

## **The Times Transport Section - Article on High Speed Rail**

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“A high-speed rail network linking London to the Midlands and the North of England will withstand the harshest spending cuts since the Second World War and work will begin within five years, the Transport Secretary said yesterday.

Philip Hammond put the vision of high-speed trains servicing Heathrow airport “at the heart” of the Government’s transport policy.

He predicted that the railway would bring an end to domestic flights. Airlines would instead paint their liveries on railway carriages calling at Europe’s busiest airport hub.

In his strongest endorsement yet of what would be the biggest infrastructure project since the construction of the motorway network, Mr Hammond said: “This is a truly strategic project to which this Government is clearly committed and around which I believe there is a broad political consensus.” He added that high-speed rail would “change the social and economic geography of this country for the next 100 years”.

The Coalition Government has ruled out a third runway at Heathrow and instead makes the case for connecting the airport by rail to the North and mainland Europe via the Channel Tunnel.

Mr Hammond’s predecessor had wanted to see a third runway built by 2020 and dismissed as “weak” the business case for taking a direct line to the airport.

Mr Hammond said: “We believe that HSR can encourage a modal shift from long car journeys and short-haul flights to rail.

“It will make the bulk of domestic flying a thing of the past in due course.”

He has instructed the company set up to advise the Government on high-speed rail to lay out by the end of next month route options for a direct link to Heathrow.

The company, High Speed Two, yesterday presented Mr Hammond with a detailed comparison of the business case for two options for the wider network. The scheme backed by the Conservatives while in opposition is a reverse “S”-shaped configuration linking London to the West Midlands, Manchester and Leeds. The second, a “Y”-shaped network with branches dividing near Birmingham and running north on either side of the Pennines, was the previous Government’s preferred option.

Mr Hammond is due to report to Parliament on the Government’s preferred route, possibly before the summer recess. He will tour the planned route from London to the Midlands this summer and public consultation will begin in the new year. Legislation authorising the development should have passed through both Houses within three years and construction will begin in 2015, Mr Hammond said. “It is a very testing timetable but it is one we are determined to deliver on,” he said.

He said that the economic case for the railway would give the project a headstart over other infrastructure schemes competing for “what will be a very small pot” of public money.

While in opposition, the Conservatives set out a 12-year construction phase costing £1.3 billion a year. The Treasury would foot £15.7 billion out of a total bill estimated to be £20 billion.

Mr Hammond told delegates at a conference on high-speed rail that private funding would have to be harnessed to finance the public-private partnership.

He predicted that by 2015, when the most costly construction phase begins, “much more benign market conditions” would open up both corporate and government funding.

HS2 has already drafted plans for the line to Birmingham to within 5 metres in urban areas and 25 metres in open country. The route presented to the previous Government slices through the Chilterns, one of 40 designated areas of outstanding natural beauty. It has provoked loud cries of opposition across the Tory heartlands of rural Buckinghamshire.

The previous blueprint saw the railway leave a rebuilt Euston station through tunnels to an interchange station in West London at Old Oak Common. A link there to the Heathrow Express would offer an 11-minute transfer to Heathrow and a connection to Crossrail, which is due to open in 2017.

Mr Hammond said that long-haul airline passengers could not be expected to wait on windswept platforms for a link to the airport.

He has asked HS2 to lay out options for linking the railway with the existing high-speed line to the Channel tunnel by the end of August. “Yes, it will be expensive, but we are building a piece of infrastructure here with a life of 100 years or more,” he said.

The Mayor of Newham, Sir Robin Wales, and businessmen including Kevin Murphy, the chief executive of ExCel, David Campbell, the boss of AEG Europe, and representatives of Westfield and Canary Wharf urged Mr Hammond to put that interchange at Stratford. “Stratford already has the capacity and the connectivity, and is at the centre of London’s major development plans for next 25 years,” Sir Robin said.

The Government is keen to highlight the potential economic regeneration that high-speed rail can bring.”