HS2: councils unveil alternative £50 billion strategy

The £50 billion earmarked for HS2 should be spent on sweeping infrastructure improvements including a new ultra fast broadband network, opponents have said.

Councils produce alternative £50 billion strategy Photo: HS2 LTD

By David Millward, Transport Editor

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Councils opposed to the high-speed rail project unveiled an alternative strategy which, they claim, would generate the growth the country needs.

The report has been produced by the all-party 51m group of 19 councils which earlier this year mounted an unsuccessful attempt to derail the scheme in the High Court.

It comes little over a week after the Department for Transport published a study by the KPMG consultancy that said the 351-mile line was essential to stimulate jobs and rebalance the economy.

Unveiling the councils' report, Ray Puddifoot, the Tory leader of Hillingdon described its challenge as the battle for the British economy.

"It will be a sorry day for this nation if the government continues with this folly," he said.

"To paraphrase, never in the history of the British economy could so much be paid by so many for the benefit of so few."

According to the report £2 billion should be spent on the existing rail network, with a further £14 billion on restoring and upgrading the country's road network.

A further £10 billion, the councils say, should be devoted to developing an ultra-fast broadband system with speeds of more than 100 MPs and a 4g mobile network.

It has also called for £17 billion to be invested on infrastructure in the country's core cities – including Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle.

A further £7 billion, the councils say, could boost jobs through grants to local enterprise partnerships across the country.

The 51m group was formed after the plans for HS2 network was announced amid mounting anger at the impact of the scheme which will see 225mph trains hurtling through the countryside including much of the Tory heartland.

Its members include three county councils – Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Warwickshire – along with two London boroughs, Hillingdon and Camden.

Martin Tett, leader of Buckinghamshire and chair of the 51M group added: "HS2 is a phenomenally expensive and controversial project which has rightly been challenged to justify that it represents best value for hard- pressed taxpayers' money.

"Quite frankly, the business case has lost all credibility. The opportunity now is to show that the important objectives of spreading prosperity and closing the north-south divide can be delivered by an alternative investment strategy."

But this was disputed by an HS2 spokesman. "A series of incremental improvements are not going head off the capacity crunch on the railways we are

heading towards," he said.

"Many infrastructure improvements are already planned and HS2 remains essential. It is the right project at the right time."

A Department for Transport spokesman said: "The Government is investing in HS2 because it is the right thing to do for the future of the country.

"HS2 will free up vital space on our railways for passengers and freight, generate hundreds of thousands of jobs and deliver better connections between our towns and cities. In addition we are investing record amounts across our transport network – trebling spending on major road schemes and funding the biggest upgrade to our railway in modern times.

"The 51m group of local authorities is entitled to act in the interests of their residents - the Government has to act in the interests of the country as a whole. The courts have endorsed the Government's approach to alternatives and we will ensure the 51m report is considered in the appropriate way – just as it has considered all alternatives in the pas