

Chinese Confirm Interest In Building And Funding Key Midlands Rail Link

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China Railway Group has confirmed interest in a scheme to reopen a line in the West Midlands that would provide new and important links to other transport infrastructure in the region, including HS2 and Birmingham Airport.

News of the Chinese interest — which includes designing, building and financing the project — is disclosed today in the January edition of Railnews, the national newspaper for Britain's rail industry.

The project attracting Chinese interest is the proposal, put forward six months ago, to restore the 11.7 kilometres (7.3 miles) Stonebridge Railway, together with a link to the planned HS2 Birmingham Interchange station and 'people mover' connections to Birmingham Airport, the existing Birmingham International Station and the National Exhibition Centre.

The scheme - put forward last June by Railnews editorial director Alan Marshall and specialist quantity surveyor and construction economist Michael Byng — would restore a route originally opened in 1839 between Hampton-in-Arden, near Solihull, and Whitacre Junction, in North Warwickshire, but closed in the 1930s. It would cost an estimated £240 million, or £280 million with full electrification.

The idea has attracted considerable interest from businesses and local authorities in surrounding areas, including Coventry, the Black Country, Leicestershire and Staffordshire.

On 19 December China Railway Group Ltd dispatched letters to Birmingham Airport and to Sir Albert Bore, Leader of Birmingham City Council, confirming its interest in the Whitacre Link and connections with HS2 in the Midlands.

Headed 'Development of the HS2 railway connections in the Midlands central region' and signed by China Railway Group vice-president Mengbo Zhou (who has since become the company's president), the letter to Birmingham Airport states:

"We have followed the publications prepared to develop Birmingham Airport and to improve the connections by public transport to it. We have also noted the comments made in the recently published Parliamentary Transport Select Committee report on HS2 railway line suggesting the need for additional rail links to its passenger hubs.

"Will you kindly accept this letter as our formal expression of interest in working with the public authorities, Birmingham Airport, and other stakeholders within the region to design, construct and finance this project."

In his letter to Sir Albert Bore, Mengbo Zhou states: "We write to express our formal interest in making long-term investments in the region, including investment the development and enhancement of Birmingham Airport, and in the development of the railways of the region to connect with the proposed HS2 High Speed line."

China Railway Group, which is listed on the Hong Kong and Shanghai stock exchanges, is the principal operational subsidiary of the China Railway Construction Corporation. Its expression of interest was sent while consultation was proceeding on a new 'Birmingham Mobility Action Plan', launched by Sir Albert Bore.

Part of this plan aims to improve access to Birmingham Airport, where a major runway extension is nearing completion to enable the largest aircraft with full payloads to operate directly to destinations such as major cities in China.

The proposed Whitacre Link would enable many more direct journeys to be made by rail - and in less time - from such places as Leicester, Nuneaton, Derby, Burton-on-Trent, Tamworth, Walsall and Sutton Coldfield.

The Whitacre Link proposal has also gained the interest of Transport Minister Stephen Hammond, who has asked for a business plan to be brought forward.

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In Parliament on 18 December Christopher Pincher, MP for Tamworth, asked: "Currently, the 15-mile journey between Tamworth and [Birmingham] airport takes 45 minutes by rail. Does he therefore agree that infrastructure projects such as the Whitacre rail link, which would reduce the journey time to 18 minutes, could be beneficial to my constituents and the airport?"

Transport Minister Hammond replied: "I am happy to look at the Whitacre link proposals. I encourage my hon. Friend to continue to discuss the development of the business case with the Local Enterprise Partnership and Centro [the West Midlands passenger transport executive], so that it can be brought forward."

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