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What's the future for high speed rail?

Posted on Thursday 14th October 2010

High speed train travel is already established in many mainland European countries and in some it has become the major transport mode for long distance internal journeys. In the UK there is only one stretch of high speed railway from St Pancras to the channel tunnel (known as High Speed 1 or HS1) and there does seem to be considerable backing for the development of a second high speed line north of London. The rationale for the development of HS2 is as follows:

- The achievable time savings would bring a reduction in the use of other, more carbon-intensive modes of transport.
- There is an urgent need for extra capacity on the 'classic' network.
- High speed travel has the potential to encourage economic growth in regions away from the capital, correcting economic imbalance.

In light of this, the previous government made a commitment to a high speed line and this has been endorsed by the current government. However, such proposals are not without controversy.

The Conservative Party manifesto proposed that the high speed route should pass through Heathrow airport which was originally rejected by the previous government. HS2 have now been asked to look at this aspect again by the new government but it would be surprising if they arrived at conclusions other than those already reached.
In addition, there are a number of local protests and there is much work to be done at local level to promote the need for high speed rail:

- A stronger argument needs to be made of the national benefits. There is a perception that high speed trains will be less energy efficient than classic trains but moves from other, more carbon intensive modes, such a road transport and short haul air transport, will bring carbon savings.
- The route needs to be scrutinised to ensure that local environmental effects are mitigated and some route reconsideration is already underway to address this. In addition the proposed environmental abatement measures need to be better publicised.
- Local benefits need to be emphasised, including the economic benefits to the midlands and the north. It might be expected that service enhancements will lead to an increase in house prices, even where the proximity of HS2 may appear to have a detrimental effect.

For Birmingham and its immediate environs, HS2 will bring significant benefits, and this is well appreciated by local authorities in the region. The economic and regeneration benefits for the region as a whole have already been touched upon and it can further be expected that the development of the Curzon Street area will result in considerable local regeneration, with new transport links and commercial opportunities.

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