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Task force mulls terminating HS2 London section to cut costs

By Mark Odell in Birmingham

A Treasury-led task force scrutinising the proposed high-speed rail line between London and the north would consider axing the most expensive last few miles of the route into Euston, according to Lord Deighton, infrastructure minister.

Mounting opposition to High Speed 2 because of escalating costs has led to a government fightback, as ministers underline their commitment to the scheme, while promising to bear down on costs.

Asked if he would look at scrapping the last 7km of tunnel that takes trains from a proposed new station in west London, called Old Oak Common, to Euston, Lord Deighton said, "Looking at opportunities to do things more efficiently is something we are prepared to consider."

Although the government does not split out the cost, this part of the route is widely acknowledged to be the most expensive section of the first phase of HS2 which would link London to Birmingham and is scheduled to open in 2026. The final section of tunnelling through north London and the remodelling of Euston station would cost in excess of £1bn, according to one rail executive.

If the Euston section were abandoned, the line would instead start and terminate at Old Oak Common, which will be connected to central London by the west-to-east Crossrail line, already under construction.

The proposed development of Old Oak Common would transform large areas of disused land around a railway depot in west London into an HS2 interchange station with direct links to the West Country and Wales, as well as central London and Canary Wharf.

The idea of terminating HS2 at the station has been floated in the past by some lobby groups as a way to reduce the projected £42.6bn cost of the project.

Ministers are on a drive to regain the initiative ahead of the publication of a new business case for the line in mid-October.

Lord Deighton said: "I think frankly it is entirely appropriate for people to keep reminding us

that it isn't a blank cheque book and that we have to impose delivery disciplines.”

Speaking on the sidelines of an event in Birmingham, he said that without the new line the existing south-north rail routes would run out of capacity.

“This is the beauty of the rail network that you can accomplish so much in getting capacity where it needs to be by creating this single spine. You can't really do that with one big power station or one big road.”

This view was backed by Sir David Higgins, chief executive of Network Rail, the owner of the UK rail network, who said the existing north-south routes were showing their age and struggling to cope with the growth in rail traffic.

“One incident on the West Coast mainline and the whole thing grinds to a halt...We are reaching a point of diminishing returns.”

He said a further upgrade of the existing West Coast line was impractical.

“It's like refurbishing an old Victorian house: it will just fall apart again.” The high volume of trains meant it was becoming increasingly hard to find time to maintain the line, he added.

“If we do nothing, if HS2 doesn't happen now, it won't happen again for another generation. It will be 50 years before we have another chance to catch up.”

He said the lack of investment in the rail network after the second world war into the 1990s was coming back to haunt the UK. “We are playing catch-up from a generation who have dined out on the investment by the Victorians.”

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