

High-Speed Rail Conference

Birmingham Council House
Saturday April 26 2003

By Graham Nalty

High-speed rail is coming to the UK. The new line from London to the Channel Tunnel will shorten journey times between London and Paris-Brussels and stimulate a new interest in building new lines here.

The Railfuture conference was held to promote the case for high-speed rail, and to develop a campaign to accelerate building.

We chose Birmingham because its position could be crucial to the financial success of a high-speed network.

Councillor Mahmood Hussain, Lord Mayor of Birmingham, opened the conference. He referred to the need to develop high-quality rail services in the West Midlands to build on the success of Birmingham's city centre regeneration and the importance to the region of New Street Station.

Professor Rod Smith had to cancel at the last moment. In his absence, Railfuture President Michael Caton read out a copy of Professor Smith's proposal for a British high-speed rail network.

In it, he said the Japanese high-speed railway is carrying about 10 to 15 times the passengers of our busiest main lines that are now considered to have reached full capacity.

The only solution to congestion on our motorways is the building of new dedicated high-speed lines with the capacity required to significantly reduce road traffic demand.

Mike Bennett showed a selection of slides to illustrate the development of high-speed railways in Europe.

He pointed out that it was already possible to travel from London to Marseilles in a day via Lille. Spain had completed high-speed lines from Seville to Zaragoza via Madrid and a line from Madrid to Barcelona was under construction.

John Stewart, chair of Transport 2000, stated that 45% of air trips in Europe are less than 500 kilometres, and that Manchester, after Paris and New York, was the third most popular destination from Heathrow.

The opportunity for high-speed rail to relieve the congestion at airports was significant, makes



RAIL ON RAIL: Britain's first high-speed rail line is taking shape. This picture shows a 9,000 tonne new bridge being constructed in North Kent in May to take the line from Gravesend to London over the new line from Ebbsfleet to Stratford

Photo: QA Pictures,

courtesy of Rail Link Engineering, project manager and designer of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link

environmental sense, has many supporters, and does work.

"We have to be careful to ensure that investment in high-speed rail is not made at the expense of local train services.

"High-speed rail is expensive. We must have two separate funding pots, to prevent playing one off against the other."

This argument was also put forward in a discussion paper by Railfuture policy officer Mike Crowhurst and very strongly endorsed by the conference.

Graham Nalty showed how road transport was more heavily subsidised than rail. He highlighted the enormous costs of road accidents that did not figure in the perceived costs of a motorist's journey, while the relatively small costs of rail accidents were added to the journey cost.

Norman Bradbury argued that the case for road-user charging is compelling.

Motorists cannot justifiably expect continued access to the road network without an additional charge for a return on the value of the assets they use.

As the external costs of road transport become more accurately identified, they could be included in a road user charge.

Former Birmingham City Councillor Hon Alderman Don Lewis, who had played a major role in organising the conference, said there had been a lot of re-thinking about high-speed rail, but he is now convinced that this is the future. MPs and MEPs are crucial to getting the message across. In a contribu-

tion that provoked a heated discussion, Jonathan Tyler challenged many assumptions we cherish about railways.

Most of rail's 6% share is in London and on journeys to and from London. We should accept that for most people in the UK railways are irrelevant, and the general assumption nationally is that everyone goes by car.

Ten years ago, the Swiss voted in a referendum against high-speed rail. Congestion on railway lines is the product of having too many small trains. The number of people per train on the regional network has not changed since privatisation.

Graham Nalty introduced the paper by Reg Harman on *High speed trains and city access - The French TGV network and regeneration of the Lille conurbation*, copies of which had been circulated to delegates.

The essence of the study was that Lille offers an excellent example of how a city centre station on a high-speed line has provided a key element in regional regeneration and underpins its continued growth.

Ian McDonald announced a paper making Railfuture's case for Eurostar regional services.

"The regional services will never take off so long as there are international security checks everywhere and we refuse to allow domestic passengers to share international trains."

The final discussion session considered what we should be doing to pursue the case for building high-speed lines in Britain. One aim will be to put

an alternative view in front of the Government when the White Paper on the Government's airports policy is due.

Railfuture must also campaign to ensure investment in high-speed rail is not made at the expense of other train services.

A networking group, set up to share campaigning information on high-speed railways, will be co-ordinated by Graham Nalty.

The group will be open to members of Railfuture and supportive campaigning organisations as well as rail and transport professionals, all prepared to contribute effectively to achieving a high-speed rail system.

Please contact Graham Nalty at graham@grahamnalty.co.uk if you wish to be informed on high-speed rail developments and join the networking group.

If you do not have email, the postal address is 55 Colwell Drive, Alvaston, Derby DE24 0UP.

All in all, a highly successful and productive conference that will be seen as a landmark in the future campaigning for high-speed rail.

Remember

'The people-carrying capacity of a high-speed railway is many times greater than a motorway, with much reduced journey times. Roads have a 70mph speed limit while rail can travel at 200mph.'

Professor Roderick Smith