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Douglas Oakervee

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Dear Mr Oakervee

Independent Review of HS2

Transport Focus is the statutory body representing the interests of rail users in Great Britain (In England duties also cover bus, coach and tram passengers and users of the Strategic Road Network). While there is no formal call for evidence for your review, we felt it would be helpful if we put on record some thoughts from a passenger perspective.

Transport Focus's research continually emphasises the importance of the 'core product' – an affordable, reliable, frequent service on which passengers can get a seat. This is reflected in the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS)¹ which measures levels of passenger satisfaction with current services, in our bespoke research looking at passenger aspirations for the West Coast franchise², and in our research looking at passengers' priorities for improvement³.

In 2017, as part of our input into the railway's strategic planning cycle, we asked more than 12,800 passengers across the country to rank 31 possible improvements to their rail service in order of priority. As well as the rank order, the research also gives a sense of the relative importance of each criterion – for example by how much more, or less, important is one factor compared to another. Headline results can be seen in Appendix 1.

¹ [National Rail Passenger Survey \(NRPS\)](#). Transport Focus. 2019

² [West Coast Trains – What Passengers Want](#). Transport Focus. 2016

³ [Rail Passengers' Priorities for Improvement](#). Transport Focus. 2017

Additional capacity (expressed in the form of getting a seat) scored highly across all categories. However, it is noticeable that its relative priority on Virgin trains is higher than the long-distance sector average and the national average.

It is clear that capacity is an issue among existing passengers. It is also clear that this will become even more pressing given current and predicted levels of growth. All existing demand forecasting work to date points to further significant demand on Britain's rail network⁴. Original studies by Network Rail and DfT pointed to the London–Birmingham–North West corridor being the first rail corridor to become 'full'⁵.

DfT's business case for HS2 also highlights capacity pressures on the West Coast Main Line⁶. It said that "...parts of the West Coast Main Line are full in terms of the number of trains, many of which are already full to overflowing at certain times of day." Some have disputed this, arguing that there is spare capacity. However, we doubt that anyone has ever argued that the West Coast is full all the time – there will inevitably be empty seats at off-peak times, hence it being deemed off peak. The problem comes from the fact that it is full at certain peak times (both in terms of the numbers of trains that can theoretically run and the number of passengers it can carry). Providing more capacity to meet these busy periods will inevitably create an oversupply at less busy times.

There has also been much debate about whether this additional capacity could be addressed by upgrading existing infrastructure or whether it requires a new line and, moreover, whether any new line would need to be high-speed.

The original studies were consistent in this regard. Network Rail's new line study said that a new line was the best option and that the strongest and best business case was made by making this new line capable of carrying high-speed trains. Likewise DfT's consultation document concluded that conventional speed lines would not offer the same value for money as high-speed rail and would not be significantly cheaper to construct and operate.

From Transport Focus's perspective it is the provision of additional capacity that is the key priority – the other decisions (such as speed) being driven more in terms of identifying the most efficient and beneficial mode of delivery. However, we believe that too much emphasis to date has been placed on the speed element – this has allowed HS2 to be branded as a 'business-persons' railway rather than a new railway line which will benefit all.

⁴ [Network Rail's long-term planning process](#)

⁵ Meeting the capacity challenge: The case for New Lines (Network Rail) 2009 and High Speed Rail: Investing in Britain's Future (DfT)

⁶ [The Strategic Case for HS2](#). DfT. 2013

A new railway line provides a once-in-a-generation chance to improve services – not just in terms of additional capacity on the new HS2 line but by rationalising services on existing routes. Running 'fast trains' on HS2 allows a complete re-organisation of services on the adjacent West Coast Main Line and, to some extent, on the East Coast Main Line.

We have long maintained 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 existing conventional lines to provide a better all-round service (e.g. in terms of greater regional or local connectivity).

Critics often point out that Virgin trains doesn't have as much of a crowding problem as some other train companies, the implication being that the HS2 investment could be better spent elsewhere. This assumes, however, that any extra capacity freed up on the West Coast Main Line would be used to provide more of the same types of services as now. However, services do not have to look or feel like Virgin services do now, the extra space could be used to provide more commuter services at the London and Birmingham ends (where people are standing) or more regional 'Cross-Country' type services that feed/connect other towns/cities. Or it could allow for more freight services to run, potentially reducing congestion on roads. So it can be misleading simply to look at existing West Coast loadings when talking about HS2.

We believe that any debate on what to do with capacity released on conventional lines must be based on what passengers want from their railway. Do London commuters want faster journeys or more frequent trains? Do passengers in the West Midlands want less crowding or better connections? To help answer these questions we joined with Network Rail in in 2012 in asking passenger sand potential passengers what they wanted⁷. This looked at trade-offs between things like capacity, frequency and journey time in a number of different scenarios. It included asking people who currently drive what could encourage them to shift to rail.

Network Rail used the results to produce nine overarching goals or 'outputs' – such as less standing on London commuter services, shorter journey times between London and the Trent Valley or additional direct services between major towns and cities in the west midlands. These could form the building blocks of a future West Coast Main Line timetable.

The HS2 review will also need to take into account the difficulties of modernising an existing line. Passengers on the West Coast Main Line know from hard earned experience that this results in considerable disruption and engineering possessions. The National Audit Office set out at length the disruption caused by the original upgrade ('PUG1' and

⁷ [Future priorities for the West Coast Main Line](#). Transport Focus. 2012.

'PUG2')⁸. Virgin Trains also reported significant growth in demand in weekend travel after the upgrade work ceased – strongly suggesting that constant engineering work suppresses demand. More recently we have seen disruption experienced by passengers as part of the electrification programme on the Great Western Main Line and as part of the Thameslink programme.

Transport Focus has always taken a passenger centric view of HS2 and its potential impact on passengers rather than the economic and technical arguments behind the business case or the route. In our opinion, the key benefit remains relevant – a potential step-change increase in rail capacity that allows services to better match the needs of both current and future passengers.

We would be more than happy to meet to discuss this and our research in more depth.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Smith
Chief executive

⁸ [The Modernisation of the West Coast Main Line](#) NAO. 2006

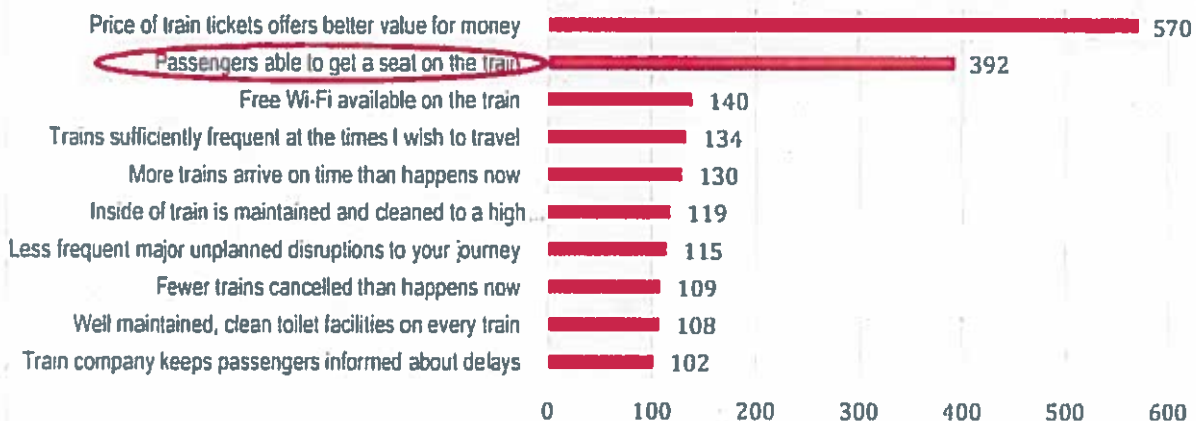
Top 10 - Rail Passenger Priorities for Improvement 2017 Great Britain



Top 10 - Rail Passenger Priorities for Improvement 2017 Long Distance



Top 10 - Rail Passenger Priorities for Improvement 2017 Virgin Trains



To assess the relative ranking, we use an index score with 100 being average importance, so anything ranked over 100 has above average importance and anything below 100 has less than average importance. For example, an index of 150 means that it is 50 per cent more important than average; a score of 300 means it is three times as important as average; while a score of 50 means that it is half as important as average.

