

# A 21<sup>st</sup> century imperative

UK transport expert Jim Steer asks ‘what type of transport system do we want to face the challenges ahead?’



Britain has the greatest level of car dependency of any major European nation. It would be possible to meet the carbon challenge this creates by a huge technology switch, but at best we'll still have a very congested road network: even a switch to hybrid or electric cars couldn't escape this. And there are no equivalent technology fixes for the aviation sector.

Aircraft rely on non-renewable fuels. We could look to the rail network, but demand is growing so strongly here, that even with lengthened trains, our Victorian infrastructure is just too limited to handle the projected doubling of demand by the late 2020s. We are, in short, in a jam.

High-speed rail allows us to switch out of short haul flights: better for customers and better for global warming (carbon savings worth between £2bn and £5bn, according to the Eddington Transport Report in 2006). It allows us to free up capacity on our existing rail network for more commuter services and more railfreight. And since high-speed rail offers not just faster journeys, but more reliable and safer travel and

a huge capacity uplift, it will attract a lot of longer distance car travellers too. Nearly half of the passenger miles in Britain (and half of the carbon emissions from personal travel) comes from longer distance travel, of over 25 miles.

High-speed rail, taking new routes into the major city centres of Scotland, the North of England and the Midlands, and possibly, Wales and the West of England, will transform the development prospects of our major cities. At the same time it can relieve development pressures on the southeast. The prospect of accommodating another 10 million people starts to look less daunting, with a re-balanced economic geography. The phrase may be over-worked, but this really is about supporting sustainable development.

While government hesitates, Greengauge 21 has this year formed a public interest group to get this transformational investment off the ground, looking at five strategic corridors (see map). The public interest group has been formed from 23 organisations: councils and transport executives of the major cities, regional development agencies, private sector interests and the rail industry. Itself this represents an exciting new way to take the first steps in strategic planning: collaborative working across the private and public sectors.

The work will answer the key questions of what a high-speed rail network for Britain should look like, what it will cost, what benefits it will bring and how it should be paid for – the inevitable questions of Ministers and Chancellors. Of course, implementation timescales mean that this is a project for 2020 and beyond. That alone means this cannot succeed without support from across the political parties. The prize is a rare communion of interest between green campaigners and business interests, and the prospect of a major national development commanding undivided public support.

**Jim Steer is founder of Greengauge 21, established in 2006 as a not-for-profit company to promote high speed rail in Britain.**  
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- Corridor 5 Anglo-Scottish