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MPs debate High Speed 2 (Heathrow)

Tue, 17 July 2012 | Debate - Adjournment and General

Summary

The Government was assessing plans to link the proposed HS2 project to Heathrow Airport, MPs heard today.

Responding to a debate on High Speed 2 and Heathrow, Transport Minister Theresa Villiers said reliable rail and road access was vital to the success of the UK's airports, as it improved passenger experience, boosted the air freight sector, improved air quality and reduced carbon emissions.

Therefore the Government was committed to working with airport operators, local authorities and local enterprise partnerships to improve surface access to major airports across the country, she added.

Turning specifically to Heathrow, the Minister explained that the Crossrail project would provide new services that linked the airport directly with the west end, the City and Canary Wharf for the first time.

The Government had last week announced funding for a new rail line to Heathrow from the Great Western main line near Slough, she added.

Ms Villiers noted the interest of MPs in how the Government could "take advantage" of the electrification and east-west rail proposals to further improve and enhance access to Heathrow airport.

Continuing, she explained that over the coming months more work was needed to refine and assess the delivery time of these proposals, as well as to consider route options.

The scheme remained "subject to the delivery of a robust business case", the Minister added, and the Government hoped to "secure funding contributions from the Heathrow aviation community".

The new line giving western access to Heathrow could be operational by around 2020 or 2022, she explained.

Turning to HS2, Ms Villiers said Phase 1, expected to open in 2026, would ensure passengers from the Midlands and the North would be able to "connect as seamlessly as possible with the Heathrow Express at a new station at Old Oak common".

A direct connection with Heathrow was planned as part of Phase 2, which would follow in 2032-33, she added.

Drawing to a close, Ms Villiers recognised that any new rail projects in the area would inevitably have an environmental impact and would affect local communities.

The Government would take these concerns into account, and would do everything in its power to mitigate any negative impacts of HS2, she promised, which represented an important opportunity to boost growth and jobs across the country.

Shadow National Transport Minister John Woodcock agreed there was an urgent need to improve transport links to Heathrow.

“The proposed construction of a rail spur to link destinations to the west of Heathrow directly to the airport could bring real improvements,” he explained.

Despite its importance, the airport suffered from very poor rail links to much of the country, he noted. For example, he added, passengers from Cumbria would have to make as many as four changes to reach Heathrow.

The Old Oak common interchange with Crossrail would make for an easier journey to Heathrow for many people, Mr Woodcock said, but was no substitute for a through train.

Opening the debate, Conservative MP Geoffrey Clifton-Brown noted that of the 650,000 passenger journeys from Oxford to Heathrow each year, 98.9 per cent took place by road. A Heathrow station and a new hub with fast transport links to the main airport would provide a solution, he argued.

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High Speed 2 (Heathrow) [Dr William McCrea in the Chair] 2.30 pm Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr McCrea, and I am delighted to see that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State is present. I am sure that she has lots of better things to do on an afternoon such as this, and it is a great pleasure to have her and other colleagues, all of whom are friends, in the debate.

There have been a number of Government announcements about rail investment over the past few days, so today's debate is most timely. Let me state from the outset that I stand fully behind the Government's proposed investments in our rail and high-speed rail networks. In order to allow our economy to compete with its European and global counterparts, it is vital that we have a truly world-class infrastructure.

I shall begin my remarks by discussing briefly the issue of western access to Heathrow—a matter of interest to my constituents in the Cotswolds—and I will then discuss the connectivity, or lack of, between High Speed 2 and Heathrow. It is, of course, possible for my constituents, and others in the west and south-west, to reach Heathrow by rail, but the requirement to change trains acts as a huge disincentive so people travel by road instead. For example, of the 650,000 passenger journeys from Oxford to Heathrow each year, an overwhelming number—98.9%—take place by road, rather than by rail. It is therefore important that all necessary steps are taken to encourage more people from the west of the country to access Heathrow by rail.

The creation of a spur from Reading to Heathrow will benefit those in the immediate vicinities of Reading and Slough, but for those further afield, at least one change of trains will be required. In addition to the Reading link, the creation of a new

Heathrow station and a new hub with fast transport links to the main airport would provide a direct rail link to Heathrow for people in the west, south-west and Wales. Such a hub would act as a gateway to the airport, with connections by road as well as rail. A significant amount of the check-in and logistical facilities could be hosted at the new hub, allowing a complete transformation of the terminal structure at Heathrow airport. That would allow a far more efficient airport structure, with significant benefits for passengers and freight services—that is vital given that Heathrow is responsible for handling over half of the UK's total air freight.

Given that we are in the process of electrifying the Great Western main line, we have a huge opportunity to create a fantastic rail and aviation link between the east and west of the country, with potentially huge benefits for people and businesses in the west, south-west and Wales. In my view, that goes hand in hand with the construction of HS2, which is the most costly single project ever envisaged by the Government.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I apologise for intervening so early, but I may have to go to the other Chamber for a debate. Will the hon. Gentleman

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explain where he thinks such a hub would be located? What are his best views on the options for the hub's location?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I will explain, but it was not my purpose to favour any one particular commercial option in this speech. A site is available within the vicinity of the interchange of the M25 and the M4, and there may well be others. It is a significant site of about 500 acres of largely disused land, so a possibility is available.

John McDonnell: Is that the Iver site?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I believe it is.

As I was saying, HS2 is the most costly single project ever envisaged by the Government, and will probably require more than the £34 billion often quoted. That figure is based largely on the assumption that 70% of HS2 users will be leisure passengers, and that seems a somewhat optimistic projection of income given that those people are price sensitive rather than time sensitive. To provide the House with a comparison, £34 billion compares with the £25 billion cost of the Trident replacement, and with the £17 billion for the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers and aircraft. HS2 is, therefore, a massive capital infrastructure project.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He talked about HS2 being phenomenally expensive, and he has mentioned that a number of assumptions have been made. Does he believe that it would be important and useful to have an independent review of HS2 and its usefulness to the economy?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: In light of what I am about to say about the alternative hub possibility, it may be that some form of review of the whole HS2 route would be a

good idea. Perhaps my hon. Friend's concerns and my suggestions could be incorporated into one study.

In this Parliament alone we will be spending £750 million on HS2 before a spade enters the ground, with £529 million to be spent between 2012 and 2015, according to answers to my written parliamentary questions, Nos. 106148 and 106541. With the greatest humility, I say to the Minister that it is vital that we get the scheme right. It is no good commencing works only to realise at a later date that we could have done something better, because by that point it will be too late to change course. The UK has lagged behind our European counterparts in the construction of a high-speed rail project, but that presents us with an opportunity to take on board what has worked previously, and learn from mistakes made in other countries. There appears to be a lack of a strategic link between our aviation and rail policies. Indeed, as the Transport Committee in its recent report on high-speed rail stated:

“The development of what could emerge as separate strategies for rail and aviation again highlights the absence of an overall transport strategy: this is a lacuna which must be filled.”

Mr Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. On the relationship between aviation and rail,

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does he think that by the time the project is actually completed, there may well be a totally different set of circumstances as far as air transport is concerned?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I anticipated that sort of intervention, and perhaps I will cover the hon. Gentleman's point in my speech. If I do not, I will be happy to give way to him later in the debate.

We need only to look at the Netherlands, Germany and France, and at airports such as Schiphol, Frankfurt and Charles de Gaulle, to see the routeing of new high-speed lines via hub airports to create a direct interchange between air, high-speed rail, and the existing classic rail network. The purpose of linking Heathrow and HS2 is to provide an integrated rail and aviation system that would release scarce airport capacity by shifting short-haul flights to rail.

The current proposal is to build a spur from HS2 to Heathrow. However, that will not happen until the 2030s at the earliest, so at best, Heathrow will not receive a high-speed rail link for around 20 years. If HS2 were linked directly to Heathrow under the proposals that I am outlining, it would receive a high-speed link soon after construction on phase 1 begins in 2026.

Another important design factor is that because the spur points only north, rail services between Heathrow and Europe would not be possible, and the potential for replacing short-haul flights will not be fully realised. We would, therefore, have to wait even longer until the spur has been extended to form a southern loop around Heathrow to connect it with HS1, but no plans are in place for that, let alone a firm

budget. Again, I say with great humility to the Minister that no other country deliberately seeks to bypass its main airport in that way.

The spur is also inherently inefficient as it relies solely on airport passengers filling trains. European precedents show the benefit of having airports on a main line, thereby allowing trains to serve both city-to-city and airport passengers, like a string of pearls linking each together.

Mr Donohoe: In a previous Adjournment debate, one question was never raised although it might have solved a lot of problems. Is the hon. Gentleman aware—as a regular customer of the airport, I am—of the distances and time it takes to travel between terminals at Heathrow? As a consequence of those times and distances, a single hub railway station would not really make a lot of difference.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The hon. Gentleman picks up a very important point. I was not going to have time to make it in my speech, but I will now answer his intervention. I believe that it would be perfectly possible to have, from the hub that I am suggesting, a relatively high-speed bus that not only takes people into a terminal at Heathrow, but takes them directly to where the aircraft are. There are all sorts of exciting possibilities to make passenger journeys an awful lot easier than they are at present.

In the “Draft Aviation Policy Framework”, published last Friday by the Government, they recognise the following:

“Rail offers opportunities for efficient and environmentally-friendly connections to airports, particularly for larger airports where passenger numbers are sufficient to justify fast and frequent services.”

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Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to the House. When the Civil Aviation Bill was discussed in Committee and on the Floor of the House, rail links were clearly important factors. The hon. Gentleman is outlining that case now. Does he believe that if a rail link is established along the lines that he is suggesting, that will provide an economic boost? I am thinking of, for instance, connections with the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India and China—the world’s developing economies, where job opportunities come from and where contacts are made. Does he believe that there will be job creation in his constituency and other constituencies as a result?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: That is why I think that world-class infrastructure is vital—for job creation and economic prosperity—but it is also vital, when spending these very large sums, to ensure that we have the best solution. I will go on to explain why I believe that my proposal not only is cheaper, but could be delivered quicker and will produce a better result.

As there is no airport in the UK larger and more important than Heathrow, which alone accounts for 1% of the UK’s GDP, should we not do whatever we can to improve rail links, including with the HS2 project, as I was saying to the hon.

Gentleman? The Government have repeatedly stated their wish to see Heathrow become a “better, not bigger” airport, but Heathrow continues to grow in terms of the numbers of passengers using the airport. That is something that we should celebrate, frankly. However, air quality, congestion and delays are already significant issues at Heathrow and, in the case of the air quality, it is illegal. Without an integrated approach to surface access, Heathrow’s challenges can only get worse.

How would a direct link between Heathrow and HS2 help? The answer can be found in the Conservative party’s rail review, published in opposition by the Minister. Although she will not thank me for quoting it, I will nevertheless. It clearly sets out the benefits of integrating air and rail infrastructure. It states:

“Good connections to major airports...also significantly enhance the benefits of high speed rail. So a Conservative Government will support proposals...for a new Heathrow rail hub. This would link Heathrow terminals directly into the main rail network and the lines to Reading, Oxford, Bristol, Plymouth, Cardiff, Swansea, Cheltenham and Southampton, greatly improving public transport links to the airport.”

It also stated:

“The plan would also include construction of a new high speed link connecting Heathrow...to the Channel Tunnel Rail link and the new route north, providing a viable alternative to thousands of short haul flights now clogging up the airport. By freeing up landing slots, our proposal would help tackle overcrowding problems and allow more space for long haul flights, making Heathrow a much better airport, but without the environmental damage that would be caused by a third runway.”

I could not have put it better myself.

It is potentially billions of pounds cheaper to route the high-speed line via a Heathrow interchange on the Great Western main line, compared with the current proposal for the development of a series of branch lines, loops and spurs. The current costs of building HS2 from London to Birmingham, followed by a spur from HS2 to Heathrow and then a loop to rejoin the HS2 main line at Old Oak Common, is projected to be in the region of £20.5 billion to £20.7 billion. However,

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a connection along the lines that I am suggesting, between HS1 and HS2, connected directly to Heathrow and then on to Birmingham and further north, is projected to cost £17.5 billion, which represents a significant saving on the current proposal. That route, I believe, would be quicker to build, and the passage of the hybrid Bill through Parliament might well be easier, as there would be fewer objections.

Shifting passengers from road to rail and making Heathrow operate more efficiently by reducing passenger and aircraft overcrowding means that the environmental impacts will be reduced. Let me give an example. Unite the Union calculates that a B747 taxiing and holding for 40 minutes on the ground—a not uncommon occurrence at Heathrow—uses as much fuel as it does at cruise altitude from the UK to New

York. Of course, that not only contributes to Heathrow's air quality failing to comply with legal limits, but increases airlines' costs. Additionally, the relocation—the point that the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) was making—of landside facilities outside the existing congested airport site will create more space for aircraft, allowing for more efficient operations. It is suggested that removing unnecessary ground facilities and streamlining the structures of the terminals at Heathrow could allow the creation of an additional 18% of air capacity in one fell swoop. Although that would not remove the demand for a third runway at Heathrow, it would certainly provide the breathing space necessary for the Government to undertake full consideration of the options available to them, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) suggested.

A high-speed route via Heathrow also avoids the major environmental impacts of the current proposals on the Chilterns and west London. It would follow the example of HS1 by following motorway corridors and the shortest route through an area of outstanding natural beauty, with tunnelling below existing rail corridors where the new line passes through urban areas. The proposed route of HS2 will pass underground from Euston to Old Oak Common before moving overground through large parts of densely populated west London. The line then goes through 20.8 km of an AONB, of which 7.6 km will be above ground and the remaining 13.2 km in a tunnel.

My alternative route via Heathrow would see the entire route through west London tunnelled underneath the Great Western main line before surfacing near Heathrow. Of course, that would involve significantly more tunnelling in London than the current proposals. However, the greatest costs of tunnelling are in the initial set-up. The cost per mile of tunnelling drops as we tunnel further. That approach would greatly reduce noise and air pollution during the construction phase for very large numbers of people. It would follow the precedent set by HS1: much of the line is tunnelled under London, with only a 1-mile section approaching St Pancras overground. It would then have far less surface impact than the current HS2 route, which will pass overground through vast swathes of west London.

The line would then proceed overground to Beaconsfield in the M40 corridor before entering a 12-km tunnel through the entire width of the Chilterns AONB at its narrowest point. In other words, the impact on the

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Chilterns would be minimised. This tunnel not only would be shorter, but would remove almost entirely the impact of HS2 on the AONB. That might assuage the extremely vocal and well funded local opposition groups that have been set up and that are heavily involved in the judicial review proceedings against the Government in relation to the current HS2 proposals.

Directly connecting Heathrow with the UK's regions and Europe in the first phase of high speed rail allows rail to replace both domestic and European short-haul flights, releasing vital additional capacity and resilience while linking the UK's regions to the country's hub airport. Improving access from the UK regions to Heathrow, our only

hub, means that business links with global markets are improved, giving passengers the choice of flying via Heathrow or from regional airports.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington would agree with this. The UK is beginning to lose the aviation advantage that we have consistently had in the past by offering more flights to Asia. Heathrow is now losing out to airports such as Charles de Gaulle, Schiphol and Frankfurt, which are offering more flights to Asian destinations. The knock-on effect is that businesses—

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): That is just not true. Heathrow is one of the most successful hub airports in the world. It offers more flights to BRIC destinations; it offers more flights to China than any of its continental rivals. London is arguably the best-connected city in the world, with far more connections than equivalent cities around Europe, including connections to 360 destinations worldwide.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: With great respect to my right hon. Friend, that may be true for routes to north America, but I think that it is beginning to be—[Hon. Members: “No.”] Let us look at the figures. I think that for secondary Chinese airports, Frankfurt is beginning to overtake Heathrow. I am happy to stand corrected on that, if it is not true. The knock-on effect is that businesses are likely to locate to where the best air connections are, not only for passengers, but for freight.

Are there any disadvantages to the approach I am outlining? The answer, in my view, is not really. Birmingham is as far west of London as it is north, so it is incorrect to say that a route west of HS2's alignment is somehow taking the line out of its way. A diversion of HS2 via Heathrow will add perhaps only three minutes to journey time for trains to stop at Heathrow. I suggest that that is immaterial when set against the benefits I outline. Indeed, British Airways and HS2's own external challenge groups confirm that, in reality, passengers do not ascribe any value to such small journey time savings, and claiming that each minute saved is worth £0.6 billion seems rather simplistic.

The direct linking of Heathrow and HS2 and improved access to Heathrow from the west would provide enormous benefits to the people and businesses in my constituency and many others to the west of Heathrow. It is, as I have said, vital, given the costs involved, that we maximise the benefits of high-speed rail.

I am fully supportive of the project in principle, and I am certainly not calling for the Government to abandon and give up on all the good work they have done so far.

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I would urge the Minister however to use the opportunity, before the hybrid Bill is introduced to Parliament, to pause and reflect on whether the direction we are taking, both physically and metaphorically, is the right one. If we take time to consider an integrated approach to air and rail, we can consider the entire HS2 route at the same time. We could then start construction from both north and south in order that the completion date is not extended.

Though it is obviously only one element of the HS2 project, the decreasing business case ratio for HS2, which now stands at 1.2:1, is another reason why we should examine the matter further. Indeed, as the Secretary of State's predecessor, the now Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), said in evidence to the Select Committee on Transport: "If it"—the business case ratio—

"were to fall much below 1.5, I would certainly be putting it under some very close scrutiny."

Given the importance of putting in place world-class infrastructure, it is vital that the Government retain an open mind. I look forward to hearing what my right hon. Friend the Minister has to say on the matter. I would be grateful if she agreed to meet me and other interested colleagues once Parliament has returned in September, to discuss this matter in further detail.

Not only would the hub proposal enormously improve road, rail and air connectivity, it is also a win-win: it is potentially cheaper; the disturbance and environmental pollution in densely populated areas of London is reduced; the damage to the Chilterns AONB is far less; and the connectivity to Heathrow for my constituents, businesses in the Cotswolds and others in the west, south-west and Wales is greatly improved. In short, it is the sort of strategic infrastructure investment that the UK needs to project us back towards the top echelons of global competitiveness for the duration of the 21st century.

2.53 pm John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I apologise to the Minister; I cannot be here for her response because I will be in the debate in the main Chamber. I congratulate the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on securing the debate. It is an invaluable debate to secure at this time.

In several debates on the issue, I have expressed concerns that the High Speed 2 consultation did not include the Heathrow link as part of a comprehensive consultation on the overall route. The consultation on the Heathrow link was done separately, which was incongruous to say the least. So far, we have witnessed 11 separate options for the link between high-speed rail and Heathrow, in addition to the hub proposal that has been brought forward. I would welcome more information from the Minister in due course on the exact route of the western link into Heathrow announced yesterday.

High-speed rail has consequences for my borough. Despite the Government's welcome assurances on the tunnelling that will go ahead, areas of Hillingdon will still be directly impacted by high-speed rail. It will have a deleterious effect on people's homes and local communities. I would welcome further information on

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the Government's consideration of the representations that have been made by the London borough of Hillingdon and others.

Mr Donohoe: Can my hon. Friend, as one of the local Members, indicate the time it takes to travel between the terminals—terminals 1 to 5—and the distances? I have looked at it, and it does not make a lot of sense to have a hub outwith the airport.

John McDonnell: That is an extremely valid point. To give BAA its due, it is looking at the efficiency of the transportation of passengers within the airport complex. I do not necessarily think my hon. Friend's point negates the full argument about a hub, but it certainly undermines some of the arguments for it.

The hub option was raised previously, as well as in local consultations that I undertook, and it would have environmental consequences for that part of west London, particularly West Drayton, which is located fairly close to the proposed Iver site. Some green belt areas would also be lost. In addition, there are concerns about the links from the hub into Heathrow airport. Whether there is a high-speed bus link or a separate direct railway line to the airport from the hub, there will be consequences, depending on the route, for the Heathrow villages, which have only just recovered from the threat of the third runway. If there is not to be a hub, and one of the 11 direct-link options is taken up, the link will travel through my constituency and, I say to the Minister, we would expect the same commitment to tunnelling as has been given to other areas, to avoid the environmental impacts on people's homes and communities.

The Government tell us that the consultation on the next stage will be in the autumn. When we raised that matter with the Secretary of State, there was an indication that interested Members may well receive some form of briefing on some of the narrowed options being considered in advance of the formal consultation. I would welcome the opportunity to bring together interested Members, as the hon. Member for The Cotswolds said, to discuss with Ministers the range of narrowed options and the consequences for our individual constituencies, to ensure that we can provide local input into the Government's final consideration, but also highlight the impacts on our individual communities.

As I have said in previous debates, to be frank, having separate consultations on the main line and on the link into Heathrow is no way to plan a railway network. Let us now make up the ground and ensure that there is full involvement of MPs in the final stage of consideration and, after that, of whole communities in the consultations on the implications of the different options that the Government are exploring. None of the options is free from environmental consequences, certainly within my area. Many of my constituents would welcome a more efficient Heathrow, as other Members have said, because many of them work there, but they want to protect their local communities and homes from any further direct environmental impacts that might result.

I welcome the debate. I do not believe the hub is necessarily the solution. It has consequences. We need early consideration of the range of options as soon as possible, to give some certainty to local communities and to avoid the continuation of what is becoming a blight—certainly on my area.

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2.58 pm Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr McCrea. I add my congratulations to those that others have given to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on securing this important debate. I agree with the thrust of much of what he said.

Let me start by welcoming the Government's announcement of the western spur link to Heathrow. It will greatly improve Heathrow's rail connectivity to the west and to some areas to the north. I have slightly higher ambitions for the link than my hon. Friend. If we combined that spur with the electrification of the Great Western line and the extra pass it would create, it might be possible to schedule direct services from the west into Heathrow. I do not have the exact timetable modelling to hand, but I believe that it would be possible.

In conjunction with the welcome announcement of the east-west rail link, which goes through my constituency and will also be electrified, it is proposed that some trains will run from Reading to Oxford and then over to Milton Keynes and Bedford. I see no reason why those services should not start at Heathrow, which would be most welcome in my part of the world. Such a move would boost the connectivity of Milton Keynes and our local enterprise area and be attractive for inward investment. The announcement is certainly welcome and hugely significant.

Let me turn to High Speed 2 and its connections with Heathrow. As a member of the Transport Committee, I have looked at the matter in some detail. For some time, I have taken the view that we must look at our strategic rail and aviation policies as two parts of the same whole. They cannot be looked at in isolation from each other, and I have a number of suggestions on which I hope the Minister will reflect.

One of the ambitions for high-speed rail is to achieve a modal shift from domestic aviation to high-speed rail, which is welcome. If we look at the upgrade of the west coast main line, there is a significant shift of traffic from Manchester to London from air to rail. High-speed rail offers greater potential to achieve that shift in domestic travel, and, as my hon. Friend said, that will free up some slots at Heathrow for longer-haul destinations. However, that is only part of the answer. The number of slots that that will free up is comparatively small in relation to the total and increasing demand on Heathrow. At present, there are 1.25 million journeys a year from Heathrow to Edinburgh; 1 million to Glasgow; and 800,000 to Manchester, with a significant percentage of those transferring to other flights. Heathrow is not the destination for many people. Strategically siting a Heathrow hub to attract more of that domestic aviation market will offer huge potential and relieve some of the capacity at Heathrow.

I urge the Government to have a think at this critical juncture before we commit to the detailed legislation on High Speed 2 and proceed with the aviation strategy. We should not rush in and commit ourselves to one project that we might later regret. I do not expect a detailed answer from the Minister at this point. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds has mentioned a Heathrow hub, but that is one of many solutions. Others may be available. I urge the Government to use

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this brief interlude to do a bit of strategic thinking and to ask themselves, “Have we got the detail of this right, or are there better options available?”

Let me give a couple of suggestions to illustrate what I mean. If we look at Birmingham airport in conjunction with Heathrow, there is real potential that together they can be regarded as a split hub or a virtual hub. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe) has raised the issue of the travel time between different Heathrow terminals. If—it is a big if—High Speed 2 is constructed efficiently, it will not take much longer to travel between Heathrow and Birmingham airport than it does between Heathrow terminals. It will possibly require air site to air site connections that do not involve changing trains somewhere, but it does, none the less, offer huge potential.

With modest capital expenditure on its runway, Birmingham airport has considerable capacity. It would be perfectly possible for it to be regarded as part of Heathrow—as part of a split hub. I do not think that the detailed planning work has been carried out. Before we get into radical long-term options such as building a third or fourth runway at Heathrow, Boris island or any other option, we should consider much more carefully the potential that we have. I believe that options such as a split hub are possible, but I am not a railway civil engineer; there are people far brainier than me who can determine such things. The option should be considered, because it would find favour with the people at Birmingham airport who are aware of its huge potential.

Mr Donohoe: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is a fellow Scot, for giving way. The biggest problem in transport today is the connectivity between various forms of transport. Unless and until we wake up to the fact that technology is now available to overcome that, all of what he says is meaningless. As somebody who has to travel on a weekly basis, using three or four different forms of transport, I see how much time is wasted every time I have to travel back to my constituency. Until that problem is overcome and is understood by Government, any of the hon. Gentleman’s proposals are of no value whatever.

Iain Stewart: In part, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We must look at journeys as a whole and not as individual component parts. For decades, we, as a country, have not got this right. Improvements could be made in a number of areas, from ticketing arrangements through to big capital investment. Yes, we have to do that, but I am putting forward one idea through which we might be able to achieve better connectivity. A journey from London to New York might involve taking a train for the first part of it. In Germany, such through-ticketing options do exist. The first part of the journey, for example, is on Deutsche Bahn before the passenger transfers on to Lufthansa. Although I agree with the hon. Gentleman, I am more optimistic about the potential to achieve such connectivity.

If High Speed 2 is properly connected to High Speed 1 and the channel tunnel, we will open up the option of achieving a modal shift not only in the number of domestic passengers into Heathrow but in the number of passengers travelling from Heathrow and Birmingham to the near continent, to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam. It would require careful planning. At the moment, it is estimated that the pivotal point for making a rail journey

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more attractive than flying is about three and a half hours. That will probably lengthen as business travellers value properly constructed carriages that allow them to do business during the course of their journey. If we look at the total travel time involved in a journey from Birmingham to Paris, there is real potential to achieve that modal shift, which will free up more capacity for longer-haul destinations without having to resort to the radical options of new runways or a completely new airport.

Let me give a few figures. There are 1.3 million flight passengers a year going from Heathrow to Amsterdam, the same number going to Paris and Frankfurt, and 500,000 to Brussels and Dusseldorf. Therefore, significant capacity at Heathrow could be released if we get the planning right.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: There is another point in my hon. Friend's equation. Railway stations seem to be located in the middle of city centres, whereas airports are on the outskirts of cities, and sometimes considerably so. There is always the necessity for a different type of journey to get to the airports. If we go directly from the centre of Glasgow to the centre of Paris, there may not be too much difference in time with high-speed rail.

Iain Stewart: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. It is not an either/or situation. The line between Frankfurt and Cologne calls at Frankfurt airport, so people have the option of going either to the city centre or to the main airport.

My hon. Friend has put forward the Heathrow hub as a specific model. I do not have any particular detailed knowledge about whether that is the correct solution, but it is one of several possibilities that should be seriously considered.

In essence, that is my point. I do not want the Minister to come back and reject the Heathrow hub or favour another option. I just urge the Government in the recess, when tempers cool down a little and there is time for a little more blue-sky strategic thinking, to use that natural pause in our strategic transport planning to assess whether we have got this matter right or whether we could make some adjustments to improve the capacity of what we have and what is already planned before we start committing ourselves to more radical options, which have all sorts of other issues surrounding them.

On that point, I will conclude and allow other Members to speak in the debate.

3.10 pm Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I am very grateful, Dr McCrea, for the opportunity to speak, and I apologise in advance for not having notified you of my wish to do so. However, bearing in mind the time that we have, it is important that a wide spectrum of opinion on this issue is heard.

As you know, Dr McCrea, I represent South Swindon, which my constituents and I regard as the hub of the Great Western Railway. Swindon is very much a town that looks outwards in terms of its opportunities for growth, jobs and investment. One of the main concerns of businesses in Swindon, the town I have the honour to represent,

is connectivity with Heathrow airport. In many cases, that is a more important issue for my

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constituents than connectivity with the centre of London, which is why the announcement last week by the Department for Transport about the creation of a western connection from Heathrow to the Great Western line was welcome news indeed. Of course, we understand that the control period is up to 2021, but a commitment of just under half a billion pounds is a significant shot in the arm for the economy that I represent. It potentially brings Swindon within 55 minutes of Heathrow airport, if the line from Reading through Maidenhead and Slough to Heathrow is constructed. Electrification would bring greater flexibility and, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) has said, we hope to see a direct service from Swindon and the west to Heathrow airport.

However, the debate today is somewhat more long-term. It is quite a common mistake that we all fall into as politicians in failing to appreciate the amount of time that a lot of these big projects take. We must remind ourselves that the High Speed 2 project is a project that will take 15 years or longer, rather than something that deals with the here and now. Although it is always important to look at the raw facts when it comes to the current operating success of Heathrow, that does not mean that in the medium to long term that position will remain the same. It is important to remember that when we consider this debate and where we are going. We are talking about a long-term future for Heathrow and long-term connectivity and capacity. That is why it is important that the case made so strongly by my hon. Friend is considered very carefully indeed.

I accept that many different permutations and options have been put on the table in the long debate about how we connect Heathrow airport with our rail network. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) was careful to make that point and he is absolutely right to say that neither he nor anybody else has a particular monopoly of wisdom when it comes to the precise nature of such a scheme.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: None of us have.

Mr Buckland: My hon. Friend says, "None of us have", and I reinforce that message. However, it is very important for people such as myself to make a strong plea for the Government to look to the long term and to understand that it is only by achieving direct connectivity to airports such as Heathrow that we will acknowledge the fact that, with the exponential and welcome increase in the use of our railways, the demands upon our network will only become more stringent.

My worry is that we will be standing or sitting here in Westminster Hall in 15 years' time, and looking back and realising that we have missed a great opportunity to rectify an historic anomaly when it comes to an airport of the significance and size of Heathrow. There it was, having been constructed in the post-war era, and it expanded to meet the huge demand placed upon it, and yet there were no direct rail links to it until many years later, when there was the link to Paddington. Now we have more

development, which is welcome indeed. However, those poor rail links to Heathrow are an anomaly of history that we are duty-bound to try to rectify.

That is why it is absolutely vital that, in understanding the potential of HS2 to unlock the north, we must not forget the west. That is the plea I make today, that in

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any future development of HS2 priority is placed upon the need to connect the major airport for our country with the rest of England and the wider UK. Central London is, of course, an important destination, but the businesses that I represent tell me time and time again that it is Heathrow airport that is crucial to their future success. The importance of businesses' ability to link with Heathrow should not be underestimated.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am sorry to keep intervening on my hon. Friends' speeches; both my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) have made very good points.

The reason that I called this particular debate today was that once the planning gets too far down the line—excuse the pun—and particularly when the hybrid Bill has gone through this place, it will be much more difficult to consider alternatives than it is now. Now is the time that we must urge the Minister to stand back, pause and consider whether there are any better alternatives; there may not be, but she should look to see if there are.

Mr Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. When I looked in detail at a map of Old Oak Common—and I am delighted that it will become an important part of this network—one thing struck me very forcibly that I had not realised before, and that is how close the Euston line runs to the Great Western Line. In fact, there is a connecting spur now that allows trains to move between the two networks.

That spur is a metaphor for the debate that we are having today. We are within an ace of getting things right in terms of judging future demand, not only for rail capacity but for the future of our principal airport. As I have said, it would be a missed opportunity, as well as a tragedy, if we were within an ace of getting things right and we then missed the opportunity that, as my hon. Friend says, the hybrid Bill presents. He is right to say that once we proceed down the line of legislation, it will become more difficult to add on various concepts or indeed to get the basic concepts right in the first place. So this debate today is timely, I welcome it and I congratulate him on securing it. I wish to add my voice on behalf of both the west of England and south Wales—let us not forget that region—and the whole growing economy and growing population that need support and proper connectivity with what will continue to be our principal airport for many years to come.

3.17 pm John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Dr McCrea, for the opportunity to speak. It is a great pleasure to serve under you in the Chair.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on securing this important and timely debate today. I commend him for making a speech

that had many excellent and vital points. He will be delighted to hear that I will reinforce those points in my own speech.

This debate is important because, despite the step change when Heathrow was linked to the national network in 1999 and which has already been referred to, its rail links remain inferior to those of most of its European

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competitors and indeed to those of many smaller UK airports. And this debate is timely because last week we had not only the very welcome news of investment in a western rail link to Heathrow but a continuation of the silence about the central issue of airport capacity in the south-east. Of course, this debate is closely tied to that issue. In addition, the issues surrounding the Boston Manor viaduct on the M4 have underlined the fragility of existing transport links to Heathrow, as well as the need for infrastructure resilience and a range of alternative routes.

The proposed construction of a rail spur to link destinations to the west of Heathrow directly to the airport could bring real improvements. Removing the need for a journey via Paddington or a coach from Reading will reduce journey times and it will make rail a more attractive option for hundreds of thousands of airport users each year, cutting congestion on the M4 and other roads. Both the draft aviation strategy framework and the high-level output statement are short on detail, so perhaps the Minister will fill in some of the gaps. What is the status of the £500 million of funding mentioned for the scheme? Does she expect the aviation industry to foot some of the bill? What is the timetable for putting together a business case for the programme, and can she confirm the planned opening date of 2021, which has been mentioned in the media? Is it intended that the link will provide through services from the west of England and south Wales to Heathrow, or will local trains simply shuttle between Reading, Slough and the airport?

Mr Donohoe: Has my hon. Friend considered how long the connection to Scotland will take?

John Woodcock: That, I know, is a continuing and important longer-term issue for High Speed 2. Every time it is raised it is incumbent on us all to stress that even the first phase, as it is currently set out, would reduce journey times to Scotland. Obviously the further north the high-speed line goes, the faster those journey times will be, which we all want.

A western link would provide welcome improved connections, as will the commencement of Crossrail in 2018; but if Heathrow is to function better as a major national airport it needs national connectivity. The airport currently has 70 million passengers a year. Whatever decisions are eventually made on south-east expansion—if they are made—Heathrow will remain dominant for the foreseeable future. Yet for much of the country, it is cosmically hard to access, at present, except by car or a domestic flight. To take the example of my constituents in south Cumbria, there are many business or holiday destinations to which only Heathrow offers a direct flight, and if people want to avoid a five-hour drive and hefty parking charges they consider taking the train. However, they find that that will take just as long and will require

four changes, which is not much fun for people with a lot of luggage, those with a young family, or people who have limited mobility. Instead, many take a domestic flight from Manchester, at financial and environmental cost, or they fly via a European hub airport.

High Speed 2 could help to solve that problem and significantly strengthen Heathrow as a truly national airport. Linking Heathrow into HS2 at the earliest

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possible opportunity would allow for faster, far better integrated journeys between the airport and various northern destinations. Connecting Heathrow would, as has been well explained in several speeches today, make it possible to boost the economies of the regions, reduce road congestion and cut short-haul flights, and, in doing so, begin to address Heathrow's chronic capacity problem. We deeply regret, therefore, that Ministers have chosen to reject Labour's call for the first phase of HS2 to run via Heathrow. Instead, they have opted thus far for an expensive branch line, which it appears will not even be legislated for as part of phase 1 and will not be built until an unspecified future date. Can the Minister provide any more clarity on that point?

An Old Oak Common interchange with Crossrail would indeed make for an easier journey to Heathrow for many people; but it is no substitute, as has been explained today, for a through train. As the hon. Gentleman eloquently explained, the sad thing is that the Minister used to get that. If she does not mind, I shall quote her. In March 2010, just before the general election—how things change—she told the House of Commons that

“the idea that some kind of ‘Wormwood Scrubs international’ station is the best rail solution for Heathrow is just not credible.”—[Official Report, 11 March 2010; Vol. 507, c. 451.]

Hear, hear: but just two years on, that is exactly what the Minister proposes—at least until 2033. Why the volte face? Will she take this opportunity to condemn the potentially deeply damaging briefings from somewhere in Government, suggesting a wobble on the entire project? If she is not wobbling, it is important that she should say so now, and I am delighted to give way.

Mrs Villiers: There is no wobble on this project. HS2 is going ahead.

John Woodcock: The Minister is not for wobbling and we are very pleased to hear it.

Any aviation strategy—and it would be nice to have one—must have as its starting point maximising the efficiency of the capacity that already exists. It is far better to use a slot to land 600 passengers from Beijing than 200 from Manchester. Ministers are right to cite, in their recent document, the potential for code sharing to promote through tickets from international flights to trains; but the key to that success is that the high-speed train should stop at the airport, not several miles away. Further, as has been mentioned, an HS2 link into Heathrow could provide a connection to the existing line to the channel tunnel, raising the possibility of high-speed trains replacing hub flights to nearby European destinations.

There is still time for Ministers to reconsider their stance on HS2. The right hon. Lady knows that high-speed rail commands support across the House. It has the full support of the Opposition, and we are keen to work together to get the necessary legislation on the statute book and to get spades in the ground. However, we will continue to argue that Heathrow should be part of phase 1 of the scheme. A failure to connect Britain's hub airport to its first domestic high-speed line would epitomise the failure to join up UK infrastructure planning—a failure in transport that has bedevilled the country for too long.

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3.27 pm The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): It is a pleasure to respond to an interesting and well-informed debate. I congratulate, as other hon. Members have done, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), on securing it and on his thoughtful and insightful speech on his ideas for the route options for HS2. I thank him and other hon. Members for the support that they have expressed for the announcements that we made yesterday on improving the rail network and for their support in principle for the dramatic further improvement that we will deliver with the HS2 project. It is always welcome to hear Opposition Front Benchers repeat their support for high-speed rail, because it is only with cross-party support that projects of such magnitude can be successful.

The Government have put transport at the heart of their strategy for economic growth and recovery, because improving our transport system is one of the best ways to support British jobs, boost business and create growth. That is one reason for our commitment to the biggest rail capacity expansion programme since the Victorian era. Yesterday, we added a further major package of projects to that already ambitious programme.

We fully accept the importance of high-quality surface access to airports, and we emphasised that point in the aviation framework document that we published last week. We are co-ordinating our rail and aviation policies, and I fully agree with the points made this afternoon about the importance of co-ordination and integration, between air and rail on the ground and in the decision and policy-making processes. That point was made by my hon. and great Friend the Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland), and by my hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). [Interruption.] Well, I have known my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon for 20 years, so he gets an extra-warm mention whenever we are in a debate together.

Reliable rail and road access can obviously contribute greatly to the quality of the passenger experience at our airports, and it is an important component in ensuring that our airports provide high-quality international gateways. It is particularly important to airport workers and crucial to the air freight sector, which is another important UK industry. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds that greater use of rail access to airports has the potential to reduce carbon emissions, as well as relieving road congestion, and also improving air quality, which is a real issue at Heathrow.

Mr Donohoe: I am sure that the Minister has listened to my questions to some of the other contributors this afternoon. Can she tell us how long it takes the passenger who gets out of a plane at terminal 4 to get to terminal 1, and what distance they travel?

Mrs Villiers: Certainly. It takes passenger a while to get from terminal 4 to the other terminals. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue about Heathrow's current layout, and I will come to it in a moment. Despite the adversities, however, Heathrow continues to be a successful airport. I appreciate and understand the point of view of my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds, but one of the fundamental drawbacks of

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his proposed rail hub at Iver, to support Heathrow, is that it would be more than three miles from the airport terminals. What my hon. Friend advocates would compound the problem that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe) has just alluded to, which is that Heathrow is already very spread out.

Returning for a moment to the environmental impact of surface access, I welcome the comments made by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). It is important that we all focus on the environmental impact of surface access, as well on that of aviation. We are committed to working with airport operators, local authorities and local enterprise partnerships to improve surface access to our major airports across the country. Time constrains me from going into detail, but improvements are under way in Manchester and Birmingham, and Luton will get better road access and Gatwick a new station. A tremendous amount of work is under way to improve access at a number of airports.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend is making a helpful speech, but I would not like the four interventions made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe) to colour the debate. With innovative solutions, it is possible for travellers, having checked their bags in at the hub that I propose—or others propose—to get in to a more rationalised Heathrow airport and on to an aeroplane via high-speed rail at considerably increased speeds.

Mrs Villiers: But it remains the case that among the downsides of my hon. Friend's suggestion are the distance from the terminals, the lack of a serious proposal about how that distance will be travelled and a failure to cost the idea.

Returning to the work that is being done on rail access to Heathrow—the subject of the debate—Crossrail is now well under way, more than two decades since it was first proposed, and the tunnel boring machines have started their journey under central London. We expect the Crossrail project to provide new services that link Heathrow directly with the west end, the City and Canary Wharf for the first time. The 2010 spending review confirmed the Government's shared commitment with the Mayor to the tube upgrade programme, which will increase the overall capacity of the London underground network by 30% and improve reliability, benefiting people travelling to Heathrow by tube.

Last week, as has been acknowledged, we announced as part of our aviation policy framework that the Government will provide funding for a new rail line to Heathrow from the Great Western main line near Slough. It would provide significantly improved connections from destinations west of the airport—a point already made—and would cut journey times from those destinations by as much as half an hour. Easier, faster and more convenient access to one of the world's busiest and most successful airports should provide a significant boost to the economies of the Thames valley, south Wales and the west and south-west of England.

I very much welcome the enthusiasm shown by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South about how we might seek to take advantage of the

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electrification and east-west rail proposals, to see if we can further improve and enhance access to Heathrow airport.

The shadow Minister asked a number of questions about the project. More work is needed to refine it and assess delivery time scales over the coming months, including the consideration of route options. The scheme remains subject to the delivery of a robust business case, and we hope to secure funding contributions from the Heathrow aviation community.

Mr Donohoe: When this issue was presented to the House, at the outset, an area of some dubiety was that tunnelling would be cheaper than putting rail above ground. I have talked to a number of civil engineers, and none of them believes in that prospect. Can the Minister shed any light on where the information came from?

Dr William McCrea (in the Chair): I know that the Minister is delighted to look towards her very good friend, and her other hon. Friends, but it is always nice if you turn towards the Chair and look also at Opposition Members.

Mrs Villiers: I do apologise, Dr McCrea, and I shall ensure that I project more efficiently around the room. I have now completely forgotten what the hon. Gentleman asked me about.

Mr Donohoe: Tunnelling.

Mrs Villiers: Yes. It depends on the circumstances. It is important to appreciate that a significant cost associated with tunnelling is that of the disposal of spoil. In certain instances, combining two tunnels might reduce the cost of such disposal, so tunnelling does not end up cheaper than doing something on the surface in every case. However, where we can get synergies between two different projects that reduce the cost of spoil disposal, we can deliver an overall reduction in cost.

On the route options, whether for western access to Heathrow via conventional rail or, in due course, the high-speed rail spur to the airport, we will seriously consider what is viable regarding tunnelling, just as we have done in relation to the rest of the HS2 route. It is too early to make the decisions because they are subject to consultation and

further processes, but we will, of course, seriously consider that, given the areas through which the new lines would go.

In response to the question asked by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness, if things progress smoothly, the new line giving western access to Heathrow could be operational by around 2020 or 2022. No final decisions have yet been made on timetables for direct trains, but we expect there to be through trains from destinations in the west, because that would be the better way to realise the benefits of the programme.

Our high-level output specification proposals, announced last week, to improve access to Heathrow from the west will complement our work on HS2, which we expect to provide greatly improved access to the airport from destinations in the midlands and the north of England. We are taking a phased approach to HS2.

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In phase 1, when the London to Birmingham line is built, we want passengers from the west midlands, Manchester and other cities in the north to be able to connect as seamlessly as possible with the Heathrow Express at a new station at Old Oak common. Phase 1 is expected to open in 2026, and will include a direct connection to Birmingham airport. I welcome the interesting ideas proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South about how we might use that improved surface access to Birmingham to help the airport flourish and attract more aviation passengers, potentially from the south-east, given the improved rail access that HS2 will deliver.

Phase 2 will follow in 2032-33, when the HS2 line will be extended to Manchester and Leeds. A direct connection with Heathrow is planned as part of the second phase.

John Woodcock: Why has the Minister changed her mind? Has the Secretary of State for Transport just taken a different view?

Mrs Villiers: A huge amount of work has been done to analyse the options, including one of the biggest consultations ever undertaken in this country. I would be arrogant to ignore the results of that work and that consultation. I am absolutely convinced that the preferred route, which will be proposed in a hybrid Bill, is the right one, and I will explain why in due course.

John Woodcock: You have not said that you agree with it.

Mrs Villiers: I do agree with it. I give the shadow Minister my firm assurance that the preferred route that we are proposing, after the consultation and consideration of all the consultation responses, is the right one.

Mr Donohoe: May I show the Minister a poster that I picked up in Wendover on Sunday? It does not give us much hope that constituents in that part of the world are likely to have as much enthusiasm as us about the building of HS2.

Mrs Villiers: It is inevitable, when one seeks to build a major piece of infrastructure, that it will cause anxiety in the areas in which it will have a local impact. I will come in a moment to the efforts that the Government have been making to mitigate or reduce the impact of HS2. We fully understand the anxiety felt by those in the local areas affected and by those with wider concerns about protecting the countryside, but as I have said in the House many times, I firmly believe that, with high-quality engineering and care, we can mitigate the worst effects of HS2 and emulate the success of HS1, which has been delivered without the catastrophic local impacts once predicted for it. I believe that it is possible to deliver infrastructure on that scale in a way that is fair to the local communities affected by it. The Government are determined to do all that is reasonable to ensure that we mitigate the local impact of HS2.

To pick up where I left off, the Government's preferred option for delivering the direct connection to Heathrow is a spur running from the main HS2 line, which would allow passengers from the midlands and the north to travel directly to the airport without having to change trains. Some of my hon. Friends and colleagues, including

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my hon. Friends the Member for The Cotswolds and for Milton Keynes South, asked for a pause. I assure them that other options, including a direct alignment that would have taken the line to Birmingham nearer to Heathrow, were considered before deciding on the preferred route that was presented for consultation.

Further thought and analysis was carried out on direct alignment as part of the consultation and the Government's consideration of the many thousands of responses. As I said, it was one of the most extensive consultations ever carried out, and I am confident that the outcome is the right one. I assure my hon. Friends that further scrutiny will take place when the hybrid Bill goes through Parliament.

After the consultation and analysis were completed, it was decided that a spur to Heathrow would provide the better option, and it was concluded that the proposal advocated by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds would have involved too great a journey time penalty and too much extra cost and, as I said, would not have taken the line to the airport. The site at Iver, the proposal for which he supports, is more than three miles from the airport terminals.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's sincere belief in the Government's preferred solution rather than the option that I proposed, but I am trying to get something out of this debate. Will she carefully consider building the Heathrow spur in the first phase of HS2, so that at least the residents of Birmingham and Birmingham airport can get the benefit of that spur as soon as possible? Will she also consider the northward-facing aspect of the spur, so that at least it can be used from central London, as well as by those approaching London from the north?

Mrs Villiers: I will come to timing in a moment. We are enthusiastic about making progress on all aspects of HS2 as soon as we can. If we can speed up the process, we will be delighted to do so, but as I said, I will come in a moment to the timing of the next steps on phase 2 and the spur. I assure my hon. Friend that the spur is planned to

have what is known as a delta junction, which could enable trains to run from Heathrow on to HS1, and possibly on to European destinations, when the spur is built.

On the timetable, the Government have asked HS2 Ltd to develop detailed route options for the spur. The plans will then be subject to detailed public consultation in 2014, alongside the rest of phase 2. If possible, we would like to make fast progress and start the consultation next year. Depending on the results of that consultation, the spur could be included in the hybrid Bill for the second phase, including the Y network.

HS2 represents a valuable opportunity to draw important strategic links between major components of our transport infrastructure. As my hon. Friend mentioned, other countries have successfully integrated high-speed rail services with their international airports. Using HS2 to improve access to the country's major hub airport for businesses in the midlands and the north will create new opportunities for growth. Better links to Heathrow will make those regions even more attractive locations to invest and do business in, because they will benefit from Heathrow's global reach as a successful hub airport.

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As I said earlier, London has one of the most extensive aviation networks in the world, with connections to more than 360 destinations. Heathrow alone has more flights to the crucial BRIC economies than any of its rivals, including more flights to China. Airlines are expanding and covering new routes to key emerging markets. For example, British Airways recently started a new route to Seoul.

I agree with my hon. Friend and other hon. Members that we should look to HS2 to provide an attractive alternative to thousands of short-haul flights. Experience in Europe shows that where high-speed rail competes with aviation, it can capture a significant proportion of the market for journeys of up to three or even four hours. For example, Air France stopped flying between Paris and Brussels entirely when the high-speed rail link opened between the two cities, and high-speed rail in Spain led to a significant switch from domestic aviation to the train. Deutsche Bahn proposes to start direct services between London, Amsterdam and Paris, so the train could start to compete with the plane for some passengers on those routes, just as Eurostar already does on the Paris-Brussels-London route.

Mr Donohoe: There has even been a change domestically: BA has removed all services from Birmingham to London as a result of the upgrading of the west coast main line.

Mrs Villiers: Absolutely. The upgrading of the west coast main line encouraged a switch from air to rail travel from Manchester as well.

I believe that the HS2 plans that I have outlined have the potential to deliver further air to rail switch. In particular, the completion of phase 2 will deliver journey times between Edinburgh or Glasgow and London of not much more than three and a half hours. In 2010, there were about 382 flights a week between those destinations and

Heathrow, and about 962 flights a week to the five London airports from Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Providing an attractive alternative to those flights could release vital capacity, which could provide opportunities for developing new routes to emerging markets and other key long-haul destinations in just the way that my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds and others have outlined today. Better integration of rail and air in terms of flight schedules, through-ticketing and baggage check-in could intensify the switch from

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the plan to the train. The shadow Minister has made a valid point on those matters.

No debate on HS2 would be complete without reference to the local environmental impact. I fully recognise people's concerns about the local environmental impact of HS2 and the preferred route, including the potential impact of a proposed Heathrow spur. There is no easy way to build a new train line through our country. I am afraid that the alignment proposed by my hon. Friend and supported by Mark Bostock would not be a miracle solution. Local impacts would still have to be considered, and, frankly, there would still be controversy. It would just be transplanted to a different area.

We have gone to very great lengths to listen to those with concerns about our preferred route and to take steps to mitigate its local impact. In particular, we are working to respond to the concerns of communities around Euston, where the station redevelopment impacts most on homes and communities. The Secretary of State for Transport regularly meets elected representatives from the area; we are working with Camden council; and we have already agreed to fund the Euston opportunity area planning framework to address the issues raised by the planned Euston expansion, including the investigation of options for the provision of replacement social housing. Elsewhere on the route, there will be a more than 50% increase in tunnel or green tunnel compared with the plans that we inherited from our Labour predecessors.

As I have said many times, I believe that, with the right mitigation and high-quality engineering, HS2 need not have anything like the extreme impact that its opponents fear. The precedent provided by HS1 shows that it is possible to have a high-speed line that does not devastate the communities through which it passes.

There are difficult times ahead, whether in relation to the main part of HS2 or to the Heathrow spur under discussion, but I firmly believe that this project will generate tremendous economic benefits. It is vital if we are to deal with the capacity crunch that we will face on our inter-city rail connections in the coming years, and that is why I welcome the support that has been expressed for HS2 in today's debate.

Dr William McCrea (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister, and I also thank all the hon. Members who have participated in the debate. I wish those Members who will now leave the Chamber a very pleasant recess.

3.52 pm Sitting suspended.

