The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Transport Committee

Rt Hon Heidi Alexander MP

Secretary of State for Transport

By email

20 November 2026

Dear Heidi

Future seat capacity on the West Coast Main Line

The Scottish Parliament's Transport Committee recently received correspondence (attached in the **annexe**, which you were also copied into) raising concerns about future seat capacity on rail services operating via the West Coast Main Line following the introduction of HS2-compatible rolling stock.

The correspondence highlights the National Audit Office's recommendation that the Department for Transport should ensure that future rail operations provide sufficient seat capacity to maximise overall benefits from HS2.

The Committee notes the argument that decisions on fleet specification and service patterns could have significant implications for passenger capacity, connectivity and the wider economic benefits expected from investment in high-speed rail infrastructure, including for communities in Scotland.

The Committee would therefore welcome the Department for Transport's views on these concerns and, in particular:

- how the Department is assessing future seat-capacity requirements on services connecting Scotland with the rest of Great Britain;
- what consideration has been given to the National Audit Office's recommendation regarding sufficient seat capacity to maximise overall benefits from HS2;
- what assurances the Department can provide that decisions relating to rolling stock procurement and service planning will support future passenger demand and the anticipated economic benefits of HS2; and

Contact: Transport Committee, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP. Email: transport.committee@parliament.scot. We welcome calls through Relay UK and in BSL through Contact Scotland BSL.

- what consideration has been given to concerns regarding the potential slower journey times between Glasgow and Stafford, and the implications this could have.

The Committee would be grateful for a response at your earliest convenience, and is sending a copy of this letter to the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport.

Yours sincerely,



Willie Rennie MSP
Convener

Annexe

Dear Mr Rennie

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SEAT CAPACITY OF FUTURE RAIL SERVICES USING HS2 / WCML

As Accountable Officers, Chairs and Conveners of parliamentary oversight committees for UK and Scottish transport matters, I am writing to you to formally place on the public record my concerns and objections regarding HS2's plans for seat capacity and journey times before their negotiations with the train manufacturer are concluded in coming weeks. This will set in stone rail services between Scotland, Northwest England, the Midlands and London for the next fifty years. An entire future generation will want to know why our generation committed £100bn to new infrastructure that failed to maximise seat numbers and faster journeys on all routes when it was possible to do this. They will also want to know who was accountable for this outcome. In the absence of any public consultation or transparency since 2020 I am writing this letter for the public record to highlight my concerns, shared by many at all levels in today's rail industry, and show that the outcomes did not have to be like this. As Accountable Officers, Chairs and Conveners of parliamentary oversight committees the record will show that this happened on your watch, and that I alerted you to the issues when the opportunity for you to take action still existed.

In a report dated 29th June, 2026, the National Audit Office made the following recommendation:

"When deciding on the HS2 train fleet and how it will integrate with the wider rail network, DIT should ensure that it aligns with the future operation of the rail network as a whole and ensure sufficient seat capacity to maximise overall benefits."

I can find no published evidence to show that this has been acted on, or that it will be acted on before the announcement that the rolling stock renegotiation has been completed. Seat numbers and journey times will be a direct and inflexible outcome of this contractual renegotiation. I can find no evidence that seat capacity will be provided to maximise overall benefits, such as economic, tourism, environmental, housing, sport and social, all of which will be directly derived from increased seat numbers. HS2 as currently being built has the potential to provide all these benefits directly and indirectly in places such as Glasgow, Oxenholme, Blackpool, Warrington and Milton Keynes, but only if the optimum seat provision strategy is adopted now.

The impact of fewer seats between Glasgow and London, and slower journeys between Glasgow and Stafford, will be felt in the West of Scotland with a negative impact on the economy, tourism, ScotRail revenue and the environment. Scottish residents and taxpayers will suffer as a result of fewer seats, fewer cheap fares and compulsory seat reservations being used to suppress demand. The Scottish Parliament and Accountable Officer cannot ignore this on the basis that WCML rail services are controlled by the UK government and imminently the UK organisation Great British Railways. Obviously, a lengthy section of the WCML is in Scotland, and the services involved serve Lockerbie, Motherwell, Glasgow Central, Haymarket and Edinburgh. This subject really matters to Scotland.

As Accountable Officers and Chairs of parliamentary oversight committees you all have a personal duty and responsibility on behalf of taxpayers to ensure that the UK's spend of £100bn on the HS2 infrastructure enhancement maximises its overall benefits. I believe that it will be inevitable that future generations will ask what examples you personally asked for to show that this would happen. I fully expect there to be future inquiries, investigations, books and documentaries exploring this issue. They will not expect you to have personally studied the entire timetable and counted the seats, but they will expect you to have looked at a few examples before the strategy was set in stone, which HS2 have said will be done before the end of March, 2027. They will also expect you to have listened to experienced railway operators who have run services on the WCML, including those who were part of an executive team that has actually doubled passenger numbers on this route such as myself. Your defence cannot be that you were not responsible, did not understand or were not told, as I'm telling you now.

I propose below a few simple examples that I think you should be doing your due diligence on and not to do so would mean that your personal oversight and duty in your role was deficient. It is entirely reasonable to expect you to ask questions to enable you to fill in the "HS2 plan 2040-2043" boxes before HS2 commits to the expenditure of £100bn of taxpayer money, including finalising the train order. To get value for money from £100bn the "HS2 plan 2040-2043" outcomes must be significantly better than "current 2026", which they can be. I would be delighted if they are better than "Chris Gibb plan 2040-2043". If they are not what is the UK spending £100bn on HS2 for ?

Comparison - Direct Train Services provided by HS2 Compatible Train Fleets

Key Measure	Current 2026	Gibb plan 2040-2043	HS2 plan 2040-2043	Notes
Manchester - Euston, average seats per hour via Milton Keynes	1,614	750		Most services will use HS2 when it opens 2040-2043
Manchester - Euston, average seats per hour via HS2	N/A	2,250		All services will use HS2 when it opens 2040-2043
Total seats Manchester - Euston	**1,614**	**3,000**		
Glasgow-Euston, average seats per hour	864	1,125		All services will use HS2 when it opens 2040-2043

Key Measure	Current 2026	Gibb plan 2040-2043	HS2 plan 2040-2043	Notes
Edinburgh - Birmingham Interchange/ International average seats per hour	336	375		
Warrington - Euston average seats per hour	1,122	1,254		All services will use HS2 when it opens 2040-2043
Birmingham New Street- Euston average seats per hour via Weedon/Milton Keynes	1,530	504		Most services will use HS2 when it opens 2040-2043
Birmingham Curzon Street - Euston average seats per hour via HS2	N/A	3,024		All services will use HS2 whenitopens 2040-2043
Total seats Central Birmingham - Euston	**1,530**	**3,528**		
Oxenholme- Euston average seats per hour	538	750		All services will use HS2 when it opens 2040-2043
Blackpool - Euston average seats per hour	0	504		Only one direct train per day at present
Liverpool - Euston average seats per hour	983	1,008		All services will use HS2 when it opens 2040-2043
Manchester - Euston journey time with one stop	1hr59m±	1hr40m		± 0700 runs today
Euston - Glasgow journey time with one stop	4h08m*	3h38m		*ran 2009-2016

AssumQtions

1. No infrastructure enhancements on WCML and no novel or unproven technology or practices are assumed to be used to deliver "Gibb plan 2040-2043".
2. HS2 Phase 1 is finished 2036-2043 as currently announced.
3. "Chris Gibb plan 2040" assumes no additional services: simply longer and faster trains, with average 62.5 seats per carriage.
4. ETCS (cab signalling) is installed during signalling renewals Warrington - Carstairs 2036-2043. 70% on London - Glasgow will be ETCS from 2043.
5. Averages calculated using 0900-1500 timetable and actual trains on Monday 2nd November, 2026. This reflects faithfully the current difficulty experienced with deploying four different train fleets, each with different seat capacity.

ImQortant Points to Note

1. The fleet of 56 Pendolino trains that currently operate Avanti's WCML services will be life expired in 2043, when HS2 will open between Euston and the WCML at Handsacre Junction, near Lichfield.
2. The existing WCML has constraints that severely limit running additional daytime passenger or freight services, for example between Colwich and Stafford, Winsford and Weaver Junction and on the climbs of Beattock and Shap. On most routes services running via HS2 must therefore replace existing services that run via Milton Keynes. It will not be possible to simply run extra trains on most routes, e.g. for premier league fixtures. Only between Birmingham / Lichfield, Rugby, Milton Keynes and Euston will there be significant released track capacity to accommodate additional urban services and freight traffic once HS2 opens.
3. Platform lengths at terminal stations are a significant constraint, but my plan makes full use of the full length of these platforms, particularly the 286m platforms in Glasgow and Manchester, to maximise seat capacity.
4. Between now and HS2 opening in 2036-2043 it is reasonable to assume that passenger volume will grow, as a result of drivers such as the economy, population growth, GBR implementation, timetable improvements, yield management improvements and increased road congestion. Much of this volume growth will be compounded and therefore needs to be accommodated when HS2 opens.

I enclose a flyer I published earlier this year with further details of my proposal. I would be happy to discuss the issues further with you at your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Gibb

AWARDS 2026

HS2 2040

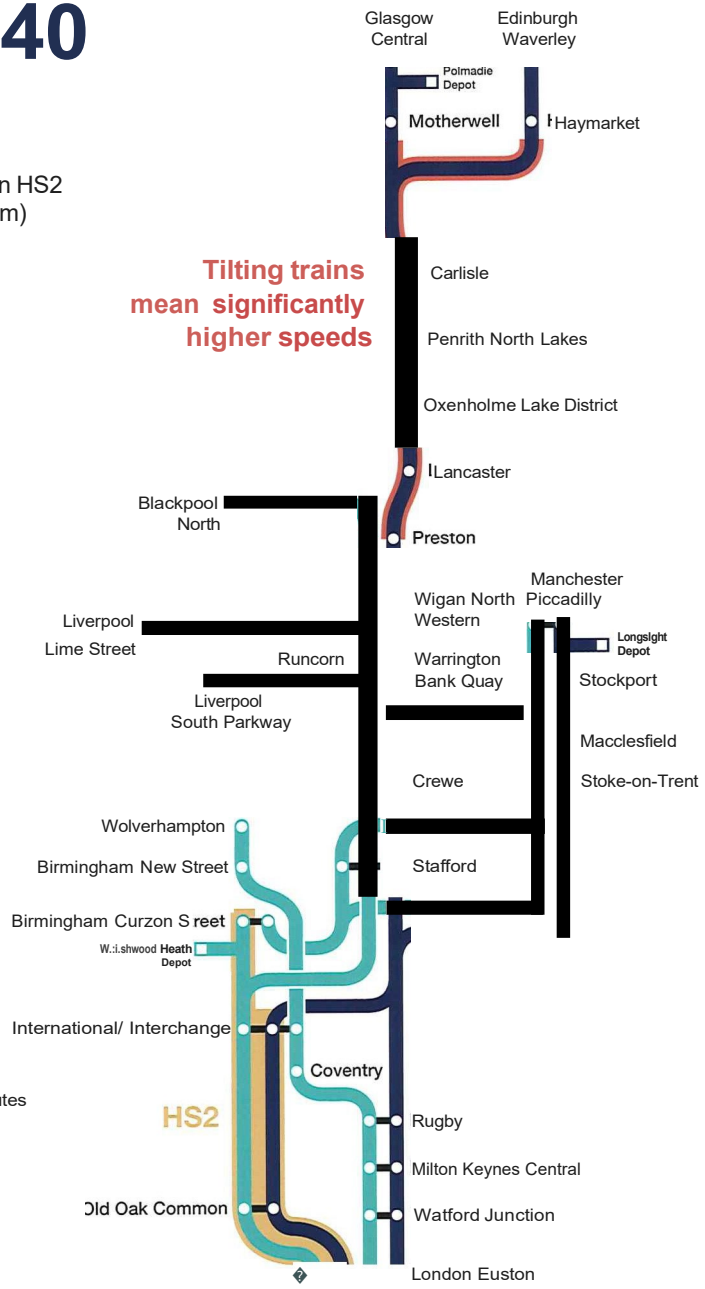
Class 895 routes
- Using 200m trains
- Formed as 400m on HS2 (London-Birmingham)
- Non-tilt

Class 391 routes
- Using 286m trains
- Tilting



Class 895
- 16 coaches on HS2
- 8 coaches on other routes

Class 391
- 12 coaches
- Fixed formation



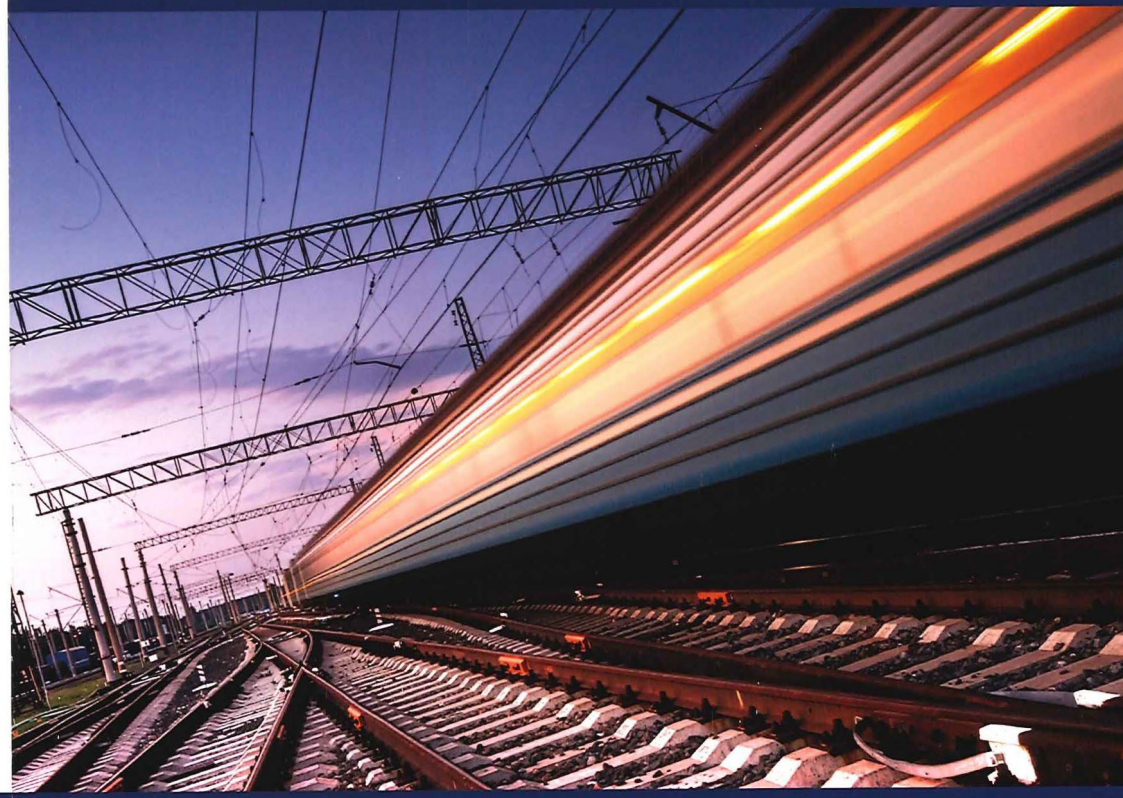
A track and train approach for growth

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HS2 2040

A track and train approach for growth

How to have more seats and faster journeys on *all* routes from 2040



Chris Gibb

February 2026

Since the Coronation Scot in the 1930s, the West Coast Main Line has connected Scotland and London in speed and style.

Electrification and tilting trains have steadily reduced journey times to a little over four hours. The construction of HS2 between Lichfield and London presents the opportunity to cut times further.

HS2 has ordered 54 eight-carriage trains with 504 seats. Today's 11-carriage Pendolinos have 607 seats and operate twice an hour between Glasgow, Edinburgh and London Euston. The HS2 order is insufficient to replace the 574 Pendolino carriages, so compromise beckons.

HS2's new trains won't tilt, which is how the trains go faster in comfort on the sinuous railway north of Lancaster. Planned renewals with cab signalling (ETCS) can make even higher speeds a reality for tilting trains from 2040. But if HS2 trains don't tilt that capability will be removed from the renewal.

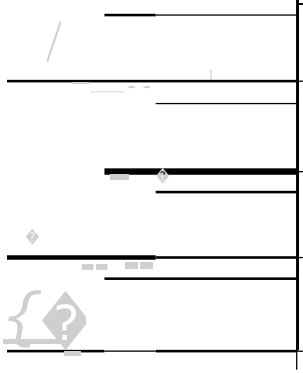
Twenty minutes gained running via HS2 will be lost by slower than possible running further north. So where is the ambition and what is the solution?

HS2 is delayed and likely to connect to the West Coast Main Line in 2040 at the same time today's Pendolinos retire. The solution is to start planning a replacement now, competitively tendering for 43 12-carriage 750-seat ETCS trains that can run on the WCML at 140 mph and run on HS2 to 186 mph.

From 2040, they could operate between Scotland to Euston twice per hour, with 1500 seats per hour, and between Manchester to Euston three times per hour. The Glasgow to Euston journey time, with an hourly fast train, could be 3hr 38min; highly competitive with air and motorway, and good for economic growth.

"Now is the time for the UK and Scottish Governments to rekindle the ambitious spirit of Coronation Scot and plan today for faster trains with more seats on the West Coast Main Line when HS2 opens."

Current train fleet in 2026

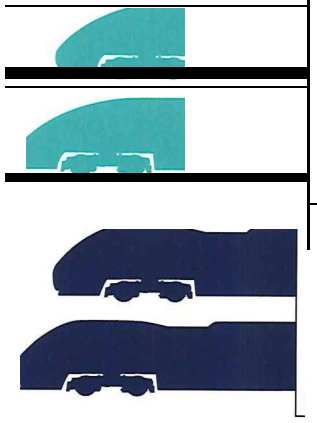


Rolling stock	Carriages per train	Length of train	Seats per train	Carriages in fleet
Class 390/0 Built 2001-05	9	218m	469	189
Class 390/1 Built 2001-05	11	266m	607	385
Class 221* Built 2001-02	5	119m	246	40
Class 807 Built 2021-24	7	182m	453	70
			Total	684

·currently in use between Birmingham and Manchester

Proposed tram fleet from 2040

with HS2



Rolling stock	Carriages per train	Length of train	Seats per train	Carriages in fleet
Class 895 (as designed) Electric Non-tilt ETCS Maintained at Washwood Heath	8	200m	504	432
Class 391 (proposed) Electric Tilting ETCS, TASS Maintained at Polmadie/Longsight	12	286m	750	516
			Total	948

No enhancements needed to existing NR infrastructure (only planned renewals) and no additional paths needed on congested West Coast Main Line infrastructure.



