

Strategic transport

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The coalition Government favours high-speed rail and opposes Heathrow expansion – but many questions remain

There is a view in transport policy circles that high-speed rail is an idea whose time has come... of course it came a lot earlier in the Far East and continental Europe but it is only now that the UK has caught the high-speed policy train. As a new high-speed link between London and the north of England (and eventually Scotland) looks increasingly likely, domestic short-haul flights are falling increasingly out of favour amongst policy makers.

There is an expectation amongst many that high-speed rail would be a viable substitute for expanding London Heathrow Airport – though there is no consensus on this. Whether this ends up being an either/or question is almost certain to be decided in this Parliament: the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government will have to take a decision on whether to put forward legislation for a high-speed rail line and BAA, the owners of Heathrow, will make a decision on whether to submit a planning application for a new third runway and a sixth terminal. The Conservatives also indicated before the election that they would reverse the changes to planning law introduced by Labour and return the final say on Heathrow to the Secretary of State.

While the Labour Government wanted to see an expanded Heathrow and a high-speed rail link, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats favour the latter over the former: their Coalition Agreement states that the Government would agree to implement “the establishment of a high-speed rail network” and “the cancellation of the third runway at Heathrow”. However, some questions remain.

THE AGE OF THE HIGH-SPEED TRAIN?

All major UK political parties are in favour of a high-speed rail link from London to at least the Midlands and the north of England. It is presumed that a high-speed line would eventually go up to Scotland.

The Conservatives made high-speed rail the centrepiece of their transport plans, with a commitment to look initially at building a high-speed line from London to Leeds and Manchester via Birmingham. The Liberal Democrats are in favour of a similar route. Labour had a generally cool attitude towards high-speed rail until its announcement on the future of Heathrow in January 2009. Labour published its final proposals for a high-speed line between London and the West Midlands in March 2010.

While all three parties agreed before the election on the concept of a high-speed line running north-south, there are questions that remain to be answered:

- What will be the route? Where will trains stop and where will the route terminate? The most controversial part of the plan is the route north of Birmingham, in particular whether it runs via the north-west or north-east.
- Labour’s preferred route from London to Birmingham is the only one currently available for public scrutiny: will the new Government propose an alternative route? How long will that take?
- Will the route connect directly to Heathrow? Labour’s plans, published before the election, have a connection to Heathrow but no direct route.

- How will the route be funded? The Conservative scheme is expected to cost approximately £20 billion, three-quarters of which would come from the taxpayer.

High speed rail is an expensive commitment in fiscally straightened times

- When would building start and a route become operational? Timing would depend to some extent on whether legislation was put through during the current Session of Parliament; if so the Conservatives have indicated that they would anticipate that works would begin in 2015 with the line being operational from 2027.

HEATHROW: TO BUILD OR NOT TO BUILD?

In January 2009 the Labour Government announced that its three conditions for supporting a third runway at Heathrow had been met and invited BAA to bring forward proposals to build a third runway and a sixth terminal. The decision was generally supported by business but was opposed by environmental groups as well as by both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Given that the Coalition Agreement includes a commitment not to proceed with the third runway, it would appear to be off the political agenda. However, there are issues to consider:

- What will happen if BAA decides to put in a planning application anyway?

As the legislation currently stands, the Infrastructure Planning Commission would take a decision; the new Government would have to change the law to enable the Secretary of State to do so.

- Is high-speed rail likely to be used as a substitute for domestic flights from Heathrow? Expert opinion is divided on what, if any, impact high-speed rail would have on Heathrow traffic, particularly for business travel.
- What if Heathrow just keeps getting more congested? There are other ways to increase airport capacity and efficiency without physical expansion: changes to air space and flight patterns, slot allocation and regulatory incentives might be other areas to examine.
- Will Gatwick and Stansted expand instead? The Coalition Agreement states that the Government would refuse additional runways at these two airports.

The positions of the coalition partners make the direction of travel on high-speed rail and airports clear – though there is still a long way to go. At some point the route on road transport will also need to be established.