

FINANCIAL TIMES

Last updated: January 10, 2012 6:49 pm

First stage of HS2 rail link approved

By Mark Odell, Jim Pickard and Rose Jacobs



The construction of a high-speed rail link between London and the north is set to go ahead after the government approved the first stage of the £32.7bn project.

Justine Greening, transport secretary, said on Tuesday that "Britain should embark upon the most significant transport infrastructure project since the building of the motorways", but also announced additional tunnelling to appease opponents of the controversial scheme.

The first phase of the project, known as High Speed 2, is set to cost £16.3bn, and will link London to Birmingham. It is scheduled to open in 2026, and would be followed by a second, Y-shaped line north of Birmingham to Manchester and Leeds by 2032.

The go-ahead comes in spite of fierce criticism from some Tory MPs, particularly those in areas set to be affected by construction of the proposed line, including the picturesque Chilterns. Their only recourse now is a possible judicial review.

HS2, which was conceived under the previous Labour government, is expected to generate up to £47bn of benefits to the economy over 60 years, according to the Department for Transport, and £34bn in fares.

"By following in the footsteps of the 19th-century railway pioneers, the government is signalling its commitment to providing 21st-century infrastructure and connections – laying the groundwork for long-term, sustainable economic growth," Ms Greening said on Tuesday.

She unveiled changes to the original plan designed to reduce the project's impact on the landscapes and communities it cuts through. Those include lengthening one tunnel planned through the Chilterns; adding another tunnel near Ruislip; adjusting the route and extending a third tunnel past Chipping Warden and Aston Le Walls; and extending two other tunnels, near Wendover and South Heath.

HS2 Timeline

Jan to April 2012 - Three-month period in which 18 local authorities opposing the line could seek a judicial review of the decision, introducing significant delays into the process

Spring 2012 - Consultation on compensation starts for those with property affected by the route between London and Birmingham

End of 2013 - Planned introduction of the bill seeking parliamentary approval for the first phase of HS2

End of 2014 - Decision on preferred route for the second phase from Birmingham to Manchester and Leeds and a spur to Heathrow

2016 - Preparatory work begins on first phase of the line, with construction starting in 2017

2026 - London to Birmingham line opens

2033 - Y-shaped route from Birmingham to Manchester and Leeds opens

Ms Greening said those adjustments would cut by one-third the number of households set to experience increased noise, and halve the number of dwellings at risk of losing land to the project. For those people still affected, the government plans to improve and streamline purchase schemes.

She did not say what the additional costs of the tunnelling and other changes would be – prompting umbrage from opponents who have already questioned the government's value-for-money calculations.

"The government's promise to ameliorate environmental damage by providing additional tunnelling is empty as they have already said that the extra cost will have to come from the existing budget. This will just lead to underfunding elsewhere on the line," said Jerry Marshall, chairman of Action Groups Against High Speed Two, on Tuesday.

Martin Tett, Conservative leader of Buckinghamshire county council and an opponent of the project has assembled a team of lawyers and rail experts to scrutinise the government decision to see if it can be challenged with a judicial review.

Labour continues to back HS2, although Maria Eagle, shadow transport secretary, has questioned the coalition's commitment to building the full route to Manchester and Leeds given that the initial bill will only cover the first leg to Birmingham.

"This raises real doubts about their commitment to enabling the north of England to benefit from less overcrowding and shorter journey times," she said on Monday. "Unless they agree to our proposal to legislate for the entire route in one piece of legislation then any commitment to build the whole route will be seen as an empty promise."

It is understood the government opted for a two-stage process on official advice, which suggested that trying to get the entire route into one parliamentary bill would be too cumbersome.

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/75b0e68c-3b70-11e1-bb39-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2012 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.