

Why are people in the Chilterns still so angry?

At the last meeting of the Central Chilterns Community Forum HS2 Ltd's Engagement Officer, Martin Wells, asked if there was any point to the Central Chilterns Community Forum. He said that HS2 Ltd is not obliged to hold Community Forums. Forum members think that they must take any opportunity to try to influence the design of HS2 through the Chilterns. They feel, however, an acute sense of frustration that the Community Forums are not working and people's legitimate views and concerns are being ignored and even treated with contempt.

The real and continuing sense of anger at the HS2 project and the way it is being implemented can be summarised under two headings – 1) HS2 and the route through the Chilterns and 2) the conduct of the Community Forums.

Section A - HS2 and the route through the Chilterns

HS2 is regarded as a fundamentally flawed project. As has been said many times. If it was perceived as having any merit at all local people would still be upset at the impact that HS2 is having on them but their anger stems from the fact that it has none. Studies, including those by the Transport Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee have pointed out the many weaknesses in the arguments for HS2. People think the distress and destruction resulting from HS2 is completely unwarranted.

'If HS2 had made a good case for the project, proving that it is essential for our nation, at a time when the country desperately needs it, we would have understood the arguments and been prepared to compromise for the greater good. In which case, all our efforts would have been concentrated on mitigation and fair compensation. BUT the case gets weaker by the day and there is a cloud of lies and deceit over the whole project. They just keep on ploughing on through the process, and rather badly at that. They [HS2 Ltd] keep publicising the same unsubstantiated cliches through 60 press officers, expecting people to accept them as fact, if repeated often enough.' Tony Bobroff, Speen

HS2 should not have been routed through the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Chilterns AONB has been designated by Parliament as a nationally protected landscape. As such, major developments should be permitted within it only if a) it is in the national interest, which in our view HS2 is not; and b) if there is no alternative, which there is. The route goes right through the centre of the AONB at its widest point. People who have been refused planning permission on the grounds that their proposals were inappropriate within an AONB are particularly aggrieved that the Government is able to flout the law and ignore the AONB's statutory designation.

HS2 will do enormous damage - to the natural environment, including ancient woodlands, SSSIs and scheduled ancient monuments. The primary purpose of AONBs is to conserve nationally important landscapes and natural environments and protect biodiversity. The 2011 *The Natural Choice* White Paper was followed up with *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services*. Its purpose is stated as being

‘To halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people.’

For some reason, although the Government considers this important elsewhere it doesn't seem to matter in the Chilterns. Local people are at a loss to understand why.

Ministers refuse to recognise the significance of the Chilterns and act accordingly. The Government and HS2 Ltd are perceived as obstinate in their refusal to make any changes at all to the proposals announced in January 2012, even though at the first Lobby Day in the summer of 2010 the then Transport Minister told campaigners that in Kent the route of HS1 had changed completely as the result of campaigning (led by Kent County Council which accepted the project) and that there was ‘all to play for’. People are particularly angry that, having routed HS2 through the middle of the Chilterns AONB at the widest point, Ministers are still extolling the value of AONBs. For example, speaking in 2011 Housing Minister Nick Boles said

‘England is famous for the beauty of its landscapes. From the Yorkshire Dales to the South Hams, from the Weald of Kent to the Cumbrian Lakes, England glories in countryside of which generations of man and nature are joint authors ... The beauty of England is its finest asset and, for each of us, our most precious inheritance ... I truly believe that nothing would do more to improve the health and happiness of the British people than if more of them got to spend more of their lives surrounded by beauty. Beauty lifts, calms, excites, inspires’. Nick Boles, 29 November 2012

Referring to this speech Lord Adonis, the architect of HS2, asked on 30 January 2013 ‘Who could disagree?’ and expressed fears about ‘...damage [to] the most beautiful landscapes in the entire country...’

The 2011 White Paper, *The Natural Choice – Securing the Value of Nature* describes our protected landscapes, specifically including AONBs as a ‘rich and diverse set of national treasures.’ It states in Section 4.1

‘Our natural environment gives us a sense of place, pride and identity. Nature inspires and moves us. Connecting with nature helps children learn, and improves people’s health and wellbeing. We know instinctively that we have much to gain by connecting with nature...’

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published by the Government on 27 March 2012, section 110 states that:

“Great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.”

In the case of HS2 and the Chilterns AONB the Government is not following its own policy. This appears arbitrary and unreasonable.

'The Chilterns is the only AONB on the line but for all that seems to matter to HS2 Ltd we may as well be the Nullabor Plain. We still do not have any confidence that they recognise the value of an AONB and the need to preserve it.' Cllr Peter Jones, South Heath, Ballinger and Chartridge

AONBs are for everybody, not just the people who live in them. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty were established to conserve important landscapes and their natural environments and to provide opportunities for recreation in wonderful countryside for those living in urban areas. It is undisputed that the Chilterns AONB is the most visited in the country – not surprisingly as it is the nearest to London as well as population centres such as Luton and Dunstable Slough. The 2011 White Paper states that

'Connecting with nature helps children learn, and improves people's health and wellbeing. We know instinctively that we have much to gain by connecting with nature...'

But it goes on to point out that:

'evidence points to an increasing disconnection. Our society is bearing the costs. Less outdoor activity and reduced contact with nature have negative consequences for public health and society. Some people have fewer opportunities than others to access a good-quality environment for their personal benefit.'

It concludes 'More people must have the opportunity for a lifelong connection with nature.' (The 2011 White Paper, *The Natural Choice – Securing the Value of Nature*, Section 4.1) The Chilterns AONB provides easy access to the countryside for hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of people. It is inexplicable that Ministers refuse to follow their own policies and respect the integrity of the Chilterns.

Phase 2 of HS2 has been designed on different principles from Phase 1. It was argued with Phase 1 HS2 route needs to take the straightest line and so the route through the heart of the Chilterns AONB was unavoidable. With Phase 2 this no longer appears to be the case. The line has been curved to avoid the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in addition to the £600m loop in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's constituency – indeed it is 26% longer than a straight line. A government spokesman said of the Phase 2 route:

'The initial preferred route north of Birmingham avoids National Parks, **Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty** and registered parks and gardens. In terms of nature conservation, there will be no significant impacts on sites of internationally recognised importance.'

This raises the question of why the same account was not taken of the Chilterns AONB and what will now be done to ensure that Phase 1 is designed on the same principles as Phase 2.

"Those of us in the Chilterns were told that there was no choice but to bisect the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty because high-speed railways have to be straight, so we are bewildered why HS2, north of Birmingham, veers miles off the straightest alignment. We want to know why greater efforts were not made to avoid the Chiltern Hills." Steve Rodrick, Chilterns Conservation Board

Tourism is vital to the national and local economy. The importance of tourism to the national economy was recognised with the creation of VisitEngland in 2009. It aims 'to provide the leadership to market England, drive forward developments in quality, ease of access and sustainability'. AONBs, including the Chilterns, have an important part to play in that and the Misbourne Valley has been identified by the Department for Transport as one of the 'gateways' to be included in a project aimed at developing sustainable tourism. This flies in the face of the government and HS2 Ltd's indifference to the importance of the Chilterns and especially the Misbourne Valley. They fail to recognise the growing importance of visitors to the area and of this area to visitors.

Claims that the proposals announced in January 2012 were an improvement on the previous draft proposals and that the changes were in response to the Consultation are wrong:

a) Changes to the route through the southern part of the Chilterns resulted from engineering problems arising from the nature of the aquifer at the point where the route was originally intended to emerge north of Amersham. Moving the route west meant that had the tunnel remained the same length it would have emerged in Shardeloes Lake. A virtue was therefore made of necessity and the tunnel continued to Mantles Wood, the next lowest point on the pre-determined route. This was done for engineering reasons, not as mitigation. People resent the lie implicit in the claim that it was a mitigation measure.

b) The shallower cuttings north of Mantles Wood make HS2 worse for the northern part of the Chilterns because they mean that HS2 will be even more intrusive, both visually and in terms of noise.

c) People resent being told this change resulted from concerns expressed locally about the quantity of spoil. They know that HS2 Ltd had grossly underestimated the quantity of spoil and have no idea of what they are going to do with it. It was acknowledged at the Great Missenden bi-lateral meeting that the shallower cuttings were cheaper – reducing the depth was a cost cutting exercise which had nothing to do with mitigation.

d) the proposals announced in January 2012 cut £300 million from the cost of constructing HS2 through the Chilterns. As this saving make the route more intrusive and destructive. This funding should be re-instated to provide the highest level of mitigation.

e) Claims that mitigation is adequate because half of the route is tunnelled begs the question of, why it's appropriate to tunnel one half and not the other?

'I am angry because Ministers continue to give the impression that the revised route announced in Jan 2012 has "solved" the AONB issue, which is a blatant lie, and because as a result HS2 Ltd struggle (even privately) to accept that there has been any worsening... in the central Chilterns Forum area.' Cllr Seb Berry, Great Missenden

The impact of HS2 on individuals is ignored. The Government, HS2 Ltd and its staff seem to be oblivious and indifferent to the profound effect that HS2 has already had on the areas through which it passes. The case of the 97 year old lady in Turweston whose home is unmortgageable and so worthless but who has been refused help by HS2 Ltd and so does not know how to pay her nursing home bills is only an extreme example of the impact HS2 is having. Many people locally are

trapped in their properties because the fall in value means that they cannot afford to move and they do not fulfil the criteria imposed by the Exceptional Hardship Scheme. The resultant anxiety and distress is making people ill.

In this area, as elsewhere, blight is widespread and people have seen tens of thousands of pounds wiped off the value of their homes. This is not acknowledged and according to the current proposals they will not be compensated. Businesses will not be compensated for losses due to HS2. People across the area look to the future with trepidation. They face the prospect of years of noise and disruption during the construction phase, for which they will not be compensated. Their enjoyment of their homes and surroundings is constantly threatened by the spectre by HS2.

‘Because there is no empathy emanating from HS2 Ltd. No understanding that the homes and lifestyles that people have worked all their lives for are being destroyed by this project.’ Cllr Peter Jones

Locally people are tired of being dismissed as ‘Chilterns Nimbys’

This is an idle and insulting way of ignoring reasonable and well-sustained arguments against HS2. Supporters of HS2, including the ‘social media advisors’ paid by HS2 to be active on Twitter and Facebook, are fond of creating the impression that everyone in the Chilterns is rich. This is very far from the case. Most of the properties affected in the Chilterns, including those closest to the proposed route, are ordinary family homes whose owners have worked hard to be able to afford them. (It is odd that a Conservative government should appear to support the view that the successful and well-to-do are somehow less deserving of consideration than anyone else.)

Section B - Conduct of the Community Forums

There is a strong sense that as far as HS2 Ltd is **concerned the Community Forums are a box-ticking exercise which is not intended to result in changes.** It was explicitly stated at the July Forum that their task is to deliver the proposals as announced in 2012. This does not allow much room for manoeuvre.

People are not involved in any decision-making. In so far as the Forums have a purpose, as far as HS2 Ltd is concerned it seems to be simply to inform people of decisions. This is denied but Mr Wells’ explanation at the Chilterns Bilateral meeting in Amersham of the importance of not putting forward alternative proposals for fear of creating anxiety exemplifies the fact that what actually happens is that the Forums are presented with *faites accomplis*.

Before meetings HS2 Ltd still fail to provide the necessary paper work (briefing notes, maps) prior to meetings as requested and what is provided at the meetings is often inadequate and conflicting. They have been resistant to the idea of making presentations available in advance of meetings so that Forum members – who are representatives of groups – can discuss them with their organisations before coming to the Forums. Presentations give the impression of being prepared at the last minute and so are unduly long and of variable quality.

At meetings excessive time is wasted on administrative points - minutes are not accepted and revisions offered at the meeting and not well in advance. The changes to minutes are often intended to put HS2 Ltd in a good light – they take the form of omissions or points made or minor word changes that don't alter the sense of the text. As far as HS2 staff are concerned the minutes appear to be intended to reflect what they think should have been said, rather than a record of what was actually said. People – including the local MP – find HS2 Ltd's refusal to record meetings so that there can be an accurate and undisputed transcript inexplicable.

We are pleased to note that HS2 Ltd staff now seem to be making some effort to be pleasant and approachable as their attitude at the first meeting in July can only be described as belligerent. This has overshadowed relationships between Forum members and HS2 Ltd staff and made working together extremely difficult. The staff are perceived as negative, unsympathetic, inexperienced and just paying lip-service to the notion of consultation. They do not appear to know the Chiltern area and are only just taking the trouble to find out about it at bilateral familiarisation of the areas and the AONB should have been the first step not an afterthought.

'Everything is undertaken as a 'desk top' exercise. It is apparent that nobody from HS2 has walked the route or driven on the roads that will be affected not only by construction traffic but also displaced traffic. That is why I am angry.' Cllr Patricia Cherrill, Chesham

There is intense frustration at HS2 Ltd's handling of questions. Often questions are not answered, responses are inadequate or dismissive and/ or responses take an inordinately long time. For example the Chilterns Countryside Group waited four and a half months for a response to a question they put to HS2 Ltd in July which was only forthcoming after the intervention of the local MP. Even then it was inadequate.

'We would firstly like to place on record our concerns over the HS2 engagement process. These centre on the questions the Chiltern Countryside Group submitted as part of a Central Chilterns Community Forum document, Chiltern Design Issues.

Following submission of our questions on 12 July, we have waited almost four and a half months for a reply. HS2 Ltd was reminded by email by the forum spokesperson (14 August), by copy letter to Douglas Oakervee (18 September), and at the 25 September Central Chilterns Community Forum meeting. On the 18 September the group had to contact Cheryl Gillan MP, to ask Mr Oakervee why we had not received a response.

HS2 Ltd has finally written (22 November). Although it has apologised, we believe the company's behaviour impeded the community engagement process.' The Chilterns Countryside Group

Too many of the 'answers' given at the CF have prompted the response "either you know and you aren't telling us, in which case why not? Or you really don't know, in which case why are you in the job?" An example is the refusal/inability to say how big the construction site proposed near Mantle's Wood would be and how many workers would be there. Too often answers are either vague or unfocused and unnecessarily detailed. Too many come via the Community Stakeholder Advisor. Why do we not get replies direct from their 'experts'? The current approach suggests that the necessary effort has not been put into answering our questions or this is a method of evasion.

Concerns are ignored – for example when HS2 Ltd staff were asked at the last Community Forum meeting about a response to the Rights of Way submission we were informed that the information was contained in the route maps that were to be presented to the meeting but it was clear from those map that the concerns raised in the submission had not been addressed – no account had been taken of them at all.

Bilaterals - HS2 Ltd seem to have recognised the inadequacy of the Community Forums as a useful vehicle for sensible discussion and have therefore encouraged bilateral meetings between HS2 and local groups. Even these meetings are seen as being of limited value. The impression is that, while at least the HS2 Ltd staff listen and take on board the points made, the meetings will make little or no difference in terms of outcomes.

As the experience of the CRAG engineering group shows even these meetings can be a farce. This group has spent a considerable amount of time over the last year engaging with HS2 Ltd but in January they were presented with a large and unexpected increase in the costs HS2 Ltd were quoting, on the basis of which HS2 Ltd say they will not give further consideration to the tunnel proposal. This 'take it or leave it' approach to a discussion with a team of engineers who had spent considerable time in working up a valid and professional alternative to the current proposal is totally unacceptable. Greater openness is essential if the public is to have any confidence in HS2's analysis.

Conclusion

For all these reasons people in the Central Chilterns Community Forum are angry about the HS2 proposals and the way they are being forced through regardless of the statutory designation of the Chilterns as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and of their impact on people's lives, homes, businesses and communities. We will continue to engage with the Community Forum exercise because we do not wish to lose any opportunity to secure mitigations of the impacts HS2 will have on this area. None the less our experience so far has made us cynical about the process both of engagement with HS2 and of democracy in this country.