

The Lee Parish Council

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To: Mr Douglas Oakervee, c/o Department for Transport
Lord Berkeley, House of Lords

cc Dame Cheryl Gillan, MP

15th September 2019

Dear Sirs,

The local impact of HS2: OAKERVEE REVIEW PANEL

The Lee parish lies in the Chiltern Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), in an area where the proposed HS2 route runs on the surface. The Chilterns Tunnel North Portal, in Great Missenden parish, is approx. 1 km from the parish boundary. The route crosses the parish in a deep cutting, continuing northwards via two large viaducts, embankments, three road overbridges and numerous footpath crossings... all within the AONB. The impact of the main HS2 construction activity in this area will be hugely significant.

1. The overall case for HS2 as currently designed

The local communities and councils have long campaigned that the original concept for this project was flawed. The original concept was built on speed and the cost-benefit analysis presented to Government was supported largely by the benefits of saving businessmen's time on trains. When this argument proved flawed, the selling point became 'better linking the North to the South', then 'regenerating the North' and finally 'capacity'. By this time, straight lines had been drawn on maps and decision taken that there should be no stops between London and Birmingham and no direct routing to Heathrow airport or to HS1.

Even the argument about capacity has now become discredited, not because there is no need for extra capacity but because this railway line is clearly not where it is most needed. There are much more cost-effective ways of improving capacity where it is needed, including more effective use of existing infrastructure, as well as more focussed infrastructure spending in places where it can produce greater benefits. Others have promoted these alternative options and priorities.

Finally, the argument now being put forward, by many vested interests, that HS2 provides an opportunity for local regeneration and growth, needs to be considered alongside other opportunities that might accrue from alternative ways of spending £100 billion. In a world where public capital spending is rationed, there are many ways of spending this money more sensibly.

2. The delivery of the project

The HS2 project has been driven along from the start by vested interests and by successive Ministers failing to properly hold HS2 Ltd to account. As Lord Framlingham has recently stated so well:

“Costs are now completely out of control, completion dates are a joke and any idea of accountability or normal public and parliamentary scrutiny has long since been abandoned... What saddens me is HS2’s pig-headed unwillingness to listen to or take advice from anyone, no matter how qualified they are”.

Locally, this has also been our experience now for nine years and continues today. For example, during the Select Committee hearings, local experts presented evidence about the local geology, hydrogeology, social impacts, environmental damage, business impacts, tunnelling, etc. All of their arguments were dismissed by HS2 Ltd’s ‘experts’ and the Select Committees felt unable to ‘dis-believe’ the Department of Transport’s own team. Time has proven so many of them to be wrong. Even now, local residents with far more knowledge and understanding of HS2’s local impact are being patronised and ignored by newly appointed (and ever-changing) ‘experts’ from HS2 Ltd and their contractors.

There has been communication locally with HS2 Ltd and contractors’ staff since the Phase 1 Bill became an Act, but little meaningful engagement with the community over the important local impacts. For example the design of key structures in the AONB, such as the Wendover Dean and Small Dean viaducts, have been unnecessarily constrained by HS2 Ltd and meaningful consultation with local representative groups to produce structures in keeping with the character of the AONB has been thwarted.

Failure to meet commitments on relatively trivial U&As such as hoardings around construction sites, and baseline road traffic surveys, give us no confidence whatsoever in any other assurances we have been given by HS2 Ltd and their contractors regarding both construction and operation of the railway.

In short, there is currently no accountability at the national level. There is also no accountability at the local level.

3. The ignored local costs

The disruption and damage that HS2 will cause both during construction and during operation have long been understood locally, but are inadequately reflected in HS2 Ltd’s priorities, resulting in key U&As from the parliamentary process failing to be met. There has also been a complete failure to recognise that, in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, extra steps have to be taken to “preserve and enhance” the environment. This has been ignored by HS2 Ltd in the areas of noise, visual, ecological, environmental and landscape impacts, resulting in a design which will produce significant avoidable impacts on the AONB.

Locally, there are also increasing costs to businesses of having such a large and incongruous construction site on our doorstep – whether through an erosion of visitor appeal, loss of productive farmland, severance of farms, or an increase in travel time on local roads.

Finally, the social impact on villages such as those in our parish (and hundreds more up and down the line) have been largely ignored by the promoters, except to offer ‘community and environment’ funds to compensate. Without exception, local communities would rather have not had these funds and not had HS2. There is no local benefit but there are large local social costs (including fractured communities, increased travel times, reduced property values, property blight and noise) which were never properly factored into the original cost-benefit analysis.

We sincerely hope that any re-calculation of costs and benefits takes account of these local costs and impacts. The concept of ‘Natural Capital’ also needs to be brought into your review, as well as the Government’s renewed commitment to AONBs, expressed in the interim findings of the Glover Review.

Conclusions

If your Review group believes, on reflection, that the HS2 project provides better value for money and more benefit to the British public than alternative ways of investing these billions of pounds; if it believes that the management of HS2 Ltd is capable of delivering such a project to the satisfaction of Parliament and if it believes that the British public sees this project as a priority in these difficult times ... then by all means recommend that it should continue.

But if you conclude that this is now an ill-conceived project, driven along by vested interests, with a poor cost/benefit ratio, the management of which has been entirely discredited and, if it is allowed to proceed, will result in massive expenditure and huge disruption for no overall benefit to the British people... then stop this scheme before any more harm is done.

Yours sincerely

Colin Sully
Chair, The Lee Parish Council