

Getting the railway budget on track

The UK spends a very high proportion of its total government transport budget on railways. It is embarking on a mega project to put in HS2. It could get more railway capacity much more quickly at a much lower price if it made some changes and stopped HS2.

There are overloaded lines – assuming we return in due course to something like previous levels of train travel. They can handle more trains if the government accelerates its plans for digital signalling, which can raise the capacity of track by at least 25%.

If you look down on the UK at rush hour without virus effects, you will see a pattern of crowded roads with cars bumper to bumper trying to get in or out of the cities. Nearby you will see brilliant straight line railways into the heart of the city with nothing on them. The reason the tracks are so empty is the need to enforce 2 mile or more gaps between trains, given poor braking, the heavy weight of the typical train and the inadequacies of older signal systems. If every train was linked in real time to a network control system and had complete visibility of the track ahead more trains per hour could be run safely on the underutilised track. Station capacity needs to be raised in some cases particularly at terminals to accommodate. Lighter trains with better brakes would also help.

Putting in more short sections of by pass track would also assist. Too often in the congested system a fast train gets stuck behind a stopper and cannot keep to timetable as a result.

Railway management needs to answer some Important questions about the current state of the railways. How will demand pick up? What is the new safe level of use? What action can be taken to get costs closer to revenue? Do the railways think they will now lose permanently a portion of the crucial commuting traffic into main cities which is such a large proportion of revenue? They have depended for many years on charging high prices for peak hours season tickets from people who had no choice but to use trains.