

HS2 AND CHESHAM'S DAY AT WESTMINSTER- 23RD SEPTEMBER 2015

On Wednesday 23rd September representatives of Chesham Town Council and the Chesham Society appeared before the House of Commons HS2 Select Committee. The purpose of their presentations was to explain the serious threats to Chesham that will arise during the construction period for HS2 and afterwards and to seek mitigation in the form of an extension of the Chilterns fully bored tunnel to the full extent of the AONB.

Chesham Town Council's team comprised Tony Franks, Town Councillor for Waterside, Dr James Conboy from the Chesham Society and Mr James Burton, the barrister appearing on behalf of the Council.

Mr Franks gave the Committee a brief history of our town and a description of what it was like today, a community with a highly skilled workforce and a diverse economic base. However, while we were mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 and had been checked out by William the Conqueror, Chesham, the largest town in the Chilterns, was the town that HS2 had forgotten and effectively ignored in its environmental statement.

Nevertheless the petitioners were convinced that the building of the new railway would have serious consequences for Chesham. Our town was very heavily dependent on the local inadequate road system and traffic congestion and air pollution, already major problems for us, were bound to get worse as a consequence of the addition of very heavy HS2 construction traffic to roads like the A413. Some 70% of Chesham people used cars, buses or motor bikes to get to work.

Dr James Conboy with the use of slides illustrated the impact that the displacement of traffic avoiding congestion on the A413 would have on unsuitable escape roads leading into Chesham. Life for people trying to get to Stoke Mandeville hospital, to work and to schools would become more difficult.

Councillor Franks then developed these themes, giving examples such as Chesham Grammar School, 800 of whose 1200 pupils were not from the Chesham area and travelled to school by coach or car. Local businesses would also be affected and he referred the Committee to letters from Silverson Machines, Gi-Lec and Orbit Press expressing serious concerns about the impact that increased traffic congestion associated with HS2 would have on their operations.

Chesham's markets and shops, which enjoyed support from neighbouring towns and villages, would suffer if travelling here became tiresome and more time consuming for visitors. Tourism was important for the town's cafes, restaurants and pubs. But would the tourists from London continue to come in such numbers if our beautiful but suddenly less accessible countryside started to resemble the Western Front in 1916? Councillor Franks very much doubted it.

Some 73% of attendees at the Elgiva Theatre came from outside of Chesham and it had been estimated that a 20% drop in ticket sales would require an annual subsidy from the Town Council of £210,000.

Because of Chesham's geographical position, HS2 would be of no use to our people wanting to go to Birmingham. One could drive there in under two hours. Alternatively one could catch a train from Berkhamsted (4.8 miles away) and travel to New Street Station in a time of 1 hour and 34 minutes.

Nor was it likely that HS2 would provide much in the way of job opportunities for Chesham .In November 2014 only 396 people were claiming jobseekers allowance. In any case our skill sets were in such areas as light engineering, metal fabrication, printing, and graphic design.

In December 2013 only 15 out of 650 registered jobseeker claimants in Chiltern District were looking for construction related jobs. Because 97% of construction companies in Chiltern District had fewer than 10 employees, it seemed clear that there was insufficient capacity among local businesses to tender for work on HS2.

Mr James Burton then gave a summary of the petitioner's arguments. The undertaker had not challenged our evidence about the impact that the construction of HS2 would have on our schools, businesses, shops, markets and theatre and those travelling to hospitals such as Stoke Mandeville. It was no good asserting that because Chesham was three miles away, the project would have no material effect on the town. As Dr Conboy had demonstrated, the huge amount of construction traffic on the A413 was bound to lead to result in congestion- avoiding drivers choosing to use entirely unsuitable escape roads, like Rocky Lane, leading to Chesham.

He then revisited our "asks" which were the extension of the fully bored Chilterns tunnel, or failing that, a package of traffic mitigation measures to address our concerns. The petitioner had also asked for financial support for local companies in establishing their entitlements to a business rate revaluation, in the event of a material change of circumstances, and funding for Chesham Town Council to provide support for threatened local amenities.

At the end of the proceedings, Sir Peter Bottomley congratulated Chesham Town Council's team on its presentation, which he said was "exemplary and most welcome".

Mr Franks and Dr Conboy later confirmed that they had found the Mr Burton's advice and assistance invaluable.

There then followed a presentation by the Chesham Society, which considered more technical aspects of the impact of HS2. Dr Conboy was joined by Andrea Polden, Vice Chairman of the Chesham and District Natural History Society, who spoke about the likely adverse ecological impact of the new railway.

Councillor Tony Franks 1st October 2015