

SIGNAL FAILURES



Euston usurped

OFFICIALS realise that rebuilding Euston station for HS2 is going to cost more than expected, but they haven't yet grasped how Crossrail and the Thameslink 2000 upgrade will affect transport in the capital long before HS2 opens.

Crossrail and Thameslink trains will run every few minutes to key places like Tottenham Court Road, Canary Wharf, St Paul's, London Bridge and St Pancras. By comparison, Tube trains and stations will feel cramped and stuffy; and Farringdon, where Crossrail and Thameslink intersect, will become one of Britain's busiest stations.

Future rail strategy in London must take note of these principal arteries. All trains on the High Speed 2 line to Birmingham and the north are expected to stop at Old Oak Common (OOC), west of Paddington, for easy transfer from Crossrail and possibly other lines. Most HS2 passengers will board or alight at OOC if the interchange there isn't skimped – yet HS2 officials insist that nearly all the high-speed trains must terminate at Euston, which they admit has “limited connectivity”.

Enlarging Euston to accommodate HS2 and trains on the west-coast mainline would require the demolition of 220 flats. The station must also stay open during construction, increasing the complexity and cost. HS2 officials have told Frank Dobson, MP for Holborn and St Pancras, the rebuild could cost much more than they have budgeted for.

London mayor Boris Johnson, lobbyists London First and former Labour transport secretary Andrew Adonis might have been expected to caution against years of disruption at one of London's main stations. Instead they are using the Euston rebuild to bolster their latest idea: a £12bn “Crossrail 2” from south-west to north London with a detour via Euston. They reckon the influx of HS2 passengers at Euston will make Crossrail 2 imperative.

“Crossrail 2 needs to be built at the same time as HS2 in the 2020s,” said Adonis last month. But building HS2 is supposedly affordable only because it will take over annual spending on Crossrail 1, which is due to finish in 2018. Unless extra billions are suddenly found down the back of the sofa (a fat chance), Crossrail 2 will have to wait till HS2 completes in 2033.

Crossrail and Thameslink are designed to address the legacy of Victorian mainlines terminating outside central London. Eventually Old Oak Common station should diminish Euston's intercity crowds, and it wouldn't be hard to switch many of Euston's commuter trains to run on Crossrail through London. Failure now to anticipate Euston's demotion could be disastrous – and not just because planning for its rebuilding wastes money and distresses local residents. The scale of the proposed rebuild suggests officials have underestimated OOC's potential. For that to be fulfilled, OOC must offer minimal walking for passengers between HS2 and Crossrail trains; platforms and connecting trains on other tracks (eg to Heathrow, Bristol, Clapham Junction and Richmond); comprehensive waiting facilities; taxi and bus stands; security and immigration facilities for international passengers; and tracks for some HS2 trains to terminate at OOC or preferably continue eastwards (via a link to the Channel tunnel high-speed line) and southwards. Altering Crossrail after it opens will be tricky, as so many people will depend on it.

Has Britain learnt from its long experience wasting money by not taking key rail decisions at the critical time (the disused Eurostar station at Waterloo anyone?) Or will Old Oak Common be stymied by misallocation of attention and cash to Euston?

'Dr B Ching'