

RIGHT LINES CHARTER

A Charter for High Speed Rail

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The Right Lines Charter - A Charter for High Speed Rail

An efficient, sustainable transport system is vital to our prosperity and well-being. Reducing the damaging impact of travel on the environment and local communities by shifting journeys from road and air to rail needs to be a key priority. High Speed Rail is one option for increasing rail capacity and connectivity.

This is a Charter for doing High Speed Rail well. The supporters of this Charter believe that:

- the process and particular proposals for High Speed Rail should comply with the principles set out below;
- the Government's High Speed Rail consultation and detailed High Speed 2 (HS2) proposals are unsound at present and fall well short of these principles.

Principle 1. National Strategy

High Speed Rail proposals need to be set in the context of a long-term transport strategy stating clear objectives.

The Government's High Speed Rail proposals are at present not part of any comprehensive long term transport strategy or nationally agreed priorities. By contrast, all the other countries developing High Speed Rail are doing so within a national framework. Objectives need to be ambitious yet realistic and could include: reducing the need to travel, improving rail capacity and connectivity throughout the country, reducing regional economic disparities and ending dependence on oil.

A particular challenge for a UK strategy is to tackle rising carbon emissions from land transport swiftly. The Committee on Climate Change says¹ that at least a 60% cut in domestic emissions is needed by 2030 to be on the path to secure a 90% cut (equivalent to 80% once emissions from international aviation and shipping are factored in) by 2050. High Speed Rail therefore needs to be planned and justified as a strategic element of a sustainable, near zero carbon transport system.

Principle 2. Testing the Options

Major infrastructure proposals, such as High Speed Rail, need to be 'future-proofed' by comprehensive testing against different scenarios. This will help identify the best solutions for genuinely furthering sustainable development.

¹ Committee on Climate Change, *Advice to Government on the 4th Carbon Budget, covering the period 2023-27* (2010)

It is not possible to predict impacts accurately over a 75 year timescale, as is being attempted for HS2. This has led to the methodology for assessing HS2's benefits being seriously called into question.

The treatment of impacts that cannot be monetised, such as those on landscapes, heritage and habitats, has been particularly limited in HS2's business case, with very limited weight given to them. A new strategic and transparent approach is needed for High Speed Rail in an increasingly uncertain future. Assumptions about future transport policy and trends need to be exposed to scrutiny, taking account of possible technological changes as well as changes to the cost of different forms of travel.

Principle 3. Public Participation

Early public involvement in the development of major infrastructure proposals, including High Speed Rail, is essential. People need to be involved when all options are open for discussion and effective participation can take place.

The evidence from High Speed 1 and other major projects is that early and effective public involvement can reduce opposition and lead to better design and delivery of projects. The public should be able to have their say at a time when they can still make a difference. This is implicit in the Government's wider localism agenda. It is also an express requirement of the 1998 Aarhus Convention, to which the UK is a signatory.

Principle 4. Minimising Adverse Impacts

High Speed Rail proposals need to be designed from the start to avoid significant adverse impacts on the natural environment, cultural heritage and local communities (including biodiversity, landscape, tranquillity and access) during construction and operation.

Setting inflexible objectives for HS2 to meet technical specifications - such as a theoretical top speed of 400km/h - and preconceived requirements - such as interchange stations at airports - has seriously limited the range of route options considered. It also limits the scope for those participating in the consultation to propose changes to the preferred route.

Although mitigation can reduce adverse impacts, it is not as good as avoiding impacts in the first place. Specifications and design speed should not be rigidly fixed in advance but be shaped by the opportunities to minimise impact and maximise benefit. This requires respecting environmental limits and a strategic approach to reducing impacts by prioritising avoidance over mitigation, with compensation being the option of last resort.