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The Chancellor needs to sort out transport spending mess

How can the Chancellor's spending review save us from Chris Grayling's climate wrecking transport plans?

Climate scientists say there are only 12 years to save the planet from the worst impacts of climate change.

Yet the Department for Transport (DfT) continues to starve those areas of transport investment most needed to meet climate change goals.

Chancellor Philip Hammond announced the details of his Spending Review last week.

He will know that the growing cost of high speed rail network HS2 is under intense public scrutiny. He will know the growing disquiet about cancelled bus routes and over-crowded commuter trains. He should know that transport is now the biggest source of greenhouse gases and that emissions have hardly decreased since 1990.

These factors, plus elevated public concern about climate change as demonstrated by the inspiring strikes by school children, mean transport could be an important issue at the next general election. Particularly among young people, whom all the political parties need to court.

Phillip Hammond could show he's listening. He could be a climate champion and reprioritise DfT spending away from new roads and HS2 towards more sustainable transport, like buses, trams and bikes.

If he doesn't improve transport choices for the majority he'll be seen as partly responsible if transport is a vote loser for the Conservatives at the next election.

Prioritise spending on improving urban transport

The National Infrastructure Commission – the Treasury’s own advisors – are scathing about uncertainty and the lack of funding for urban transport. They say fixing it “offers some of the highest returns for transport investment”. They’ve recommended that the government should spend at least £2 billion a year on urban transport for the next 20 years¹.

Research for Friends of the Earth suggests that this is no way near enough, even though it would be a huge improvement from now².

In the best European cities more than half of journeys are by foot or bike, double that of the UK. More journeys by bike and on foot not only help improve people’s health but by reducing air pollution help save on healthcare costs. And fewer emissions help tackle climate change too. In Berlin 70% of all journeys are by walking, cycling and public transport.

The UK should spend at least £2 billion a year on making cycling and walking safe in our towns and cities³.

To bring public transport up to scratch compared to many European urban areas we would probably need at least an additional £4 billion a year spent on buses and trams.

If we wanted to match the global leaders in urban transport, we would provide buses for free. In the UK this would cost an additional £3 billion a year⁴.

In short, the UK should be considering spending at least £6 billion a year on upgrading our urban transport infrastructure, and probably much more.

And that’s before we’ve looked at the railways.

Why HS2 is the wrong kind of railway spending

We're used to the wrong kind of leaves. The wrong kind of railway spending is a new concept.

Originally HS2 was broadly welcomed. It was a pleasant change to hear about a government investing in a new railway line rather than new roads.

But sadly, it was the wrong railway line.

HS2 will destroy or damage scores of ancient woodlands. That's bad enough. But the vast construction project will also increase carbon pollution according to HS2 Limited's own figures⁵.

There is a good case to be made for a new north-south train line. Research commissioned by Friends of the Earth from railway experts and the New Economics Foundation conclusively demonstrate that HS2 isn't it⁶.

It is a project that will cost at the very least £4 billion a year for decades to come to provide wealthier business travellers with slightly shorter journeys.

It is money that can be better spent on fixing our broken railway system and improving public transport in our towns and cities.

There are numerous better ways of spending the money across the country.

Many of these will deliver much greater economic benefits for the North of England, which was the stated purpose of HS2.

These options could also improve the over-crowded and delayed local commuter lines, a daily misery for the vast majority, which HS2 will not fix in most parts of the country.

The biggest road building plan for decades

The Government boasts that it is making “the biggest investment in the strategic roads network since the 1970s”.

Given the contribution of transport emissions to climate change, this is akin to a pyromaniac boasting they’ve bought the biggest can of petrol in existence.

The Government is planning to spend around £6 billion a year on new roads for at least 5 years. But that doesn’t include repairing roads and filling in potholes.

£6 billion a year could go a long way to solving the UK’s transport problems and enable transport to play its part in reaching climate change goals.

Or it could be used to further increase traffic and greenhouse gases, lead to more extreme weather and commit young people and future generations to increased climate chaos. Surely this isn’t a difficult choice?

Conclusion: Transport spending is make or break for climate change

If the Spending Review does not challenge the DfT's reckless plans then the hope of the UK meeting its legally-binding carbon reduction plans has gone.

The DfT is out of control, and that's without even mentioning its aspirations for limitless aviation growth.

If Phillip Hammond doesn't force the scrapping of HS2 and massive spending on roads then he is as culpable as Secretary of State Chris Grayling for failing on climate change.

Notes

1. National Infrastructure Commission, 2018, National Infrastructure 2018, <https://www.nic.org.uk/publications/national-infrastructure-assessment-2018/>.
2. See the Transport for Quality of Life briefings for Friends of the Earth at <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/topic/transport>.
3. Forthcoming, Transport for Quality of Life briefing from Friends of the Earth on active travel, available at <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/topic/transport>.
4. Transport for Quality of Life, 2019, Transforming public transport, <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/publications/transforming-public-transport>.
5. HS2 Limited, 2019, High Speed Two phase 2a, Informationa Paper, E27: carbon; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779301/E27_Carbon_v1.1.pdf
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6. New Economics Foundation, 2019, A rail network for everyone, <https://neweconomics.org/2019/03/a-rail-network-for-everyone>.