

## £125 Million HS2 'Bat Tunnel' Branded a Symbol of Bureaucratic Excess

LONDON — A tunnel meant to protect a rare species of bat has become an unlikely lightning rod in Britain's infrastructure debate, after the government condemned its staggering £125 million price tag as "ludicrous." Built along the HS2 high-speed rail route, the one-kilometre steel mesh structure near Sheephouse Wood in Buckinghamshire was designed to guide the endangered Bechstein's bat safely across the railway corridor. But what began as a targeted conservation effort is now facing intense scrutiny as a symbol of bureaucratic excess, regulatory inflexibility, and spiralling costs.

The project, which started as an environmental requirement to protect local wildlife habitats, was developed under strict conditions set by Natural England and various planning laws. It was never just a whim; those behind HS2 were legally obligated to avoid disturbing protected species. But as the cost ballooned from early estimates to nearly £119 million, and with final figures expected to rise, ministers and taxpayers alike are questioning how such a narrow project could command such an eye-watering budget.

Environment Secretary Steve Reed didn't hold back. He called the cost "ludicrous" and argued that the tunnel epitomises a planning system that often prioritises box-ticking over balanced, practical decision-making. In his view, this isn't just about bats, it's about how Britain handles its infrastructure ambitions in an age of competing priorities. Reed and other ministers are now pushing to overhaul the process entirely, promising reforms through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Among the proposed changes is a new "Nature Restoration Fund," designed to shift away from piecemeal, high-cost add-ons like the bat tunnel and instead deliver broad, strategic conservation across regions.

HS2 Ltd, the company overseeing the rail line, has defended the decision. Officials insist the tunnel was the most feasible and legally sound way to meet strict environmental obligations. They followed the rules, they say, and responded to planning demands that left little room for cost-saving alternatives. Some conservationists agree that the bats needed protection, but even within the environmental community, questions are being asked about whether such a solution was proportionate.

What's clear is that the bat tunnel has touched a nerve. For many, it represents a wider problem with how public money is spent, and how infrastructure projects can be bogged down by well-meaning but rigid regulation. For others, it's a cautionary tale about the importance of early, flexible planning, before costs and criticism begin to soar. Either way, a tunnel built for bats has become a flashpoint in the battle over Britain's infrastructure future.