

The Spatial Effects of High Speed Rail: Regional Workshop in Leeds

The Event:

The Independent Transport Commission (ITC) has commissioned a major work stream investigating the spatial effects of High Speed Rail (HSR), and the opportunities that an extended network might bring to the UK's cities and regions. Public and media perceptions of the potential of High Speed Rail have been strongly focussed on the speed of the journey, rather than the benefits it could generate in terms of improved connectivity, convenience, economic synergies and increased capacity across the system. In order to foster the exploration of these issues and improve collaboration at the wider city-region level, the ITC is holding series of workshops in key city-regions during the Spring and Summer of 2013.

The second of these workshops was held on the evening of 7th May for the Yorkshire region: this was kindly hosted by Carlsberg UK at Tetley House with excellent views across Leeds South bank redevelopment area and the site of the city's proposed new HSR station. The workshop involved a number of leading stakeholders, including local government officials, Local Economic Partnership representatives, transport specialists, academics and experts who had responded to the ITC's Call for Evidence. The format of the evening involved short presentations on submissions to the Call for Evidence, followed by a structured discussion of the likely spatial effects of HSR chaired by ITC Commissioner and project chairman John Worthington.

Key Issues raised in Discussion:

A number of important issues were raised by workshop participants:

- Speakers identified the potential benefits of HSR for the Yorkshire region. Crucially, these benefits were not limited to faster journey times to major cities such as Birmingham and London. Other advantages mooted include benefits to commuter catchments arising from improved local rail capacity, major development opportunities around HSR nodes, improved connectivity between major cities in the Midlands and North, and better access to the 'global gateway' of London: arguably Europe's leading world city. Research has shown that business investment declines when a link to a global gateway is greater than 2 hours travel time; HSR would bring Leeds and Sheffield well under this threshold. All these benefits could contribute towards the rebalancing of the UK economy in favour of the North.
- One of the most important aspects of HSR emphasized by participants was its potential to free capacity on other parts of the national rail network. Speakers noted that congestion currently affected both commuter travel in the Leeds city-region as well as longer-distance rail links such as Leeds-Birmingham. Critically, the extra capacity provided by HSR could potentially enable additional freight traffic in the region as well as more passenger services.
- The need for an ambitious regional vision, and demonstrations of the economic benefits of HSR, were deemed essential to ensure that the benefits of HSR could be realised. Various delegates agreed that it would be helpful to identify public sector/civil service departments

that might relocate as a result. Others suggested that a variety of economic spatial strategies should be developed, for manufacturing industries as well as services, in order to understand how the improved connectivity from HS2 would contribute towards rebalancing the UK economy. Several delegates noted that investment in education/skills had to accompany improved connectivity if economic regeneration was to occur. In addition, a number said they would welcome more devolution in order that regions such as Yorkshire could take control over governance and funding of their connectivity planning.

- A number of delegates noted that we should consider carefully the impact of HSR on second-tier, peripheral towns in the wider region such as Hull and Middlesbrough. Such places could see disbenefits as investment shifted towards first-tier cities with HSR connections. Other experts disagreed, and pointed to benefits that HSR could generate for such towns, including more frequent standard rail services as a result of released capacity, and the economic advantages of being plugged into a more successful regional hub city.
- A recurring theme was the need to address the sustainability impacts of HSR. A number argued that developments around HSR nodes should be designed so that they create compact, livable and higher density sustainable communities. Others warned that in car-friendly cities, such as Leeds, without reappraising the paradigm of urban living, HSR could result in additional car travel and congestion as users drive to the station.
- Some delegates pointed out that it was not automatically clear whether HS2 was the optimum HSR strategy for the UK. Local leaders were urged not to forget other strategies for connectivity, such as an HSR link from Hull to Liverpool. It was noted that the Court of Appeal was due shortly to examine whether a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is required for the HS2 proposal: this would result in alternatives to HS2 (HSR and non-HSR) needing to be considered and consulted upon.
- Many participants noted that it would take 20 years for HSR to begin serving Leeds, and the region should respond appropriately to this long wait. Some expressed concern that areas such as Leeds south bank would be blighted for decades as developers waited for HSR to arrive before investing. As a result, it was even more important in the meantime to identify actions and investment in the region that would strengthen connectivity and enhance the quality of place.

Next Steps:

From the discussion, the following were identified as key initiatives to develop:

- Create a positive and pro-active approach, bringing together the public, business and civic communities to collaborate across the regions in order to establish a vision for each city's own future. The evidence presented by the Leeds Sustainable Development group (LSDG) highlighted the role of civic society and the catalytic role HSR could have in bringing together the public, as well as business and civic sectors around a common aim of improving livelihoods and making better places.
- Cities and regions must develop a strong case for rail investment based on their own economic needs and strengths. For example, Tees Valley's strengths are in petrochemical

industries and its ports: as a result additional freight capacity is a key need. The resulting narrative for HSR must be clear about the economic advantages of the project in terms of jobs and business investment.

- Action needs to be taken now to identify projects that will improve connectivity both before and after HSR is built: examples recommended include investment in the Transpennine line and congested local rail routes. Further connections to the planned HS2 line should also be considered, including a northwards connection from the proposed new Leeds station. Such local investment might also strengthen the case for a city-centre HSR station in Sheffield.
- The development of local and national networks will be important for preparing the ground for HSR so that it fully benefits the North of England. Local groups should ensure they submit high quality submissions to forthcoming consultations, including the Phase 2 HSR consultation, and the Network Rail market studies (which are currently open for consultation). Local/regional interest groups should also start preparing their case for rail investment and understand any current or potential capacity constraints ahead of the next Rail HLOS that is due to be completed in 2017.

The ITC will be drawing together the issues raised at the national workshop series with a concluding event in London on the evening of 23rd July 2013. All participants in the workshops will be invited. An interim report containing a summary of the Call for Evidence and the workshop discussions will be published at the end of the summer. This will lead to a major symposium ‘Learning from Europe’, planned to be held in Lille during late autumn to review conclusions, draw insights from European experience and frame recommendations for the project’s final report.

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