



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

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Press Statement from Buckinghamshire MPs following the Transport Department's Notice to Proceed with construction of Phase 1 of HS2

We are surprised and disappointed that the Department for Transport has issued the Notice to Proceed in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. Although the Prime Minister stated in February that HS2 would go ahead, the world has changed since then. In its own Business Case published today, the DfT states:

- This Full Business Case (FBC) for HS2 Phase One was prepared prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the period of exceptional uncertainty that this has created for the UK economy (Executive Summary, point 2)
- Rapid developments and the uncertain outcome of the COVID-19 outbreak mean it has not been possible within the FBC to undertake specific analysis to determine the outbreak's potential longer-term impacts to transport passenger demand (point 20)
- The Department's forecasts on long distance rail passenger journeys is lower than the historical growth seen over the past 25 years. The low demand sensitivity assumes that demand is 16 per cent lower than in the reference case and sees a fall in the BCR of 0.3 for Phase One, shifting the value-for-money category to poor. However, until new information is available on the potential longer-term impact of COVID-19 on long-term demand and economic growth it is not possible to say whether this will materially impact the Value for Money of HS2. (point 21)

These points highlight that the impact of COVID-19 has not been taken into account, yet it is already acknowledged that demand has fallen. It is abundantly clear that there will be long-term changes to our economy as a result of coronavirus, and that the way we work and travel is likely to fundamentally change forever. We believe that it would be far wiser to wait and reassess the business case for HS2 after the pandemic.

We simply do not understand how the DfT can conclude:

- As part of this FBC process, the Government has carefully considered the merits and disadvantages of proceeding with HS2 and has concluded that overall HS2 represents value for the taxpayer (point 25)

when it also states:

- The Economic Case demonstrates that HS2 offers value for the taxpayer under all but the most extreme scenarios. (point 25)

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We would suggest that the current coronavirus emergency, with virtually the entire world population in lockdown, and the global economy in an unprecedented state of fragility, easily constitutes “the most extreme scenario”.

We therefore appeal to the government to pause. This is a time for everyone to focus on one thing – overcoming COVID-19. Once the pandemic is over, we will all need to reconsider how we live our lives, how we work, travel and spend our leisure time. That will be the moment to consider whether there is a need for HS2. That will be the time to decide whether it is the right way to spend £100 billion.

The Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan, MP for Chesham and Amersham said: *“With the warnings from the Office of Budget Responsibility yesterday that GDP could shrink by 35%, we should not be taking additional steps to cement our commitment and finances to an infrastructure project where the business case is now officially “poor”. I will be writing to the National Audit Office to call for an immediate examination of this Notice to Proceed at a time when the country’s finances will be needed to rescue our economy rather than continuing with the construction of HS2.”*

Steve Baker, MP for Wycombe said: *“I have opposed HS2 ever since I was first elected in 2010. It is a bad-value white elephant. If the construction sector is now dependent on the project, that is a very bad thing, not a good reason to proceed in the context of this pandemic.”*

Rob Butler, MP for Aylesbury said: *“Sadly this moment felt inevitable after the government decided to approve HS2 back in February. But at a time when our economy is being battered by the consequences of the coronavirus, I entirely agree with local residents and businesses who say that our country can't afford it. And I share the bitter disappointment of the thousands of people throughout the Aylesbury constituency who have fought long and hard against this railway. I've been in touch with the HS2 minister today, who has assured me that there will be a minimal impact on local sites at this stage, with no heavy construction. I will continue to hold HS2 Ltd to its promise that it will only carry out work where contractors can comply with Public Health England guidelines, to ensure the safety of both its own workers and the local community.”*

Joy Morrissey, MP for Beaconsfield said: *“This is deeply disappointing at such a difficult time, and is causing distress to local residents at a moment when we should all be pulling together.”*

Greg Smith, MP for Buckingham said: *“Serious questions need to be asked about the suitability of HS2 Ltd to act as custodians of taxpayers’ money to deliver this railway. In February the Prime Minister acknowledged that HS2 Ltd needed to fundamentally change. HS2 Ltd’s abject failure to act responsibly during the COVID-19 crisis does nothing to demonstrate any such change has occurred. At a time where over 12,000 people have tragically lost their lives as a result of COVID-19, we have seen HS2 Ltd allow contractors to continue to work on sites across Buckinghamshire, fail to follow social distancing guidance and frighten local residents away from local stores and facilities through a fear of HS2 workers spreading the virus. Weeks into the crisis, HS2 Ltd issued a statement pausing enabling works, only to be seen continuing regardless on many sites. The HS2 minister has promised me this morning that sites will only be allowed to operate if they can do so in line with PHE guidance and the overall COVID-19 strategy, and that in the short-term the work will be detailed design, planning and procurement.”*

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