

Towards a Positioning for HS2

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Sample:**Four group discussions :**

- Group 1 : M/F, aged 25-40 years (Barnsley)
- Group 2 : M/F, aged 40-59 years (Barnsley)
- Group 3 : M/F, aged 25-40 years (Birmingham)
- Group 4 : M/F, aged 40-59 years (Manchester)

All groups included some respondents from business

All respondents claimed to have heard about HS2 (those with strongly negative views were excluded)

All respondents were occasional/regular of either local or national rail services (or both)

Timing:

Fieldwork took place between 7th & 9th January

A verbal debrief was given on 21st January 2013

Moderator:

All groups were personally conducted by Dr John Armstrong

The Confusion of Early Days

- for the most part, current public engagement with the HS2 project appears to be relatively low
- this is particularly the case in Manchester and, to a progressively lesser extent, in Birmingham and Barnsley
- although HS2 is now a familiar issue, *it has not yet established itself in clearly defined terms*; either at the rational or emotional levels
- in the absence of a single, overarching position, HS2 currently exists in the public mind as a jumble of disparate elements
- these are usually very limited, fragmentary, incomplete and often erroneous
- one of the consequences of the current absence of a 'bigger picture' is that *the resultant vacuum tends to suck in negativity and cynicism*
- this is clearly a function of the collective English psyche; our default position tends to be one *an expectation of failure*
- to an extent, there is a protective element at work here ('protective negativity')
- if things turn out badly, we are not disappointed and even derive satisfaction from being able to say 'I told you so'
- where the result is positive, we are also happy and often deny, through a process of cognitive dissonance, that we previously held a negative view
- the recent London 2012 Games provides a text book example of how this all works in practice
- *such negativity and cynicism typically means that rational claims about HS2 tend to be disbelieved or, at best, not fully trusted*
- even where the rational gains are believed (eg reduction in travelling times), these are often offset by perceived losses which, in many cases, are not actually believed in

- for example, destruction of habitat along the route(s) was often cited as an argument against the project whereas, in reality, most of the population are not actually bothered about such issues
- in essence, if unconvinced or uneducated about the value of the development, such *spurious objections start to become part of the individual belief system*
- at the moment, there is confusion from the most basic to the specific
- the only apparent certainty is that HS2 is being planned to run from London to Birmingham (although maybe never built)
- for some, this may be a new system, for others, an upgrade of the existing network
- it might, or might not, join up with HS1 to give direct or indirect access to Continental Europe
- it might extend to Manchester and/or beyond; or it might end at Birmingham
- some expect that it can be built in 5 years whilst others imagine a time scale in excess of 20+ years
- there will probably be massive temporary and/or permanent destruction of the environment although, some assume, much of the London to Birmingham route will be underground
- the prime concern for all is cost (at a time when people are suffering in economic terms)
- the prime benefit is seen as reduction in travelling time although there is, as yet, little clarity over the actual gain
- confusion, lack of enthusiasm, indifference, negativity and cynicism will continue until HS2 is understood as a rational system
- and, *crucially, given a national purpose which goes beyond a simple increase in speed*

- *every member of the public must be able to look at HS2 and see a positive answer to the question 'what's in it for me'*

Manchester

- the prevailing view here was that HS2 was *not that relevant to the city*
- whereas Birmingham seems to have a relatively close relationship with London, Manchester views itself as a much more independent entity
- almost the London of the North
- in business terms, respondents noted that Manchester related as much to continental Europe as it did to London
- London was obviously important as the UK's financial centre, but Manchester could claim to be a rival in terms of commerce
- Manchester Airport was seen as world class and provided direct or indirect connections to most world destinations of significance; it was not necessary to fly via London
- Manchester also had an impressive and dynamic arts scene which challenged London
- the recent move of the BBC to Salford was seen as an endorsement of the city's status in the UK
- of course, in Manchester, Manchester United is perceived as the best soccer team in the World
- and, although there are some who commute to London regularly, most travel there only when it is absolutely necessary
- the contrast here is with Birmingham where commuting to London is seen as a much more established phenomenon
- *given that London does not figure excessively in the Mancunian collective consciousness, it is unsurprising that interest in a faster connection with the capital is not particularly high*

- further, most respondents noted that, for occasional trips to London, the current service and best travelling times from Manchester were not brilliant but 'good enough'
- *again, in the absence of reason to believe that HS2 would deliver any real benefits to Manchester, negativity and cynicism inevitably filled the existing vacuum*
- primarily, although there was a belief that HS2 would be built as far as Birmingham, rumour suggested a two stage process where any the decisions of any extensions would be made on the basis of the success of the first phase
- given that estimates of completion of the London to Birmingham phase were often as high as 15-20 years, a staggered phasing would mean that Manchester might not be reached until 2050 or later (and certainly not in the life time of some of the older respondents)
- and the project would inevitably be delivered late (cf the speed of development of Chinese railways)
- business respondents noted that, in 15-20 years time, communication within and beyond the UK would probably be via the internet
- already, some large companies conduct meetings via Skype rather than face to face
- as elsewhere, the feeling was that any kick-starting of the economy needed to happen now whereas a HS2 would start to suck in funding immediately (mainly at the niche level; planners, lawyers, surveyors etc) whilst any benefits would not be delivered for many years to come
- *there was also a real concern that the project would not benefit UK construction companies since infrastructure and rolling stock contracts often went elsewhere*
- claiming that HS2 would generate 100,000 new jobs was viewed sceptically
- here the problem is that *the public does not naturally make the cognitive leap between new jobs associated with the HS2 project and increased employment as*

a result of the regeneration of local economies and the creation of new business opportunities

- yet this generation/regeneration message needs to be central to the HS2 promise if the benefiting locations, and the UK as a whole, are to become supporters of the project
- and, for Manchester, generation appeared to be the keyword
- language is important here; *regeneration implies a rescue* whereas *generation implies building towards further future success*
- by contrast, for Barnsley, regeneration was seen as both apt and acceptable
- for all locations, the most positive promises were primarily emotional
- a few rational messages were unquestioned; train speed and travelling times
- but others tended to be viewed cynically; 'generate benefits of up to £45billion'
- or to be of limited significance; '100,000 jobs' (short term, niche)
- for Manchester, the primary role of HS2 needs to be expressed in enhancing opportunity within the UK through a modern rail infrastructure
- *for both Manchester and Birmingham, there is a need to avoid any impression of HS2 being the 21st century railway with the current continuing to be unfit for purpose and well behind the times*
- in this sense, HS2 seems pointless if it simply feeds into a dilapidated second tier network
- worse, such an imbalanced network smacks of a service for the elite who can afford to pay for the best service and those who must cope with the cheaper second rate
- *if HS2 is couched in terms of an integrated network, then Manchester will recognise a significant local benefit*

- more opportunities within the UK since a more healthy and balanced UK economy can only be good for the North West
- as with the other locations, such a promise needs to position HS2 as a nationwide asset and *not simply one which puts London in touch with the regions*
- much of the language in the messages used in this research directly, or indirectly, was London-Centric
- for Manchester, this undervalues the local economy and achievements
- and for all locations, *inherently implies that the primary beneficiary will be London*
- with London sucking in more and more opportunities, skills and commuters from the regions and thus depriving the likes of Barnsley and, particularly, Birmingham, of new possibilities of investment and regeneration
- even where 'rebalancing' was mentioned, this used London and the South East as starting point
- promises of such 'rebalancing' tend to be viewed cynically (a few crumbs...) and overly political
- by contrast, when the impression is one of a national *network* rather than as a spine originating in London, there is much more interest
- thus, giving travelling times between Birmingham and Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham (and so on) helped here
- although a slightly flawed analogy, the need to is think of the most appealing structure as a neural net within the brain rather than as the circulation of the blood which depends on the central dominance of the heart
- *if local communities believe that HS2 will put them on the national map (rather than more closely in touch with London), respondents felt that this would encourage the opportunity, confidence, investment and enterprise which is currently at a very low level*

Barnsley

- Barnsley respondents were clearly the most engaged of the sample
- most were aware that HS2 would link the main cities, Birmingham, London and Manchester, and there was the belief that it would reach Leeds and that Sheffield might be on the system
- of the three locations, there was a degree of excitement here although one tempered with the concerns about time-scale and costs
- *Barnsley currently sees itself as a poor relation of Sheffield and Doncaster*
- in this sense, it does not relate to London directly but through those places
- a fast link to London (even through, say, Sheffield) would still be seen as giving Barnsley a new position in the UK economy (an identity, a status and a presence which it currently feels it lacks)
- significantly, *Barnsley respondents were able to make the cognitive leap from the speed offered by HS2 to one of local gain*
- in a way that Birmingham and Manchester respondents did not initially do
- for Barnsley, speed is immediately equated with 'moving into the fast lane' and thus a new significance in the UK
- the prevailing view, especially amongst business respondents was that HS2 would create opportunity, give confidence and thus improve the local economy; moving it out of the shadows
- however, the main concern was that a fast link to London might, in fact, deliver the reverse
- making it easier for London to 'asset strip' the regions and to suck the remaining life out of places that currently offered little to local people

- indeed, as one respondent noted, the Y symbolic representation of the planned route looked ominously like a funnel; channelling all into London and creating ghost towns
- at the moment, Barnsley and Rotherham are effectively supply towns to Sheffield and Doncaster; an arrangement which works reasonably well
- providing a fast link to London would upset this local balance and thus exacerbate the North/South divide; and speedily
- *in short, speed without increased local opportunity is not only seen as pointless but actually quite dangerous and potentially destructive*
- however, if HS2 is positioned in terms of local opportunity, the picture becomes very appealing and such rational issues (as increased employment, return on investment, efficient infrastructure, time savings and so on) are natural consequences which the public can understand and believe in
- without this basis, rational claims tend to be viewed sceptically

Birmingham

- it was accepted that HS2, if built, would join London and Birmingham
- *it might, as a second phase, extend further (probably to Manchester) but interest in this was extremely limited*
- Manchester is readily accessible by road (not much more than 90 minutes) and Leeds was simply seen as being of 'no importance whatsoever'
- although the UK's second city, *Birmingham seems to lack both the clear identity and self-confidence evident in 'independent' Manchester*
- in essence, Birmingham sees itself as one end of a strong but unequal axis with London at the other pole
- further, the flow here is perceived as unbalanced with Birmingham feeding into the London on a daily basis
- people commute for employment, people travel for entertainment and leisure, businessmen travel to London offices
- *London exerts a magnetic force which is very evident in Birmingham and much less so in Manchester*
- the prime concern over HS2 is that it would simply *exacerbate this imbalance*
- for example, more people would take advantage of cheaper Birmingham housing and commute every day
- in socio-cultural terms, Birmingham lacks strong self-belief
- the imagination is that Londoners would not want to move to, or visit, Birmingham because the inhabitants are somehow 'odd' (funny accents, culturally backward and, at a disguised level, ethnically imbalanced)
- in short, *HS2 would benefit London much more than Birmingham*

- in the absence of any clear local benefit, the common response was clearly 'do we need it' (and not at a high cost)
- whereas it was accepted that the current rail network was overstretched (in terms of train capacity at rush hours) and unreliable, it was 'not that bad'
- although HS2 might offer a more reliable and extremely fast alternative, this would probably be expensive and for the 'rich' (eg businessmen on expenses) and would have little benefit to ordinary travellers
- a parallel here was drawn with the local M6 Toll Road which had been 'sold' to Birmingham as a solution to local traffic on the main M6
- in fact, it seemed to be underused and, as a consequence, progressively more expensive to cover the cost of its existence
- however, *the notion of a two tier rail system is not inherently seen as a bad one*
- but only if the second tier is raised to an *equivalent standard of quality and performance*
- the concern, here and elsewhere, was that HS2 would be great (exciting speeds of up to 225 mph) whilst the rest of the network would probably deteriorate even further
- clearly, when presenting HS2, the need is avoid presenting it as a 'stand alone' spine, but rather as the energetic structure within a total network
- ***a regenerated network, with HS2 at its centre, has immediate consequences in communicating the regeneration of the UK economy***
- the perceived benefits to Birmingham tended to be seen as parochial and limited
- revitalised areas around the HS2 terminal (assumed to be New Street) but these mainly related to service industries (taxis, shops, coffee bars)
- since London would become even 'closer', development of real business and commerce would not really flourish and might even deteriorate

- *however, there was some support for the notion that HS2 might be able to rationalise the existing network; freeing up local services to operate more effectively*
- especially in terms of reducing overcrowding and taking freight off the roads (and so making life on the complex Birmingham motorway network much easier)
- as with the other locations, *HS2 needs to be presented to Birmingham in local terms*
- the default view is that London will be the winner
- *but as the primary destination on HS2, Birmingham has an opportunity to rebrand itself, not as an alternative to London but as the powerhouse that keeps London working*
- no other UK city has the proximity, scale and resources to fill such a crucial role in the UK economy
- *Birmingham gaining by the service of London's needs*

Overview

- *in order to capture widespread imagination and support, HS2 needs to a national story which must be expressed in local terms*
- the national story is that HS2 is bedrock of a totally revitalised railway system which will be fit for the UK in the 21st Century
- each destination will need to demonstrate how it will gain, how it will match the opportunity with local initiatives
- for Barnsley, a point of access to the whole UK economy
- for Birmingham, the indispensable support for London
- for Manchester, building on the region's current success and ascendancy (even making it more accessible from London; cf BBC)
- importantly, avoid facts and defensive positions
- the overarching vision (of national investment to drive local growth) is essential both to discourage negativity and cynicism and, of course, to ensure engagement; *avoid a vacuum now*
- *on the basis of this research, the core notion that 'HS2 will be an engine for growth' remains both relevant and credible but its local expression will be critical*