

## David Lidington's letter of 29<sup>th</sup> March 2010

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for your recent correspondence regarding the Government's proposed High Speed Rail link. As you can appreciate, I have been inundated with emails and letters about this issue. I am therefore sending this as a standard response and will deal with individual enquiries where necessary.

My own immediate reaction is that while there are strong arguments in favour of the principle of a high speed rail line, I am against the route proposed by the Department of Transport.

I think that we need to acknowledge the strength of support, public, business and political, for the principle of high speed rail. It could bring national economic benefits, with MPs, Councils and business interests from the North of England and Scotland being particularly enthusiastic. If high speed rail diverted large numbers of passengers off domestic flights and off motorways, then it could bring important environmental gains too.

A number of constituents have written to me to challenge the whole idea of high speed rail. Some have argued that it is unaffordable, especially given the country's debt crisis and that, even if we can afford to build the line, the fares will be beyond the reach of most people. Others have said that the money, if available, would be much better spent on improvements to the current rail network and on better broadband connections which could reduce the need to travel. The arguments in favour and against any high speed rail scheme should be tested in public debate. That is one of the reasons why it is so important that the government, HS2 Ltd and Network Rail are completely open in allowing access to the evidence and assumptions on which the current proposals have been made. Both the Department and HS2 Ltd are public authorities as defined by the Freedom of Information Act.

One thing that does strike me as obvious is that a high speed line that runs just from London to Birmingham would be pretty pointless. The journey time saved would be too little to make a difference to travellers, especially if, as seems likely, the high speed line will charge premium fares. The idea of high speed rail only starts to add up in either business or environmental terms if you aim to link London to the big cities of northern England and Scotland.

In my own constituency, some people find that their homes are marked for demolition. Many more have houses which are now blighted and unsaleable. So far, the Department of Transport has not published an Environmental Impact Assessment nor detailed noise studies, so we do not know, for example, how many homes in Aylesbury, Stoke Mandeville and Wendover would be affected by noise if this line is built. Nor do we know how bad the noise impact would be.

Given that any route selected will arouse opposition from people adversely affected by the scheme, I think that the strongest argument, in terms of national planning policy, against the government's preferred route (and its runner-up, which would devastate the Hughenden Valley and Saunderton) is its impact on the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. An AONB is a landscape designated by government as of exceptional national importance. It is just one level below a National Park. It seems to me that HS2 Ltd and the Department of Transport were very quick to rule out options like the M1 corridor that avoided the AONB altogether.

On 23rd March I initiated a short Adjournment Debate about the impact on Buckinghamshire of the Government's preferred route. You can read the Hansard record or watch the video of the debate [here](#).

Both the Transport Secretary, Lord Adonis, in a telephone conversation with me, and the Commons Minister of State, Sadiq Khan MP, responding to my debate in the Commons, have promised that the public consultation due to begin in the Autumn will be a genuine exercise and that Ministers will not take a final decision about either the principle of an HS2 scheme or any route until the results of the consultation have been assessed.

If we are to persuade the Department of Transport to change its mind, simply saying “no” will not be enough. We need to put together the strongest possible case for an alternative route that does less environmental damage. I am getting to grips with the mass of detail, putting down questions to ministers and talking to as many local organisations and individual constituents as I can. I have also spoken to the other Bucks MPs whose constituents are affected -- Cheryl Gillan, Dominic Grieve and John Bercow -- to make sure we coordinate our work and am in touch with MPs from other counties and boroughs whose constituencies also lie along the proposed route.

It would be sensible for the different groups opposing this route to co-ordinate their actions. For example, it would be a waste of resources for everybody to commission separate reports from noise consultants, planning and engineering specialists etc. On 26 March, the Bucks MPs met the County Council's cabinet for a long discussion of HS2. The County Council intends to call a meeting a little late this year to which all the campaign groups, parish councils, environmental groups and other will be invited so that people can thrash out how best to work together.

We have some months to get our arguments together. To win these arguments, we have to base our case on detailed evidence and meticulous argument.

At the same time, we need to prepare our Plan B. If the worst came to the worst, what do we want from government to make things slightly more bearable for local people? Could more of the line be put into tunnels? What about additional works to suppress noise and limit visual intrusion? Is more generous compensation part of the answer?

A number of constituents have already asked me about compensation. The government has proposed an interim compensation scheme for people who need to sell their homes before the normal statutory compensation arrangements come into force. Further information about this can be found at: <http://www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/open/2010-18/>. The document is called the *High Speed Two – Exceptional Hardship Scheme Consultation*. I am concerned that this scheme will not fully compensate people who deserve to be compensated and raised some of these concerns in Parliament on 23 March. I very strongly encourage constituents to read the proposals and to submit comments and criticisms to the Department of Transport as soon as possible.

At the link below you can view the Government's white paper, *High Speed Rail*, which sets out its plan for a High Speed Rail link. It is also possible to view the HS2 report to the Department of Transport and supporting documentation. This information can be found at: <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/rail/pi/highspeedrail/>.

I sent copies of the white paper and HS2 report summary, along with a CD containing supporting documentation to Wendover, Great Missenden and Aylesbury libraries for the benefit of those residents who do not have access to the internet. In addition, I have sent copies of the white paper and CD to the Parish and Town Councils of those areas affected.

A number of people have asked me about the views of opposition parties.

The Conservative Party supports the principle of high speed rail. Unlike the present government, the Conservative Party sees HS2 in part as an alternative rather than an addition to a third runway at Heathrow. The Party is not committed to the present government's preferred route and would review the issue if it takes office.

The Conservative Party has also made a commitment to review the blight rules to see if we can do more to help those affected. It goes without saying that a Conservative government would provide for extensive engagement and consultation with the public to ensure that the communities affected by whichever route is ultimately chosen have the chance to ensure their voice is heard.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to HS2 and have also indicated support for the government's preferred route. Transport spokesman, Norman Baker MP said, “*I congratulate HS2 on producing a route that, I think, minimises environmental damage while maximising the usefulness of the line*”(Hansard 11 Mar 2010: Column 452).

I have written a number of posts on my website [www.davidlidington.co.uk](http://www.davidlidington.co.uk), which you might find helpful. There is a huge amount of detail to go through, but residents who wish to contact me about the proposals can do so at [lidingtond@parliament.uk](mailto:lidingtond@parliament.uk).

I will of course be sending out updates on the proposals and get back to those emails that I believe need further attention as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

David Lidington