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Camden council launches legal challenge to HS2

by GWYN TOPHAM • FEB. 16, 2012



Euston train station, which will be redeveloped and expanded as part of HS2. Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

The "great earthquake" that "rent the whole neighbourhood" was recorded by Charles Dickens in *Dombey and Son* when a railway first cut through Camden in the early 19th century. Nearly 200 years on, Camden's residents are stepping up their fight against what they fear will be a smaller, but similar, seismic shock from High Speed 2, the rail scheme given the go-ahead last month.

Camden council on Thursday signalled the start of legal action against the government, joining rural anti-**HS2** campaigners seeking a judicial review. The first section of the £33bn project's route from [London](#) to Birmingham will demolish much of an estate housing many hundreds of people near Euston station.

While much protest has focused on the scheme's effect on the Chilterns in marginal Tory-held constituencies, more than two-thirds of the 323 homes earmarked for demolition along the entire route are within the first half-mile in central London, mostly social housing on the Regent's Park estate. Camden council believes a further 264 homes near the proposed line are at risk.

The redevelopment and expansion of Euston will affect businesses in adjoining streets. Plans show Drummond Street, site of the first Patak's store in the 1950s and a historic home of British curry, will be partially knocked down and restaurateurs in the renowned stretch of curry houses say they face a huge loss of trade.

Camden council on Thursday served a formal "letter before claim" on the transport secretary, Justine Greening, identifying legal flaws in the government's decision to proceed with HS2.

Councillor Sarah Hayward, who has already petitioned Greening directly, said she was bitterly disappointed by the government's response to their concerns about the "catastrophic mistake" of HS2. She said: "We are talking about people's homes and businesses. The government's approach is flawed and we will fight this decision brick by brick if we have to."

Camden says the government has given no guarantees of upfront funds to mitigate the loss of housing, businesses, parkland and community facilities.

Frank Dobson, the Labour MP for Holborn and St Pancras, said: "The new footprint of Euston isn't just a little extension, but the size of a new St Pancras International again. We've got no guarantees whatever for the people who live there about rehousing people locally, or security, or rent. The right-to-buy leaseholders are the worst off: they certainly won't be able to buy somewhere equivalent."

Work to deepen cuttings dug for Robert Stephenson's original Victorian railway will also affect the more affluent areas around Regent's Park and Camden Lock. "Even just during the process there's going to be the most devastating amount of noise and nuisance and disruption for pedestrians and traffic," he said.

Stan Passmore, 85, has been living in his local authority flat overlooking the railway since 1961. The veteran of the Royal Navy's Arctic convoys to Russia in the second world war said: "If people knew what was going to happen they could come to terms with it, make plans. But I've got neighbours suffering from clinical depression, crying at the thought of being turfed out. The whole business of moving terrifies them. You can't explain what moving means to a young person. This place is full of memories – my [deceased] wife, my children."

Azad Ali's family have lived in the neighbouring block for 35 years – since he was five years old. Three generations now live there: his parents, who bought their flat, are pensioners now, while his children go to the same schools as he did. Even if they were adequately compensated – unlikely, according to Dobson – he says it is beside the point. "No one wants to move. It's a close-knit community. They had all that hoo-haa about the Chilterns over people who are going to lose their views. Here it's homes and livelihoods."

The Department for Transport said: "Rebuilding Euston will inevitably cause significant disruption but we are committed to working closely with Camden and the GLA [Greater London Authority] with the intention of agreeing a joint strategy for the Euston area and providing new social housing to replace any that is compulsorily purchased. This will also include engagement with local people, businesses and community representatives." Earlier this week the HS2 Action Alliance, an umbrella organisation for 70 environmental and residents' action groups nationwide, served notice it would be seeking a judicial review, claiming that HS2 would not comply with EU environmental protection directives. Last week the 51m group, an

alliance of 18 mainly Conservative councils led by Buckinghamshire county council, announced similar legal action.

Should the HS2 project secure expected parliamentary approval next year, high-speed trains are scheduled to start running in 2026 between London and Birmingham, with extensions to Manchester and Leeds in 2032. The trains will almost halve journey times between major cities, but supporters say the critical point is that a new line is essential to meet future passenger demand.

Camden has held a succession of public meetings which residents have attended – but, said Ali, "the people from HS2 never turn up". If the legal action doesn't get their attention, he said, they will have to do something more dramatic at Euston. "We need to chain Frank Dobson to the railings."

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