

A digital future, the real 21st century technology

The World Wide Web was invented by a British scientist in 1991, the first ever computer programmer was a British woman and Bletchley Park, near Milton Keynes is the birthplace of the modern computer. We've been developing and innovating computers from the beginning.

Just as the personal computer and office software have changed the way we work now, the internet will change the way we work in the future. 15 years ago, most people did not have a mobile phone, and had never heard of the internet: these days mobile devices allow you to find up-to-date information on line, no matter where you are.

Telepresence videoconferencing is already changing the need for face-to-face meetings, with attendees in different places able to see the same presentations and work on the same documents. Why would anyone worry about saving a few minutes with a high speed railway when they can avoid the entire journey altogether?

These changes are being led by businesses. But the Government can help to encourage their uptake by helping to provide the high speed broadband infrastructure necessary.

Today's teenagers are the first generation to grow up using the internet. They already work on ventures together online. As they start their careers, they will bring these ways of working to the workplace. In the mid 2020s, 15 years time - when HS2 might open - these methods of working will be standard, methods that do not involve the need to physically be in the same room to speak face to face.

Is HS2 really the only alternative?

Proponents of HS2 argue there is no alternative to the £33 billion HS2 project.

They are wrong. HS2 is a misconceived project in search of a rationale. There are plenty of alternatives, which solve real problems better and more quickly.

Stop HS2 was formed specifically as a response to the original HS2 proposal in March 2010. We don't object in principle to the idea of high speed rail, as part of an integrated transport strategy - let's face it, the West Coast Main Line, the East Coast Main Line and the Great Western Main Line are all high speed railways, according to European definitions. However, HS2 is designed as a stand alone project: links to HS1 and Heathrow are not included in the detailed design.

HS2 – There are Alternatives?

Proponents of HS2 often say it has to be built because there is no alternative. But they are wrong.

What is HS2?

High Speed 2 is a proposed superfast new railway. Phase 1 would provide a duplicate link between London and Birmingham only, opening in around 2026, but with no stations between those two cities. Two branches, to Leeds and Manchester might open in the 2030s, but there are no plans to extend it further north. Outline maps from HS2 Ltd show no stations between Birmingham and Manchester either, although there may be a couple of stations between Birmingham and Leeds.

Parts of the line are designed for running at 400kph, making it impossible to avoid sensitive sites. However the detailed design for Phase 1 also includes significant sections with much slower designer speeds. The time saved will only be 20-30 minutes: new high speed lines in other countries normally reduce journey times by hours.

HS2 Ltd anticipates that the build cost for both phases to be about £33 billion in 2009 prices: trains will be extra. Per kilometre, it will be the most expensive high speed railway in the world.

In spite of the massive cost, HS2 Ltd themselves say it will not reduce Britain's carbon emissions. They say the shift from cars or air would be limited, with only 13% transferring from non-rail travel. This will have a marginal effect on demand for air travel and car usage. The business case assumes that time spent on trains is wasted, but this ignores the widespread use of modern technology by passengers. ➤



HS2 commits us to spending £33 billion on a single project which takes decades to complete and which will deliver very little benefit for that spend. But there are more immediate alternatives.

Other Transport Investment

The majority of journeys are short local journeys going to work, shops and schools. Targeting investment on these journeys will make a much greater difference to more people than the few who will use HS2. Buses are the most frequently used mode of public transport and are a lifeline to the poorest people in our society.

They provide independence for people who can't drive because they are too young or too old to drive, or who don't own a car. Many people rely on buses to get to work, hospitals and access other essential amenities.

Three quarters of students attending further education college use buses to get there. School buses reduce rush hour congestion by taking cars off the road. But local council transport budgets are being cut. Councils are having to cancel subsidized bus services, regardless of the social benefits they bring.

Investing in transport projects like these will do more for carbon reduction, social justice and local jobs – at far less cost – than building one expensive railway line.

Increasing Local Rail Provision

Local rail services play a major part in sustainable transport policies and there are plenty of places on the existing network where investment could make a big difference. If we are going to spend money on railways, there are lots of alternatives to HS2 which would benefit more people.

For instance, the Campaign for Better Transport has a list of 36 railways to reopen, to make the rail network work better. These include the Leamside Line (Darlington/Newcastle) and the East West line (Oxford/ Cambridge). Reopening lines like these would open up job opportunities and reduce the number of passengers forced to travel by car or train via London. HS2 would need more money spent on London transport but the Northern Hub proposals focuses spending on transport projects in the North.

92% of medium and long distance passengers in Britain are happy with the time tabled speed of their journeys, according to a recent EU survey - the need is to increase and improve commuter services, not long distance. And the top ten most over-crowded trains are on the Great Western Line into Paddington, not the West Coast Main Line.

There are still no plans to electrify large parts of the UK's mainline railway network: if a modern railway is our goal, full electrification should be a priority.

It is no use arguing for both HS2 and these other investments – the money is just not there.

A better railway for Britain

The planning stage of High Speed 2 will do nothing for growth and jobs during this Parliament, but will cost up to a £1 billion. Putting the money into our current infrastructure would bring immediate jobs and growth.

HS2 deals with routes northwards out of London. But these are already fast and have a high share of the market. Other railways are more congested. The new proposals in, "A better Railway for Britain" (www.betterthanhs2.org) looks at the broader needs for developing rail and encouraging modal shift. It lists a series of incremental measures which could provide extra capacity, in stages, by upgrading our existing fast intercity railway network. It's a low risk, low cost strategy which can be assessed as it is rolled out.

In contrast HS2 is a high risk strategy. It will not show any results until we have spent £17 billion (the cost of the Birmingham-Euston section) and waited a decade and a half. But 9 out of 10 rail projects are based on overestimates of demand...

Reducing the Demand for Travel – a policy conflict

Travel is a means to an end. A green, sustainable transport policy would look at whether there are other ways of getting the same results without the need to travel. The Department for Transport is already doing this, and Norman Baker has been asked to look at ways of reducing the demand for travel.

The case presented by HS2 Ltd ignores necessary initiatives like this. HS2 Ltd projections, of 2% annual demand increases, for over 30 years, assume that there will be a massive increase in demand in all forms of travel. They say a further 22% of passengers will use HS2 simply because it has been built. There's a clear conflict between HS2 and a "reduce travel demand" strategy.

Government reports, like the McNulty report released in May, said that we should move away from a "predict and provide" model for railways, just like we've stopped using it for road building projects. A Public Accounts Committee report in November 2010 suggested a wide range of ways of managing travel demand on the railways, such as an increased use of smart card ticketing and a rethinking of season tickets so that they reward people who occasionally work from home.

Ultra highspeed broadband would play a part in this. It could be rolled out across the entire country, faster and cheaper than HS2. It could benefit everyone, from businesses to individuals, in all cities, towns and the countryside. ➤