



High Speed Rail

A submission by Civic Voice to the Transport Select Committee inquiry May 2011

1. Civic Voice is the new national charity for the civic movement. We champion and support a network of hundreds of volunteer-led and community based civic societies and other groups across England who work to make the places where everyone lives more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive and to promote civic pride. We have been joined by over 275 civic societies with c71,000 individual members in our first year. Civic society volunteers are the most numerous participants in the planning system and take a close interest in transport and development issues. This submission is informed by their practical experience and local outlook.
2. The Government's proposals for a new high speed rail link between London and Birmingham, and beyond, have profound implications for the communities and places along its route. They concern dozens of civic societies and have been a stimulus for community action. Major infrastructure projects of this kind can be intimidating and the procedures for participating can be daunting for the individuals and communities most affected and it is all the more important that their views are effectively addressed. Civic Voice has brought local voluntary civic societies together to discuss the HS2 proposals and hosted visits for civic volunteers, HS2 staff and others to view the experience of HS1 through Kent.
3. Civic Voice is a signatory along with a wide range of voluntary transport, environmental and conservation groups to the *Right Lines* charter (enclosed). This reflects our view that there may be a case for high speed rail but the current proposals fall well short of what is required.
4. We recognise the benefits that can be provided by strategic investment in rail services but any proposals need to be underpinned by a robust business case and to demonstrate they can:
 - support urban regeneration over greenfield development
 - integrate with transport policy to support investment in other rail services, increase rail freight and shift trips from air and road to rail
 - support moves to a low carbon economy
 - provide maximum protection for the local environment and heritage and maximise opportunities for enhancement.
5. We believe it is paramount that any proposals for high speed rail engage people at the earliest possible stage when genuine options are on the table and choices and assumptions can be tested. This is also a requirement of the Aarhus Convention. We have been disappointed by the limited nature of the current process of public consultation on HS2 which falls well short of both what is required and what is expected of a Government that places such an emphasis on localism.
6. We recognise that there will be circumstances where the national interest is served by the development of major infrastructure. In developing such proposals, however, it is essential that people are engaged meaningfully in strategic as well as local issues. We also recognise the concern over blight which may result but this should not be allowed to stymie effective public engagement and a much less risk averse and transparent approach should be adopted. We encourage urgent action to address this as part of the current debate over HS2 to Birmingham and much more effective public engagement over the choice of whether and how to extend any

line north of Birmingham is a necessity. To do otherwise not only runs counter to public expectations of meaningful engagement and political commitments to localism but also risks causing further delay and controversy later on in the process.

7. We ask the Committee to address the need for more effective public engagement as a priority. This should combine consideration of both strategic and local issues in the range of engagement techniques adopted and take place at a point where the public's contribution can make a meaningful difference. We also urge the Committee to recognise the case for making public funds available to support community engagement as part of the process for any high speed rail proposals.

8. In the light of the experience with HS2 we also urge the Committee to consider a series of further requirements for any proponent of high speed rail. There is a need to:

- ☛ Demonstrate a robust business case based on a variety of scenarios – this should be much less volatile and susceptible to small changes in the assumptions than the evidence which underpins HS2
- ☛ Adopt a more bespoke and flexible approach which reflects the sensitive English landscape and townscape through which any new high speed line would need to pass - this should avoid in particular any rigid assumptions about design speed and take a strategic approach to mitigation from the start
- ☛ Undertake a full audit of the cumulative impacts on undesignated townscape, landscape, heritage, wildlife, tranquillity and valued buildings and on the rights of way network at the earliest stages to shape the initial route assessment and inform early discussion on mitigation – this work remains incomplete for HS2
- ☛ Maximise opportunities for positive enhancement, including creating new rights of way networks, opening up new green space, compelling design of new structures and providing a long term endowment to manage and care for the local environment in perpetuity
- ☛ Develop a design brief for the route which reflects local distinctiveness and ensures design considerations are on an equal footing with engineering considerations in development of the proposals
- ☛ Locate station where they support urban renewal and avoid “parkway” stations on greenfield sites.