

CAPACITY – THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH

Claims that the West Coast Main Line (WCML) will soon be full are not robust and the demand forecasts are over optimistic. Even so alternatives to HS2 indisputably meet forecast required capacity, and are a better, low risk option.

Government's demand projections are inflated

As the Public Accounts Committee agrees, the government's assumptions about demand are exaggerated. The Department for Transport (DfT) has used an outdated model which overestimates long distance demand growth on the West Coast Mail Line (WCML), even though they know it is discreditedⁱ. They have ignored the impact of price competition on the London-Birmingham routeⁱⁱ. Thus government both overestimates demand on the route, and demand for HS2 itself. This repeats the over optimistic forecasting of passenger numbers for HS1 leading to a long term debt for the taxpayer which could reach £10bnⁱⁱⁱ.

DfT admit total journeys by all transport modes are declining not increasing, with no increase per person in long distance domestic travel in the UK since 1995. So growth in rail depends on a shift from other modes. But it is not credible that modal shift can just continue indefinitely.

More recently government have re-jigged their demand forecasts, ostensibly to take account of the recent growth in rail traffic as a result of the massive service improvement that accompanied the completion of the £9bn WCML Route Modernisation and the December 2008 timetable with faster more frequent services. But this ignores the fact that the growth was concentrated in off peak services – which requires no additional capacity to accommodate it^{iv}.

The West Coast Main Line will not be full within the next ten years

Currently the WCML is far from full. Euston is the least busy domestic long distance service station - just 60% capacity in the 3hr morning peak (64% in the busiest hr) compared to Paddington and Waterloo over 100% at peak^v. Tellingly these figures are from before the extra carriages currently being delivered – providing 51% more standard class capacity. First Group, who have won the WCML franchise (until 2026), say there is 'considerable unused capacity' and 11-car trains will be '35% loaded' when they take over. Even if it were true that WCML were full, or full by 2026, then given First Group are only proposing to use the already committed 11-car trains on the southern end of WCML, extra capacity could come from extending to 12-car and rebalancing first/standard class.

Nevertheless, alternatives deliver more than DfT's forecast long distance capacity requirement

The 51M 'Optimised Alternative (OA)' enables a tripling in standard class capacity from a 2008 base, comfortably accommodating the Government forecast of doubling in demand to 2037. The Transport Select Committee, Atkins (for DfT) and National Rail all accept OA can deliver this intercity capacity. The OA is entirely based on existing technology, unlike HS2. With the same technological developments as HS2, there is the prospect of even greater capacity^{vi}.

HS2 will provide no capacity until the first stage is complete, in 2026. In contrast the OA alternative can be implemented quickly and in stages, with more capacity only created – and paid for – if it is needed.

It is HS2, rather than the alternative, that has capacity problems

HS2 trains serving places beyond the high speed network (on the existing network) have less capacity than those trains they replace. This means that

HS2 trains would be impossibly crowded with the additional demand induced by HS2. The case made by HS2 for 18 trains per hour each way (in the February 2011 business case) on which government's capacity arguments rest, was not based on evidence.

The only documented assessment that HS2 Ltd had showed that 18 trains/hr was not possible. The service pattern for the Y now assumes a maximum of 17 (not 18) trains/hr all day, not just at peak. This is because 2 trains/hr (each way) are planned for Heathrow, which carry few people, leaving an increased demand to be carried by fewer trains.

It is in any case doubtful that that such an intensive service could operate, or be reliable^{vii}.

Where is the real capacity problem?

According to Office of Rail Regulation data on overcrowding, HS2 comes in near the bottom of the national priority table for investment (at 39 and 49 out of 53 priorities)^{viii}. It is not socially just to direct £17bn of investment into a third line between London and Birmingham at the expense of much higher priorities around the country.

Moreover, built into HS2 is a decrease in capacity on existing services.

Coventry, for example, is likely to have one service an hour to London rather than three as at present.

Capacity – a fabricated scare story

The government's arguments about capacity are a fabricated scare story, a fig leaf to hide the collapse of the business, regional and environmental cases for HS2.

ⁱ Research showed that the 'distance term' that makes the rail demand elasticity on income increase with length of journey is wrong. The Passenger Demand Forecasting Handbook (PDFH) V4 was corrected to remove this term in August 2009 (PDFHv5). Since then DfT have had the results of a major review (by Oxera and Arup) that confirm the distance term does not exist. In April 2012 they finally published it. Meanwhile DfT did not ratify draft guidance that reduced the maximum elasticity to below the level used for HS2, which was issued in January 2010, and replaced it with draft guidance containing the higher values used in the HS2 assessment. No evidence has been offered to support doing this.

ⁱⁱ Alison Munro (Chief Executive, HS2 Ltd), admitted that the version of the demand model (PLANET) HS2 Ltd were using does not take the price of alternative rail routes into consideration (letter to Bruce Weston, 29 June 2011)

ⁱⁱⁱ PAC, The completion and sale of HS1, HC 464, 6 July 2012.

^{iv} HS2 Action Alliance, Why the business case is flawed and HS2 is not in the national interest. 6 September 2012.

^v Network Rail's London and South Eastern Rail Utilisation Strategy, July 2011, Table 4.2 page 55

^{vi} HofC Transport Committee Report, High Speed Rail, 10th Report of session 2010-12 pages 92/3; Network Rail's Review of the Strategic Alternatives to HS2, November 2011, Section 2.3.3, page 17 and section 2.3.2 page 13; High Speed Rail Strategic Alternatives Study Update by Atkins, January 2012

^{vii} This was confirmed by an SNCF director to the Transport Select Committee. See Q83-Q84 of TSC oral evidence at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmtran/1185/11062101.htm>

^{viii} <http://www.hs2actionalliance.org/index.php/business-case/latest-bc-review>