

HIGH SPEED RAIL IN A LOW CARBON ECONOMY

The 2M Group wants the Government to consider how a national high speed rail network allied with improved European links might relieve the pressure on capacity at Heathrow and provide competitive alternatives for business travellers to around one in four of the current short haul flights.

The potential for modal shift on this scale depends on city centre to city centre rail links and much-improved local access to Heathrow in the London area. In the UK the vast majority of domestic flights from Heathrow serve the Scottish cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen (48 of the 68 flights daily). For this reason it is essential that any plans for a UK high speed rail network start with the aim of getting to Scotland using the most cost effective and achievable routes.

High speed rail and associated enhancements to the Scottish rail network would put all these major Scottish cities within four hours of London. This is the commonly accepted crossover point at which people will choose trains over planes. In practice the threshold could be higher as passengers weigh the benefits of rail travel's increased frequency and reduced environmental impact.

In total we have identified 159 flights from Heathrow for which high speed rail could offer a viable alternative within the four-hour threshold. This would include the key European destinations of Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and Frankfurt. This is equivalent to just over 24 per cent of current Heathrow flights.

But this 24 per cent should be seen as the starting point. As the European network is developed so more cities could come within easy reach of the UK by high speed rail. This would place cities like Munich, Barcelona and Milan comfortably within seven-hour range. It would transform the air-rail choice for passengers with potentially 43 per cent of Heathrow flights facing realistic competition from high speed rail alternatives.

These comparisons are based on Heathrow's current schedules. They take no account of domestic and near-Europe flights from other London or regional airports. Nor do they address the key issue of how Heathrow would use the spare capacity created.

What is clear is that the full potential for modal shift and consequent reductions in CO2 emissions has still to be thoroughly scoped. Before final decisions are made on new runways and new rail lines, the UK Government should first assess how a genuinely national high speed rail network allied with ongoing European developments might impact on demand for short haul – and quantify the consequences for CO2 emissions from such a substantial modal shift.

This submission to the Committee on Climate Change Commission has been prepared by the 2M Group. It is based on a detailed study of options for high speed rail in the UK.

The 2M Group is an all-party alliance of local authorities concerned at the environmental impact of Heathrow expansion on their communities. The full membership comprises the London Boroughs of Brent, Camden, Ealing, Greenwich, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Richmond, Sutton, Southwark and Wandsworth, the boroughs of Reading, Slough, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wycombe and South Bucks District Council

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