Chiltern Railways

High Speed Rail All-Party Parliamentary Group

Evidence from Chiltern Railways

About Chiltern Railways

1. Chiltern Railways operate main line and commuter services between London Marylebone and Birmingham Moor Street, Kidderminster, Stratford-upon-Avon and Aylesbury. Chiltern has a unique 20-year franchise agreement that incentivises investment in the infrastructure along our route. Since 1997 we have invested over £500m in track doubling, extra signalling, higher line speed, new "Parkway" stations, new and expanded depots, and additional rolling stock. This investment has driven – and been driven by – a 300% increase in passenger traffic since privatisation.

Current Capacity on Britain's railways

2. Britain's railways are now handling more traffic than at any time since the 1920s, and both passenger and freight traffic are continuing to grow despite the poor state of the national economy. A particular feature is the growth of rail traffic to/from south midlands (e.g. existing towns such as Banbury and Bicester, or new cities such as Milton Keynes), due to these being favoured locations for new housing development. There is a limit to how much of this growth can be absorbed on the existing rail network.

3. A conventional railway line handling a mixture of intercity passenger(100-125mph), local passenger (75mph) and freight (60-70mph) of necessity makes sub-optimal use of line capacity, due to fast trains catching up with slow ones. This is exacerbated where more trains have to call at intermediate stations.

Future capacity requirements

4. It is clear that the key routes between London, the Midlands and the North will be running out of capacity within the next decade. As the time taken to develop and construct new or expanded rail infrastructure is lengthy, it is essential that work to design and deliver this starts now. A particular problem is the time taken to gain statutory authorisation for major infrastructure. The fact that the HS2 link to the Midlands will not be open before 2026, and onwards to the north not until the 2030s, is a matter for concern.

5. In this context it is unfortunate that the proposed new route to the north is known as "High Speed 2". Whilst high speeds result in higher revenue earnings, better equipment utilisation, and better connectivity between different parts of the UK, the most important requirement for the new line is to provide extra capacity - and this will benefit en-route communities on the existing network at least as much as those making end-to-end journeys. It is regrettable that this message has been widely overlooked.

The best way of providing future capacity

6. We believe that the best way to provide additional capacity a totally new railway. This is because:

    - With sensible planning a single new line can provide capacity relief to each of the main routes from London to the north (West Coast Main Line, Midland Main Line, East Coast Main Line)

- The new line can provide capacity relief to those parts of on existing network that are both the most congested, and where the room available for expansion is most limited – i.e. the first 30 miles out of London, and the last 10 miles into Birmingham.
- By concentrating on a single traffic type (i.e. high-speed intercity passenger) a new line can give far more additional capacity than could an upgrade of a conventional mixed-traffic railway.
- A new line can be routed to avoid urban areas, with a resultant reduction in the number of people affected.

7. Conversely, we believe that the potential for adding extra capacity to existing routes is limited:
   - Many of the possible projects have already been carried out (e.g. Chiltern Railways' successive "Evergreen" projects that between 1999 and 2011 have transformed the Marylebone line from a low capacity suburban route into an intensively-used main line; or the West Coast Main line's Trent Valley quadrupling). The scope for further upgrades is thus limited
   - Such work causes massive disruption over many years for both rail users and for lineside residents.
   - Engineering work on an existing railway is inevitably more expensive than on a "greenfield" site, where construction is unimpeded by the need to continue running trains.
   - Due to the amount of lineside housing, upgrading and additional tracks is least practical where it is most needed – again, the first 30 miles out of London.
8. A number of commentators have suggested that the Chiltern line could be upgraded as an alternative to HS2. We do not believe this is practical:
   - The Chiltern line is now very busy, and in parts working at capacity. Claims that there is significant spare capacity are incorrect.
   - Extra capacity could only be added by building additional tracks. As noted above, this would be extremely disruptive, and the work would severely disrupt passenger journeys for many years.
   - Claims that Chiltern trains could be "looped" onto side lines to enable intercity/high-speed trains to pass are not practicable. Not only would the looped trains be excessively delayed, but the overall gain in line capacity would be slight.
   - Claims that the line was built with enough land to add additional tracks throughout (i.e. quadrupling) are largely incorrect. Whilst there are stretches of the line where 4-tracking was originally possible, these are not contiguous, and the width is often insufficient for earthworks and between-track clearances to modern standards. Significant extra land purchase would be required, along with much heavy engineering work.
   - Much of the additional land and construction work needed would be in the middle of urban and residential areas such as Gerrards Cross and Beaconsfield, and considerable purchase of domestic property would be required. Away from the towns it is also questionable whether significant work would be allowed in the Chiltern AONB.

- At both High Wycombe and Leamington Spa the existing railway is elevated above the town, and on a sharp, speed-restricted curve. A new by-pass line would thus be needed, and due to (perceived) noise impacts this would probably also be desirable for the other towns en-route. In this case the various by-passes might as well be linked to give a wholly-new route throughout, rather than a sub-optimal mismatch of old and new.
- Between Northolt and Denham the works needed to upgrade the existing railway would be little different from those proposed for HS2.

The effects of not providing future capacity

9. We believe that on the affected routes some, and possibly all of the following would occur:
   - Rationing by space – i.e. overcrowding.
   - Rationing by price – i.e. fares would be raised to choke off demand. This would penalise lower income travellers, and also be ineffective at those times (e.g. commuter rush hours) at which passengers have little option to change their travel patterns in response to price signals.
   - The withdrawal of some services in order to create line capacity for others. If profitable long distances trains are withdrawn, the railways' financial viability would suffer; if local and commuter trains are withdrawn, the socio-economic benefits of the rail network would be reduced.
   - Rail punctuality and reliability would decrease, due to the system being required to operate more trains than it is designed for.
   - Long-term disruption of the rail network due to attempting incremental capacity increases along existing lines. This would impact on both rail users and lineside residents, and in many instances provide only temporary relief.
   - Modal shift from rail to road and air – due to all of the above. This would not only bring adverse environmental and fuel security impacts, but would increase pressure on road space and runway capacity. This would in turn lead to calls for highway and airport expansion, which in terms of landtake, noise and emissions would have far worse impacts than expanding the rail network.
   - Successive governments' plans to tackle the housing shortage by building new homes in e.g. Milton Keynes and Northampton would be put at risk due to inadequate public transport capacity.

Additional issues

i. North Chiltern Parkway

10. Calls have been made in some quarters for a "North Chiltern Parkway" station, perhaps at Calvert, Bucks, where the new HS2 line would cross the proposed East West Rail line from Oxford to Milton Keynes. We believe that such a station would be undesirable:
    - The resultant mix of non-stop and stopping rains on HS2 would reduce line capacity.
    - Most traffic from the new station would be towards London; to provide sufficient seating trains would need to run partially empty between Birmingham and the new station.

- The new station would be in a wholly rural area, and thus dependent on long-distance railheading by car.
- There would be no interchange benefits between HS2 and EWR, as the potential connections already have direct rail links (e.g. Oxford- Birmingham).

ii. The route for HS2

11. Chiltern Railways do not have a view on the alignment chosen for HS2, except at those locations where the new line would cross or run parallel with our own. We have examined HS2 Ltd.'s proposals at these locations, and are satisfied that adverse impacts would be minimal in both the construction and operational phases.

iii. Future Chiltern Railways services

12. We understand that claims have been made to the effect that, post HS2, Chiltern Railways would increase fares and/or reduce services at intermediate stations. We have no such plans, and totally refute these allegations.