

Investing in a new High Speed line will provide a once in a generation chance to improve rail services

*More people are travelling by train in the UK than ever before, and this increase in demand has often led to overcrowding, delays and accusations of poor service. **Anthony Smith** from Passenger Focus makes the case for a new High Speed Rail line for the London-Birmingham corridor, making the point that while such a line would be faster, its real benefit would be to provide much more capacity without causing long disruptions and closures to existing lines.*



Britain's railways are attracting more passengers again. All the long-term predictions show that the use of rail is likely to increase. We all want to continue to move around as we do now, have choices about where we live and work and reduce the effect of this mobility on the environment. In order to do this there needs to be a step-change in the space on the rail network for more trains. So the start of the consultation on the new line between London and the West Midlands is welcome. It will create many more seats on the new line and release space on existing lines so other communities can be better connected.

Passenger Focus is an evidence based organisation – which means we spend a lot of time asking passengers about how happy they are with the service they receive and about their priorities for improvement. For rail our research consistently shows the importance of what might be dubbed the 'core product' – an affordable, reliable, frequent service with passengers being able to get a seat. Capacity is clearly one of the major challenges facing the rail industry. Network Rail's 'New Line' study found that, despite all the investment to date, the corridor from London to Birmingham and the North West will become 'full' by 2020. It recommended that the best solution was the building of a new railway line. The Department for Transport's [own analysis](#) also gives priority to the main north-south inter-city routes out of London, beginning with the West Coast Main Line.

These studies establish the need for additional capacity and for this to focus, at least initially, on the West Coast route. There has been much debate about whether this line should be high-speed. From our perspective it is the provision of additional capacity that is the key priority, not speed. Faster journey times being a useful by-product of what perhaps ought to be better dubbed 'big rail two', not HS2.

There has also been much debate on whether a new line is needed or whether existing lines could be upgraded. Passengers know from hard earned experience that upgrading an existing line will just mean a decade of disruption and engineering possessions. A new railway line provides a once-in-a-generation chance to improve services – not just on the new line itself but also on the existing lines. We believe that this aspect has not always come across in the debate on the merits of the proposed High Speed line – the perception being that unless it stops in 'my area' it brings no benefit whereas in fact it may allow the existing conventional line to provide a better all round service (for example in terms of greater regional or local connectivity). But any debate on what to do with capacity released on conventional lines must be based firmly on what passengers want from their railway.

Sceptics of this major project argue such an expensive investment will choke off funding for the rest of the railway. Construction of HS2 and the spending of large sums of money are many years away. In the meantime the Government's welcome commitment to, among other things, more electrification and new trains will help address some of the more immediate capacity issues in many parts of the country but there is still much to do. It will be crucial that investment continues if the railway is going to keep pace with growth forecasts – more and more passengers want to use the railways.

However, lurking inside all this success is the costs bug – the ballooning costs of running the railway that threaten to soak up the new money. We will be keeping a close eye on the conclusions of the Government's value for money review. We will make sure that the value of the railways is kept in focus as well as the cost. And we will watch for signs of how ticket prices might rise even further. We already have a costly railway compared with our European counterparts and the trick now is to ensure we have a successful and value for money railway – good for both the taxpayer and passengers.