

COI Research Management Summary on behalf of DfT
High Speed Rail Consultation – qualitative research (March 2011)
COI Reference number: 404954

Background

The Government is proposing to build a high speed rail (HSR) network across Britain, starting with a route between London and Birmingham (HS2). Qualitative research was commissioned as part of consultation activity to understand the knowledge that communities on the line of route, frequent business travellers and members of the general public have about HSR/HS2 and how they feel about the project overall.

Research objectives

To ascertain public perceptions of the HSR/HS2 project, in particular to explore:

- The levels and types of concerns within and without the proposed line of route
- Understanding of the economic, environmental and social arguments for HSR/HS2
- The best way of phrasing the explanations that outline the case for HSR/HS2.

Sample and method

18 x 1½ hour group discussions:

- 6 groups with residents living along the proposed line of route
- 6 groups with business people travelling at least once a month between London, Manchester and Birmingham
- 6 groups with members of the general public living outside of the proposed line of route.

Fieldwork dates

Research was conducted between 3rd and 10th March 2011.

Fieldwork locations

Fieldwork was conducted in:

- Aylesbury, Brackley and Leamington Spa (residents)
- London, Manchester and Birmingham (business travellers)
- Bristol, Milton Keynes and Norwich (general public).

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Public perceptions of HSR/HS2

Residents along the proposed route were broadly negative, due to the perceived negative impact on the community/environment; business travellers along the proposed route tended to be positive, due to an expectation of improved travel times and passenger experiences; and members of the general public were often undecided due to a lack of perceived information about the proposals.

Within this, there were variations according to behavioural and demographic factors:

- Rail users and the most frequent business travellers were more likely to be positive than those using rail travel less frequently, due to greater perceived personal benefit
- Men and younger people were more likely to be more positive than women and older people, as the former tended to place greater importance on keeping up with technological developments and international competitors than the latter
- Those living in urban areas were more likely to be positive than those living in rural locations, due to their general greater access to the rail network.

Levels of pre-existing knowledge about HSR/HS2 varied greatly, ranging from this being highly detailed and accurate (some residents), to being non-existent and/or inaccurate (some members of the general public).

2. **Understanding of the economic, environmental and social arguments for HSR/HS2¹**

‘Investing in the future’ was the most emotive benefit, with many agreeing that Britain cannot afford to be left behind international competitors. However, more information was required relating to how HSR/HS2 would help to build a modern economy and why it was needed.

‘Bringing Britain closer together’ was accepted literally, as HSR/HS2 would make travel faster between key cities. There were also positive reactions to the idea of job/wealth creation. However, there was scepticism that HSR/HS2 alone would serve to regenerate urban centres and change the way business is conducted.

‘New lines and new trains’ elicited consistent support, given that many had experienced overcrowding on the existing network. It was felt that the benefits regarding the broader customer travel experience, e.g. fewer delays, more comfort and better on-train facilities etc, could also be more strongly communicated. However, participants wanted more information about why new lines, rather than an upgrade, are needed. There was interest in more information on the integration of HS2 with existing lines, as well as further explanation of the reference to ‘no net increase in carbon emissions’.

Environment: the impact on the community/countryside was of great concern to residents; others tended to feel that some impact was inevitable.

¹ Please see the appended stimulus for the full wording of the arguments discussed in the groups

Need: consistent questions about perceived need were raised, which included: whether HSR/HS2 should be a priority in the context of public sector spending cuts; why existing lines cannot be used; whether the time savings are significant enough to justify the spend; and whether business people will continue to travel rather than use the internet more for business purposes.

Finance: there were high levels of concern about potential over-spend on the construction of HS2. It was also anticipated that fares would be expensive and, even if they were reasonable to start with, would creep up over time. There were repeated requests for guarantees from the Government relating to ongoing regulation of fare levels.

3. The best way of phrasing the explanations that outline the case for HSR/HS2

Top line communication would ideally link the international, national and personal as detailed below:

'A national high speed rail link will help Britain to plan for and invest in the future

- *High speed rail will introduce world leading technology into the British rail network*
- *The new lines will improve the speed and efficiency of the network overall, for everyone*
 - *This will provide much needed extra capacity for passengers and freight operators*
 - *There will be better/more reliable links between cities*
- *The new trains will provide a better experience for passengers*
 - *More comfortable service, with better on board facilities and fewer delays*
- *Construction will boost the economy by creating jobs and wealth in the long term'*

Key supports to this that would be required include information on:

- What precisely is being proposed (in terms of a new line being built, the route, journey times, train frequency, how it will link into the existing network and likely service facilities)
- The capacity issues that will be experienced on the West Coast Main Line in the future and reasons for a new build rather than upgrade
- Costs and timescales
- Pricing and fare structures
- The evidence for job/wealth creation and how this would affect different areas of the country
- Any environmental advantages that HSR/HS2 would have over other transport options
- How the damage to the environment and local communities would be minimised (and how this has been done on similar projects, if relevant).