

AGENDA

www.birminghampost.net
business@birminghampost.net
Head of Features: Sarah Probert
sarah.probert@birminghampost.net
0121 234 5186

Building a high-speed rail link to Europe, say
Robin Hooper and Norman Perry, will be hard

Journey in planning

If you are a Birmingham resident, no one would fault you for thinking that the Conservative Party's recently-announced plans for a new high-speed rail link between the Midlands and the main European cities is tantamount to an early Christmas present.

The plans include funding for a station in central Birmingham but, as with all initiatives, there are practicalities which need to be considered.

These range from whether the line of the route would be available to dealing with the issue of costs and raising the necessary finance, together with planning, legal and significant infrastructure questions.

The 2008 Planning Act establishes an Infrastructure Planning Commission which will operate across England with a specific brief to deal with major infrastructure planning applications.

The provision of the high-speed rail link from the Midlands to the Channel Tunnel and main European cities is exactly the sort of complex planning application that the Government had in mind when creating the Commission under the Act.

Indeed, the prospect of dealing with planning for such a major project without the Commission being in place would be almost impossible.

The line of the route, assuming that there would be track improvements, new railway stations as well as security and customs centres at various locations, would, under the current law, mean that individual planning applications for each stage would be determined by individual and different local authorities along the route.

There would be the possibility that some planning applications would be approved and others refused.

That nightmare situation is overcome by the Infrastructure Commission having express legal powers to be able to consider the whole project as a single planning application.

The Planning Act also deals with the second major obstacle to the implementation of a proposal which is the avail-



ability of land. While much of the route can be identified either by using or replacing existing track, there may be a need to find a new route across certain parts of the country and the need to purchase the land.

The new Planning Act allows the Infrastructure Planning Commission to consider any compulsory purchase of land at the same time as considering the planning application.

A single planning application and request for compulsory purchase would be made to the Infrastructure Planning Commission which would then administer the process.

There would then be a public hearing and interested parties would be heard and the process could be completed within a matter of months rather than the many years that, for example Terminal 5 at Heathrow took to complete only the planning process.

There will be a variety of other legal factors that would need to be considered at the same time as the planning and

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land use issues in order that such a scheme could be successful. These include whether existing licence-holders for routes on the current railway network would need to be in support of the route and whether their consent is needed or whether the Government would be able to facilitate the route without consent.

At the present time, where new passenger routes are using existing railway lines, it is necessary to consult with other providers of services and the Rail Regulator on those lines in order to avoid existing operators' routes becoming unprofitable and reducing service levels.

In addition, the issue of noise abatement may be necessary in certain residential areas using high-speed trains as well as the numerous environmental impact considerations.

There are certain practicalities in operating a cross-border route in relation to customs and excise and immigration. At each entry port on the route there will

need to be a customs presence and facilities available for people and vehicles to be checked. These are important factors in terms of immigration policy and security of transit. Experience already exists with these issues at the Eurostar facilities at St Pancras in London.

The actual infrastructure requirements for such a scheme would also need to be analysed to determine the best locations to which people would go to start and end their journeys. While a new station in central Birmingham may be helpful for foot passengers and office commuters, for vehicles there may be additional movements to and from the station. The traffic strategy, environmental impact and integration into the City Centre plan would need to be considered.

Overall, while the initiative is one to be welcomed for the benefit of business and tourist travel between mainland Europe and the UK, the length of time it will take to deliver such a scheme and the costs will need to be properly assessed.

Whether public and private sector money would be able to be put into the scheme in partnership or whether it would be wholly funded by the public sector is a matter that will also require considerable debate.

One thing for sure from evidence of the past is that many major projects, such as the London 2012 Olympics or Wembley stadium, have overspent and overrun both time and costs.

Therefore, the project management for such an initiative needs to be very tightly controlled to ensure that costs are kept under control, that the scheme is on time and that it actually delivers a high-speed rail link from the Midlands to the main European cities in a safe, convenient and cost-effective manner.

Dr Robin Hooper is director of planning and Dr Norman Perry chairman of public services at HBJ Gateley Wareing LLP

Monday: Alan Duncan writes about the Jaguar Land Rover crisis