

January 10, 2012 8:42 pm

Business chiefs welcome green light for HS2

By Andrew Bounds, Chris Tighe and John Murray Brown

Regional business leaders hailed the government's decision to give the go-ahead to the HS2 project, the high-speed rail link with London, saying it would help to redress serious economic imbalances.

Jerry Blackett, chief executive of Birmingham Chamber of Commerce Group, predicted it would "help erode the north-south divide and break the economic stranglehold of the south east."



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But he warned there should be no delay in starting the project, after Justine Greening, the transport secretary said it could be two years before parliament even votes on the plans.

"This must not be allowed to happen. Delay would be damaging for the project and it would push it into the heart of an (general) election campaign," said Mr Blackett.

Running from a rebuilt Euston station in London to a new Birmingham City Centre station at Curzon Street, the first £16.3bn phase, introducing trains with an initial top speed of 225mph and cutting London-Birmingham journey times to 45 minutes, would be completed in 2026.

The government has also announced plans for a second phase, taking HS2 to Manchester and Leeds, to be completed around 2032/33. A formal consultation on second phase routes will begin in early 2014 with a final route chosen by the end of 2014.

The project will mean substantial time savings between Britain's cities, reducing a Birmingham to Leeds journey from two hours to just 57 minutes and a Manchester to London journey from two hours eight minutes to only one hour eight minutes.

Sir Richard Leese, leader of Manchester City Council and campaign chair of HSR UK, said: "This is welcome news. We believe that the high speed rail line is essential to help address imbalances in our nation's economy and help attract jobs and investment to Greater Manchester and other areas outside London and the south east."

Richard Lewis, Leeds city council's member for economic development, said: "High-speed rail would not only transform rail journeys to and from the north of England, it would also bring massive benefits in terms of the potential for Leeds and the surrounding area to develop further as a major hub for business, investment, jobs and leisure."

Emma Antrobus, transport policy manager at Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, said: "We have campaigned long and hard on behalf of businesses for this major investment into infrastructure, which will provide a significant boost to the nation's economy. The benefits for Greater Manchester and the north west are essential to complement regeneration plans and support job creation through increasing capacity for vital journeys for both passengers and freight."

But James Ramsbotham, chief executive of the North East Chamber of Commerce, which represents more than 4,000 member businesses, also raised concerns about delays to the project. "It is concerning that initial estimates suggest it could be two years before legislation is enacted given the threat of Nimbyism and localised political opposition will be ever present," he said.

Improving transport infrastructure is a key priority for north east businesses. Many are frustrated that successive governments have shied away from key improvements, such as dualling the A1 all the way from Newcastle to the Scottish border. Many are also very keen to see investment in the East Coast main rail line. There is concern that any potential benefit to the region from the HS2 project could be decades away and that its proposed northern branches stop at Manchester and Leeds.

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