.
- Dr Chia-Lin Chen, Research Associate at the Bartlett, UCL, drew attention to a number of recent reports on the spatial impacts of transport investment, including publications by the American

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Public Transport Association and the EU SINTROPHER project. She noted that these studies pointed to the importance of investing in intra-regional transport links. Problems with the British approach included a lack of appropriate funding mechanisms for local transport investment, and the need for a better appraisal framework. The benefits of High Speed Rail investment were not limited to time-savings or productivity gains, but included land value increases, regeneration opportunities, improved urban structure and image, a more flexible labour market, improved business operations and rebalancing effects to reduce regional and urban inequality. Capturing all these benefits would be a primary challenge for UK planners.

## **Discussion issues:**

From the discussion some key themes were identified:

- In order for HS2 to be successful cities and regions need to be able to capture the potential benefits. Some delegates pointed out that many HSR lines internationally were not profitable, with certain exceptions such as Paris-Lyon and various Japanese lines. The real economic boost came from land value increases and many noted that we needed to ensure that cities and regions benefited from these. Many delegates noted that current appraisal methods were too narrow and missed these issues. There was some criticism of LEPs and the Planning Act which were seen as either too fragmentary or too bureaucratic, and there were also calls for cities to have more power to determine their own local infrastructure planning with less interference from central government. Delegates pointed to France, where there was a sequential and logical approach to planning infrastructure development, and where cities had sufficient power to plan their own redevelopment schemes.
- Transport is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for economic growth and urban revival. European examples, such as Montpellier, show how provincial and peripheral cities can become centres of growth with the right investment in local connectivity and imaginative urban redevelopment. Some delegates noted that we have now to take the HS2 scheme and retrofit it with good planning. It was pointed out that in France the investment in HSR was seen as much more than a railway, and local issues also had prominence when it came to planning. Some suggested that HS2 should act as an infrastructure spine with local authorities in charge of building connections to it. In such an example, the taxpayer would cover the HSR line infrastructure, local government would pay for local connectivity, and the private sector would develop the stations.
- Reform of local government could help it better capture the opportunities provided by HSR investment. Greater economic power and the ability to raise revenues were key advantages enjoyed by European cities, in contrast to the UK. It was noted that local leadership in France was strong, as a result of its mayoral system and the financial autonomy of local government. There was some skepticism about how this could be implemented, but others pointed out that until the mid-1950s France was as centralized as the UK, but had progressively devolved power to localities since that time.
- Together with economic power, a strong local vision is necessary if cities are to capture the potential from HSR connections. These visions should take account of local economic strengths and identities, recognizing that there was not one model that would work for all cities. Some delegates pointed to the importance of experimenting with new projects, pointing to New York, where experiments in policy had resulted in long-term successes such as the High Line and Times Square pedestrian scheme.
- In contrast to those who suggested that HSR would suck life and economic activity out of peripheral cities, others argued that improving impoverished settlements was a task for central government, and not the job of HS2. There was criticism of the idea that the unevenly spread benefits of HSR should prevent regeneration in the main cities it would serve, and some noted that this infrastructure investment and the improvement of regional centres such as Leeds and Birmingham would help improve local/regional confidence and in the longer term draw attention to poorer areas, thereby acting as a catalyst for wider regeneration.

The ITC will now draw together the issues raised in the expert panels and study visits, and capture these in a report to be published later in the Autumn. This will lead to a major symposium to which all participants in the study visits will be invited. We would like to express our thanks to all those who have taken part.

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