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## **A HIGH SPEED RAILWAY TO THE NORTH WEST OF ENGLAND**

### ***A Position Statement by TravelWatch North West***

#### **1. Introduction**

1.1 TravelWatch North West warmly welcomes the current discussion on the concept of a new high-speed railway connecting London with the North West of England. It also considers there is now some urgency for the government to commit itself to the planning and construction of a new railway route linking these regions of the United Kingdom to ensure that a new line is available in time before the projected crunch on capacity on existing routes expected in some 15 to 20 years time.

#### **2. The Need for a New Line**

2.1 The enormous expenditure on the West Coast Main Line over the last ten years on both its physical infrastructure and new trains has greatly increased capacity, speed of transit and performance over the route, particularly for passenger movements. Frequency of services is now greatly increased on core sections of the line, including to Preston and Manchester in the North West. This has been facilitated by new track layouts to remove conflicting movements and the widening of some sections of the route by provision of additional tracks. Further short to medium growth in traffic will also be provided for in the next three years by additional train sets and strengthening of existing trains from nine to eleven cars. However, major physical bottlenecks remain which will constrain future growth, particularly at Stafford.

2.2 Inevitably the recent actual and projected growth in passenger traffic has had its downsides. For one, it places serious constraints on the development of freight traffic on a route which is the most heavily used in the UK for this type of traffic – and at a time when motorway congestion, greater environmental awareness and the need to reduce CO2 emissions, is creating a strong demand for new freight flows from new customers. Also experiencing poorer services are passengers from smaller provincial stations which have not always retained the frequency of London-based services, and inter-station journeys other than to London which are now often found to be much more difficult and longer than hitherto.

2.3 Together, these factors strongly suggest to forecasters that the WCML will be suffering serious capacity problems, probably by 2020, but certainly by 2025. The recent experience of upgrading a working route – with the disruption it caused to all types of customer – would not be acceptable again, let alone the capacity limiting factors of trying to operate faster trains alongside slower commuter, local and freight trains, leads strongly to the case for a totally new railway line reserved for high-speed trains only. High speed railways which may also cater for freight are no longer acceptable as they do not permit an overnight “maintenance window”, and catering for high freight axle-loadings compared with new lightweight high-speed trains escalates cost and prejudices ride quality.

### **3. Strategic Design Criteria**

3.1 While the discussion on potential routes for a new line (HS2) has only just begun, with options so far being put forward by Network Rail and others, it is vital that any initial proposals are seen as logical parts of a much longer term strategy for the provision of a network of new lines to connect the various nations and regions of the UK both with London and with each other. TravelWatch North West sees the following criteria as being essential for a high-speed network to serve to North West of England.

- (a) Route to be oriented from London to serve Manchester as the primary north-west destination, but also to serve the West Midlands en route enabling a high-speed inter-regional service in addition to London services.
- (b) Route to approach Manchester from south westerly quarter to facilitate a westward link (probably using existing tracks) to Liverpool and onward services over classic lines to Preston, Cumbria and Scotland. It would also provide a jumping off point for extension of the high-speed line itself to Scotland.
- (c) The approach to Manchester described above may also permit extension of the high-speed line north-eastwards over or through the Pennines West Yorkshire, eventually allowing the development of a new line linking the principal northern conurbations of Merseyside, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and the North East (this latter via an additional high speed line from London through the East Midlands and running to the east of the Pennines).
- (d) TravelWatch North West can see only a limited case for a high speed line between London and the North West also serving Heathrow airport on the main route. Such a diversion would impose significant additional capital expense and environmental impact, and impose additional time on all London-based journeys for the direct benefit of a relatively small proportion of all passengers using the route. On the other hand, TOWNW is very concerned at the present lack of connectivity between Heathrow and the WCML and would advocate other appropriate measures to provide this from a new line.

3.2 Essential to the new line will be city-to-city centre linking, probably using existing classic rail routes to achieve at least part of this. Serious

consideration should also be given to the development of strategic park-and-ride stations on conurbation fringes where motorway-related locations would greatly widen market accessibility to the new services.

#### **4. Integration with Existing Rail System**

4.1 Early attention to the design of timetabled services on a high-speed line is essential, not least to reassure as many as possible of those communities which will not have direct access to the new route that they will benefit from it. A fully integrated approach to timetable planning over a high-speed line and the parallel classic railway will be a vital element in its acceptability and overall success.

4.2 Closely related to the above is the need for effective and efficient connectivity with feeder services, again to extend the market reach of a new line. This will be most important at the stations serving large urban areas, including London, but also for major rail interchanges such as Crewe, Preston and Carlisle.

#### **5. Financial Considerations**

5.1 However urgent is the need for a decision on a new high speed network of railways in Britain there remains a vital need for continued improvement to the existing rail network on which the great majority of passengers will continue to travel. Investment in high speed railways must not detract from the funds available for the present rail system, including major developments to remove bottlenecks and increase capacity.

5.2 Despite the very high cost of provision and operation of a high speed railway it will not attract many classes of passenger unless fares are affordable. While a premium charge may be appropriate on peak-hour services many travellers will not be drawn from other modes if fares are not competitive.

#### **6. Environmental Issues**

6.1 Any major transport development brings with it major environmental issues and a new high-speed railway will be no exception. As a transport campaigning group TOWN cannot consider the full implications but it is anxious to ensure that some basic guidelines are adopted when route planning proceeds in more detail. England is a crowded country compared with most European countries where high-speed lines have been built so many communities and individuals are likely to be disadvantaged during construction and operation, or both. The intrusive scale of the development, noise of trains and disruption to local life, including wild life, will all impact severely despite the very much smaller land-take of a new railway compared with a motorway.

6.2 Other routes, including HS1 across Kent, demonstrate some of the steps which can be taken to alleviate and minimise the inevitable impacts. Perhaps most important of these is the planning of a route, as much as possible, to closely follow existing major transport corridors such as railways or motorways, rather than introduce a new swathe of development, noise and disruption into areas of open country. Locally, landscape design measures such as bunding and dense planting can do much to minimise noise intrusion. In very sensitive areas extreme resort may be necessary to tunnelling but to cover extensive distances in this way is extremely expensive and will soon affect the viability of the whole project. It should also be remembered that proper attention to train design can itself greatly minimise noise generation at its point of origin. Failure to address these issues will only result in much increased opposition to any proposals.

## **7. Summary**

7.1 TravelWatch North West strongly supports the concept of a new high speed railway linking London and the North West, designed as part of a strategically planned network of high-speed railways linking the nations and regions of the United Kingdom to London and to each other. A government commitment to an agreed strategic network is an essential preliminary to the planning of the first parts of that network, which should aim to relieve forecast capacity problems on the West Coast Main Line by the mid-2020s at the latest.

7.2 Funding of a new line must not detract from continued investment to improve the quality and capacity of the existing network. Similarly, the cost of using the new network must be affordable for potential passengers who must not be driven by cost to revert to other modes of travel.

7.3 TOWNW strongly advocates early adoption of policies for the design of a high speed railway to minimise the environmental impact such a major development will inevitably create.

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