

Our Ref: JF/HS2 01001
Please quote on all correspondence

31 January 2014

HS2 PHASE 2 CONSULTATION

RESPONSE FROM THE RT HON ANDY BURNHAM
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR LEIGH

1. Introduction

To inform this response, I have held a series of open public meetings over the last 12 months in the Lowton and Golborne area of the Leigh constituency and consulted students at Wigan & Leigh College.

I have also held a series of discussions with Transport for Greater Manchester, Merseytravel, Wigan Council, St. Helens Council, Transport for Leigh and local businesses.

2. Summary

While I can see a case for HS2 overall, I am unable to support the Government's specific proposals as they stand for my constituency. They deliver maximum disruption and minimal benefit to an area which has amongst the poorest access to rail transport of any in the country.

More broadly, I believe the plans as they stand fail to maximise the economic and transport benefit to the whole of the North West of England – particularly Merseyside – and, as such, represent a poor deal for the majority of taxpayers in our region.

For these reasons, I am seeking major modification to the plans as outlined below. I have confined my comments to three principal areas.

3. Depot

The inclusion in the plans of a major depot facility in the Golborne and Lowton area means that my constituency faces amongst the greatest level of disruption from HS2 of any in the country.

In effect, the Government is proposing to site a major industrial installation in an area of open countryside.

HS2 has set out four criteria for selecting the location of the depot. One of those criteria is to minimising impact on areas of environmental and heritage significance.

With this in mind, I find it hard to understand why HS2's preferred location is in the middle of an area designated by Wigan Council as its "Green Heart", bordering a Site of Special Scientific Interest and close to the historic Lightshaw Hall and Byrom Hall.

It seems clear to me that HS2 has prioritised its other three criteria relating to strategic positioning and operational convenience over and above its own stated aim to minimise the impact on the environment and heritage. It is therefore a flawed and highly questionable decision.

The natural landscape of the Leigh and Wigan area is slowly recovering after centuries of coal mining and heavy industrialisation. What green areas we have are therefore precious to us and need to be respected. Locally, there is a strong feeling that a similar decision would not have been taken to site a depot in an area of environmental and heritage importance in the south of England.

This large infrastructure project would also have a major impact on local residents in terms of noise and light pollution, traffic movements and disruption to local roads. I find it surprising that the need to consider impact on residential areas was not one of the criteria set out by HS2. A large housing estate is less than half a mile from the proposed site across open fields. It is clear that the facility would have a major impact on these residents.

While I can appreciate the value of the proposed new jobs, that needs to be balanced against the intrusion and disruption that the depot would bring. I have concluded that the latter is

disproportionately large on this area and therefore the plan cannot be supported.

I find it disappointing that precise detail on the scale and nature of the depot has only emerged in the later stages of this consultation. Until recently, people were not aware that it would involve raised viaduct sections. I am concerned that many local people are therefore not fully aware of its size and potential impact.

For all of the reasons set out above, I believe HS2 needs to go back to the drawing board on its proposed depot. It seems to me highly unfair on my constituents to present this proposal as a fair accompaniment as part of a much wider plan for Phase 2. There is a real risk that their specific and legitimate concerns will be lost in the wider debate about HS2.

Wherever possible, a large industrial facility of this kind should be located on a brownfield site. This could possibly be achieved if HS2 considered splitting this facility into two - one for HS2-only trains and one for hybrid HS2-WCML trains. I would ask the Government to investigate this possibility.

I therefore call on the Government to run a specific and separate public consultation on both the location and the precise nature of the depot facility, presenting a range of potential competing options that can be considered alongside each other.

4. Proposed Leigh Interchange

Leigh is one of a small number of Parliamentary constituencies in the United Kingdom which does not have a rail station within its borders. This is surprising given its strategically significant location. Leigh sits at the crossroads of the North West on the Liverpool-Manchester corridor and is flanked by the M6 and A580 East Lancashire Road.

The lack of accessible rail transport has seen exponential growth in traffic volumes on these major roads in the four decades since our rail infrastructure was ripped out. The large numbers of commuters who now live in my constituency have no realistic choice other than to get in the car and join the morning queues on the two main arteries that run along its borders. Looking to the rest of the 21st century, this is not sustainable in environmental, economic nor transport terms but neither is it fair to Leigh constituents who pay

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for the rail network through their taxes but have limited access to it.

For this reason, I strongly believe that HS2 represents the best opportunity that the Government will have to correct this unsustainable situation and fully support the proposal developed by Transport for Greater Manchester and Transport for Leigh to add a new, purpose-built interchange to the plans at the point where HS2 crosses the East Lancashire road. Not only would this benefit the Leigh area, I believe it will open up HS2 to millions more people in the North West, help improve the connectivity of our region and spread the economic and regeneration benefit of HS2 towards Merseyside.

It is clear to me that the Government's current proposal for HS2 in the North West fails to maximise its potential benefit to our region and its taxpayers. The vast majority of the North West population will find it difficult to access HS2 services out of Manchester. Existing West Coast Main Line stations at Wigan and Warrington are already close to capacity and, without major modification, will remain difficult to access. As such, the current plans replicate a traditional model of rail transport - based around town or city centre access - and miss the opportunity to bring it into the 21st century.

As a result, we believe the current plans for HS2 do not address the transport problems of our region. Many people travelling South from the North West will continue to use the M6 instead of the rail network. Congestion on this stretch of the motorway between the North West and West Midlands is already unsustainable and a barrier to the economic development of the North West.

HS2 will succeed in building public support if, rather than cutting journey times between places that are already well-served, it opens up rail travel to more people than currently use the rail network on a regular basis. That means taking this opportunity to rethink rail travel and giving people more convenient ways to switch from car to train. The Leigh Interchange proposal will achieve that. It will also spread the economic and regeneration potential away from Manchester and towards communities along the Liverpool-Manchester corridor. With a connecting link to the Liverpool-Manchester railway line, it will give people in living Merseyside much easier access to HS2 and cut journey times from Merseyside to London.

For the reasons outlined above, I ask the Government to incorporate the Leigh Interchange proposal put forward by Transport for Greater Manchester and Transport for Leigh into its Phase 2 plans for HS2. If the country is to make such a major investment in this project, it is essential that the benefits are more widely spread.

5. Route and nature of construction

Given the nature of the proposed route and its proximity to residential developments and areas highlighted by the Wildlife Trust as important for local ecology, I feel it is appropriate to request a reconsideration of the current proposal to include green tunnelling and further consideration to standard tunnelling in the Newton Road area.

As the train passes along the section from the A580 crossing Newton Road and onto Lowton Civic Hall playing fields it will be slowing and therefore associated noise will take longer to dissipate. The cutting depth is not significant to act as a noise insulator and the impact on homes which fall on the proposed edge of the track will be far greater than at other points along the route.

I feel that it is vital these homes are protected from prolonged levels of noise, as currently they are the most affected; they do not fall with the limits for compensation but are blighted by the proposal.

Tunnelling this section would allow for minimum disturbance to residents and the retention of a vital community resource in Lowton Civic Hall playing fields. The fields are a heavily used both formally through a lettings system via Wigan Council and also as an informal community green space.

The area surrounding the depot should be linked with wildlife corridors to allow the continued safe transit of mammals and birds across the route from the SSSI to surrounding water courses and rural space.

Whilst I acknowledge that the Grade II listed Lightshaw Hall is to be preserved it will be located in the centre of an industrial depot which hardly seems fitting for this historic farmhouse.

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Conclusion

Whilst acknowledging the need for progress and infrastructure to devolve economic power from London to the wider regions, it cannot be allowed to be at the expense of local communities, whose greatest resource is the green space in which they reside.

To maximise the opportunity of a major infrastructure plan for my constituents, I am only able to offer my support to the HS2 proposal if my concerns over the impact on residents and the need for a station to serve the people of Leigh are implemented.

Yours sincerely



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AMBurnham', is centered on a light-colored rectangular background.

ANDY BURNHAM