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Q&A: Would HS2 solve UK's rail capacity crunch?

By Mark Odell, Transport Correspondent

It has been a bruising summer for supporters of High Speed 2. Revelations in June that the cost of the project had soared to nearly £50bn triggered a political backlash threatening the scheme's cross-party support.

The vociferous "No" lobby, led by well-heeled residents of the Chilterns, have long questioned the economic rationale of the project. Their case was lent credence in July, when the transport department admitted flawed assumptions about productivity gains from faster journey times could weaken the benefits of the line.

Since then, the clamour has grown for a rethink of the project, with political heavyweights from both sides of the spectrum calling for it to be scrapped.

In the latest attempt to seize the initiative, the government is going "back to basics", arguing that, regardless of the economic benefits, HS2 is vital to ensure that the transport system does not grind to a halt as rail and road links become increasingly congested.

Is the transport network facing a capacity crunch?

Rail usage has grown dramatically since privatisation two decades ago, recording annual growth rates of more than 5 per cent, with the number of journeys almost doubling to more than 1.2bn. Executives at Network Rail warn they will struggle to squeeze much more peak capacity out of the existing network. Even modest annual growth forecasts of just over 1 per cent point to some trains becoming increasingly overcrowded.

Worse, the UK's road network, which carries more than 90 per cent of all traffic, is under strain. Government figures predict a rise of 10m in the UK population by 2033, resulting in a 46 per cent jump in traffic and a 54 per cent increase in delays.

Why not upgrade the existing rail network?

HS2's opponents accuse ministers of deliberately ducking this question because they are hung up on delivering a grand project. They argue longer trains are the answer, including on the west coast mainline, along with upgrades to the existing track. They also believe the government is targeting the wrong part of the country, producing figures that show long distance services out of Euston are barely half full, in many cases. By contrast, commuters coming into London's Paddington and Waterloo stations are having to use trains running at

more than 90 per cent capacity, on average.

The government, backed by Network Rail, insists that further improvements to the existing network would lead to years of delay and disruption, as well as the risk of large cost overruns. Even those with a short memory will recall the years of chaos and overspend on the previous upgrade of the west coast mainline completed in 2008.

If that's too difficult then what about building more roads or encouraging more domestic air travel?

This government certainly supports road building, but is nevertheless doing little more than trying to squeeze extra capacity out of the existing network. There are no big new road schemes in the works. Even if there were, this would likely face even greater opposition from the environmental lobby than high-speed rail. Equally, encouraging more domestic flights would go against everything this government has said about aviation and its environmental impact.

So does that mean high-speed rail is the only answer?

It is deemed to be “greener” than road or air travel, but even then, those credentials are undermined by evidence published by the government in 2007, showing that a jump from the current top rail speed of 125mph to the 225mph for trains on HS2 would lead to a 90 per cent increase in energy consumption.

So where does this leave the government's wider transport policy?

A pertinent question, and one difficult to answer because three years in, this government has still not produced an overarching transport strategy. As Professor Stephen Glaister, the transport economist and director of the pro-motoring RAC Foundation, puts it: “Both this government and the last promised a national policy statement on surface transport, yet still there is no sign of it. How can hundreds of millions of pounds have already been spent on something as hugely significant as HS2 without the context provided by an overarching strategic picture?”

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