17 April 2009

Dear Mr Harvie

I am writing in response to the Report of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee into the potential benefits of high speed rail services. The Committee has provided a comprehensive and far reaching report which presents a number of challenging recommendations and actions for the Government.

I will respond in detail to these points throughout this letter.

I welcome the Committee’s findings. The report has clearly set out the environmental benefits to be realised from the development of a high speed rail service between Scotland, London and onwards to Europe. It has presented compelling evidence that high speed rail services not only offer lower per passenger carbon emissions than aviation, but that with their shorter journey times can create a real shift from air to rail travel. I also note that the Committee considers that it “is in no doubt that high-speed rail would bring significant economic benefits to Scotland”. During my evidence to Committee on 16 December 2008, I stated my agreement with both of these points.

During that session, Committee Members were keen to discuss the role of both the Scottish and UK Governments in supporting the development of high speed rail. In that context I note the Committee’s recommendation that the Scottish Government clearly articulates its long term vision for the planning, funding and construction of a high speed rail network and that it takes a strong role in promoting high speed rail and supporting any project through to completion.

The Committee also recommends that it is essential that the Scottish Government makes further progress in articulating a detailed policy vision for a high speed rail scheme.
The Scottish Government agrees with the Committee that this will be key to developing the case for high speed rail. In working towards this, it will be necessary to consider many of the issues raised in the Committee's report in closer detail, and with the involvement of many of the stakeholders who gave evidence to the Committee.

I am encouraged then by the broad support for high speed rail already demonstrated in submissions to the Committee. I recognise that while the report considers that there may not – at this early stage – be a consensus about any proposed route, or any potential development options, there does seem to be an emerging shared agenda, with many stakeholders recognising the benefits associated with high speed rail and supporting its development.

In developing a clear policy position, the Scottish Government will of course reflect the Committee’s position that:

- further work is required to identify the most suitable routes for high-speed lines and that they should serve both Glasgow and Edinburgh city centres
- it is imperative that any high-speed rail network connects effectively with the existing rail network to ensure that all parts of Scotland benefit from any new high-speed link
- the development of a high-speed line should not divert resources and attention away from investment in improvements to the current rail network.

Having considered the proposed second National Planning Framework (NPF2), one of the Parliament’s recommendations to the Government was that a high speed rail link between Scotland and London should be designated as a national development. Current and ongoing investment in the rail network can help to pave the way for high speed rail, and in that context I also note the Committee’s recommendation that the West of Scotland rail enhancements proposed as a national development in NPF2 should take account of the potential for future integration with a high-speed rail network. These and other recommendations are currently being given very careful consideration and I anticipate that NPF2 will be published later this spring. The Government will set out the changes made to the NPF in response to Parliament’s recommendations in a statement, which will be laid before Parliament when NPF2 is published.

Policy will be also be informed by ongoing studies, particularly Greengauge 21’s High Speed Rail Development Programme and the first report of High Speed Two, due later in 2009.

During my evidence to the Committee’s inquiry in December 2008 I noted that its report would have the potential to influence policy on high speed rail far beyond Scotland’s borders. Indeed, I note that the Committee is to meet with both Lord Adonis and Sir David Rowlands in the near future.

Since the publication of the Committee’s report Lord Adonis has announced that the High Speed Two company will now also be charged with further investigation of the feasibility of extending high speed rail services to areas in the North of England and Scotland. I welcome that development.
I am grateful to the Committee for its expression of support for the Scottish Government in making strong representations on high speed rail to the UK Government. We will endeavour to ensure that the High Speed Two company works up a fully developed case for a high-speed route extending to Scotland. The Scottish Government will work to ensure that Scotland’s interests are fully represented and that we can make the greatest possible contribution to the development of plans for high speed rail in the UK. To that end, we will give consideration to a separate Scottish Study building on the work of HS2 at the turn of the year.

I welcome the interest that many are expressing in establishing high speed rail services across the UK. Like this Government, a cross-section of stakeholders can clearly see the potential of these links in driving the regeneration and development of destination city regions, and of increasing productivity, at the same time as contributing to our environmental goals.

During its inquiry the Committee heard the difficulties in estimating the likely cost of establishing a high speed rail network, not least because there is no consensus on the routes or technologies proposed. Ongoing studies will inform that position. Nonetheless, the report has established that the costs of high speed rail will be substantial and will require significant private and public investment. The costs must be clearly and realistically defined.

I agree with the Committee’s report that high speed rail will also bring a wide range of economic, social and environmental benefits. High speed rail needs to be viewed more as a long term infrastructure investment rather than as an individual rail project; the benefits go far beyond the rail industry.

It is my view that High Speed Rail can be delivered, but only through robust long-term partnership working – with partners across the UK rail industry and across the UK and Scottish political spectrum. I think that this report is a key step towards achieving that aim.

Kind regards

STEWART STEVENSON

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