

PRELIMINARY REPORT FROM THE HS2 WORKING GROUP

The HS2 Working Group was set up to explore the arguments for and against the proposed High Speed Rail link between the North of England and London. The findings of the Working Group are to inform the Cabinet in order that a stance by the Borough Council towards the proposed rail network can be determined.

At its initial meeting under its expanded membership the cross-party group decided that it would concentrate on how the proposal would affect North Staffordshire rather than the United Kingdom as a whole in relation to:

- Environmental impact
- Compensation
- Economic benefits

It was also determined that the preferred method of obtaining the relevant information would be to offer all stakeholders the opportunity to present their case to a meeting of the Working Group. A wide range of stakeholders were invited to attend including Members of Parliament, Local Authorities, representatives of Local Chambers of Trade and Commerce, Keele University, protest groups and HS2 Ltd itself. Those unable to attend were invited to present a written submission. This meeting was arranged for August 13 2013 when the submissions of the stakeholders were heard. Stoke-on-Trent City Council accepted an invitation to attend at a later date and a number of written submissions were received. HS2 were invited to a closed meeting of the Working Group which took place on the 31 October 2013. A summary note of that meeting is attached at appendix 2.

During the time that the Working Group has been in existence there have been a number of negative statements regarding HS2. With a background of negative publicity from Continental Europe regarding the economic viability of similar rail schemes and an accident that produced considerable loss of life, prominent figures at Westminster and in the business world have voiced their doubts regarding the scheme.

However at the time of writing- and despite the comments from the Shadow Treasury team- all three main national political parties remain broadly in support of the scheme. In addition there have been warnings from several quarters that the cost of the venture is set to spiral upwards. These forecasts have been contested by HS2 Ltd

The Route

The proposed route would run for 11.3 kilometres within the Borough's boundaries passing through the settlements of Baldwins Gate, Whitmore and Madeley. The line would consist of a series of tunnels, cuttings and embankments. When fully operational it is envisaged that there would be up to eleven trains per hour on a frequent basis. There is no envisaged station to service the proposed line within Staffordshire.

The protest groups concede that in their opinion the proposed route is by and large the best route but they do not support it because they do not see the economic benefits it will bring.

It has to be noted that Stoke-on-Trent has employed a firm of consultants in order to ascertain their stance to the Public Consultation process. The consultants are looking at a number of alternative proposals. Although it seems unlikely that these alternative proposals will be seriously considered it has to be recognised that if some of these were to come to fruition then there would be consequences for the Kidsgrove area of the Borough.

There are also plans to explore the possibility of two further alternatives that would give residents of North Staffordshire access to HS2 services. The first of these is the construction of a spur off the HS2 route at Colwich that would allow "Classic Compatibility" stock to use the existing line from Stoke and then join the high-speed network. If this were to be economically viable it should be pursued. The second alternative is the construction of an intermediate station within Staffordshire. This will be discussed later in this document.

Environmental impact

The scheduled route would pass through a largely rural area and the impact on the environment is likely to be huge both in the construction phase and during its operational life. The settlements are largely serviced by a road network that is already heavily used at peak times and/or is unsuitable for the movement of the type of construction traffic that is likely to be required. The residents are nervous of the disruption to their normal life that is likely to occur during the construction phase.

Should construction go ahead the Council should do all within its powers to persuade the developers to use the route under construction for the importation of manpower and material and the removal of minerals and waste. The current road network should be used as little as possible. Following construction –notwithstanding the use of cuttings and tunnels -there will be a massive impact on the visual environment, particularly where the lines will be laid on embankments and viaducts.

Whilst approval for the acquisition of the necessary land and the construction of the line would be achieved via a Hybrid bill through Parliament, certain relatively minor details would still require approval, and subject to the Council as a Local Planning Authority agreeing to certain standards of performance (in terms of the handling of applications), it could have a future role in the consideration of these minor details.

There is also the noise pollution likely to be caused as trains exit from the tunnels. Residents are unconvinced by the assertions that noise levels would be acceptable and would like further evidence to prove HS2's case. They also have concerns about the impact on livestock.

It has to be stressed at this point that should Stoke-on-Trent win its case for a change of route then the Working Group feels that the impact on the urban areas of Kidsgrove would bring into serious doubt any support that NULBC could give to the project.

Compensation

Although it would be impossible to quantify the emotional losses to a family that will lose a home that has been lovingly maintained maybe over several generations, it is accepted that in financial terms there is adequate compensation available. It is also favourably noted that this Council has worked alongside others to enhance the Compensation scheme to look favourably on those who may have to vacate their property before the allotted time.

There does remain two areas of uncertainty that need to be addressed. The first of these concerns residents who currently reside outside the area that qualifies for automatic compensation. The current situation is that they will not be able to apply for compensation until a period of twelve months after the commencement of the HS2 service. This in reality means a period in excess of twenty years. There is anecdotal evidence that these residents are already experiencing a sharp fall in the value of their property. Given the demographics of the settlements many of the owners or their families will over the course of the construction period need to vacate for purposes of downsizing, serious illness or death. Residents are extremely concerned that they will be in a lose-lose situation as they face maintaining residences that are unable to be marketed at a reasonable commercial level.

The second area of uncertainty is with regard to agricultural land. There is at least one farm that would be economically unviable due to the proportion of its area that will be lost to HS2. The Working Group is unsure of how the loss of agricultural land and the employment associated with it will be compensated. Clarification is required.

Economic Benefits

It has to be stated at the beginning of this section of the report that no evidence was found to suggest that the proposed HS2 would bring economic benefit to the area of North Staffordshire. This is despite the fact that the Working Group made great efforts to find any such evidence. The recent KPMG report on the effects on regions shows Stoke and North Staffordshire as one of the areas that would lose out

The bodies representing local trade and commerce stated that they broadly supported the proposals and urged local councils to be innovative and grasp the initiative. However most of the support hinged on the provision of a new stopping point to serve the conurbation of North Staffordshire.

As already stated there is currently no provision for such a station but there are moves to propose sites close to the M6 motorway. The first of these would be near to Stafford Services and the second close to Junction 16, but this would require a different route through the Borough.

There would be possible plusses for Newcastle if either of these should happen. In addition to a link to the High Speed system there would be a need for the respective councils to finally sit down and discuss a properly-integrated transport system. This could take some pressure off the existing road network and help to regenerate areas with the Borough should a tramway system be evolved.

Kidsgrove possesses the only rail station in the Borough with lines to Crewe and Manchester and the Town Council has outline permission from the County Council to turn the existing car park into a turning circle for buses and coaches plus facilities for taxis. The adjoining wasteland would then be available for a Park and Ride scheme.

There are significant doubts to cast against the proposal for an interim station. Financially there is no provision for such a scheme within the HS2 budget meaning that the local councils would have to find an estimated £600 million for its construction.

The fact that trains would need five minutes to slow down and five minutes to regain their optimum speed in addition to the time for passengers to depart and board would mean a possibly unacceptable increase in journey time. There would also be problems accompanied with the planning of effectively a new town in Green Belt land.

It is doubtful that the general public has any stomach for the spending of such large amounts on this scheme with public opinion turning against the scheme. Opponents have a myriad of ways in which the £50 billion pounds could be better used to improve our rail infrastructure. It would take too long to mention all of the proposals but two that are seen as ideal solutions locally would be an operational station at Etruria and a new station at Trentham serving the Britannia Stadium.

The crumbs of comfort for those in support of HS2 were provided recently by the Minister of State For Transport. Although all of the main direct financial benefits mentioned would go to the nodes on the network, he did state that there would be benefits to the non-users of HS2. These would include the increased availability for freight and the provision of quality commuter services due to the released capacity on the existing West Coast Main Line.

The ability to despatch freight by rail could have a twofold benefit to the area. Firstly the reduction of HGV movements on our local motorway and trunk roads would have a positive impact on all other users of our road system through less CO2 emissions and easier movement owing to less congestion. Secondly the former railway goods sidings within the Borough could be brought back into operation to the aid of our thriving warehousing and distribution businesses.

The provision of quality commuter services to Manchester and Birmingham could see our Borough thrive as a sustainable commuter base. It could certainly be argued that such a situation would allow the extended provision of quality housing and an increased prosperity to the Borough. However the rail services to London may be seriously curtailed, The worst-case scenario is that there would be just eleven services daily from Stoke-on-Trent to London with just three of these being provided by the current Virgin franchise. The remainder would be operated by the current London Midland route. One of the difficulties the working group has had is the conflicting and complexity of information from various sources on this matter.

Recommendation

The information obtained by the Working Group leads them to recommend to Council that it should oppose the HS2 proposals. In so doing, they should join forces with Staffordshire County and the other Councils within Staffordshire to establish a joint policy of opposition but not necessarily link in with any national protest movement

However in the event that the scheme is given assent in Parliament the following recommendations are made:

- The Council should work with the relevant parties to ensure that the environmental impact is kept to a minimum. Wherever possible land should be restored to its original condition after the completion of construction
- The Council should work with the relevant parties to ensure that compensation is full and fair with particular reference to those who live outside the area where compensation is automatic and those who are owners of agricultural land
- The Council should work with Network Rail to ensure that the provision of train services to London from Stoke are as frequent as possible. Also that quality commuter services are initiated at the earliest possible opportunity.
- The Council should continue to seek opportunities to enhance the development of business and employment that may arise from the rail network.

Conclusion

There has been some criticism that the above recommendations could have been made some months ago. However the Working Group are satisfied that the process employed has allowed it to make an informed decision that would stand the test of an external audit.

Councillor Dave Stringer

Chair

HS2 Working Group