

Clearing the way for rail closures

By Peter Rowland

In its final dying throes, the Strategic Rail Authority has produced the definitive edition of the West Midlands rail utilisation strategy which is intended to cover the strategy for the region up to 2011.

There has been a public consultation since the original proposals were published in February. Railfuture West Midlands sent in our comments; and we were glad to see that some have been taken into account.

However, despite the manifest problems of Birmingham, we remain concerned that the RUS is too heavily focused on the centre of the region, saying very little about the services around Stoke-on-Trent, Shrewsbury, Hereford or Worcester.

The branch is convinced that at least one additional track will be needed, within the timespan of the RUS, on the main line between Coventry, New Street and Wolverhampton to provide the essential future growth for the conurbation.

Commuter services are already being compromised by the need to path long distance services on this congested route. We see this work as the priority need for the West Midlands region.

A second major problem that the RUS has identified concerns five local stations on the West Coast main line with low numbers of passengers, specifically Atherstone, Polesworth, Norton Bridge, Barlaston and Wedgwood.

The RUS suggests that four of these should be closed. Their meagre services have now been "bustituted" for over a year and could soon be formally withdrawn. Is this another sacrifice at the Virgin Trains altar – or are we too cynical?

However we too are pleased to read that Atherstone will continue to be served by the new semi-fast Northampton to Crewe services and we acknowledge that the more substantial town of Stone, in Staffordshire, has also been given a reprieve, with limited stops now promised in the Cross Country service next year – albeit only for a trial period.

Sadly, Etruria station north of Stoke-on-Trent will have been closed by the time this is in print.

Thirdly, the RUS proposes the withdrawal of the Wolverhampton to Walsall section of the hourly Walsall to Wellington and Shrewsbury local service completely from April 2006 – much to the chagrin of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council – offering an express bus in its place. Centro is also vigorously opposing this cut. There are currently no intermediate stations on this short, six-mile, electrified route but funding was available from West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority to reopen a station at Willenhall on the old Grand Junction line. Fourthly, we believe that

But the West Midlands route utilisation strategy is not all bad news

there will be major track capacity issues within the life of the RUS on many other lines, implying continued peak-hours overcrowding on almost all routes into Birmingham.

Lack of track capacity now constrains any increase in service frequency on most routes into Birmingham. For instance, Tamworth's position as a growing commuter town has been acknowledged but not equitably addressed.

The through train to Matlock, which provided a third local train per hour on this route, was withdrawn last year and no replacement is offered.

Other towns in the Birmingham "travel to work" area have however fared better; with platform extensions and a better service promised for Bromsgrove; and a loop suggested at Alvechurch to permit a three trains per hour service to Redditch.

The West Midlands RUS listed over 50 station reopening proposals that have been mentioned in the Local Transport Plans.

Very few of these have even reached the SRA's feasibility stage; although we believe that many will be needed if local passenger growth is to continue. A more proactive approach from both the Regional Assembly and the SRA's successors is badly needed.

In general, West Midlands branch remains seriously worried that the RUS proposals do not adequately address the future growth in local passenger numbers which is widely predicted to be above the national average.

We are looking for a more progressive approach in the forthcoming Regional Planning Assessment which is due later this year.

Nevertheless there is some good news within the RUS:

■ Increased frequencies are promised on some middle and outer suburban services, specifically to Hednesford (on the Chase Line), to Kidderminster and to Stratford-upon-Avon (the last one having been a long term aspiration of the Shakespeare Line rail user group). All these services have shown substantial growth.

■ Most trains currently reversing at Shirley will be extended to an expanded park-and-ride facility at Whitlock's End.

■ A daily through service is promised from Shrewsbury to London. There has been significant local political pressure for this reinstatement.

■ Attempts will be made to deal with short platforms at numerous stations around the region, which are inhibiting the use of longer trains. Most significantly the long-proposed enhancements at Bromsgrove are endorsed.

■ There are at last plans for a new layout at Tyseley Junction. Currently all Snow Hill services to and from Leamington are subject to a severe 20mph speed restriction here, which dates from the disastrous "simplification" of this former Great Western route in the 1970s.

■ Modest capacity improvements at Stratford (a facing cross-over) and, possibly, at Stourbridge Junction (a reversing facility) are also promised.

■ Reinstatement of the blocked track through platform three at Walsall is also suggested to alleviate the present restricted three-track layout.

■ Warwickshire County Council's aspiration for a new station at Coleshill is endorsed but the RUS is surprisingly dismissive about the long-standing aspirations for a reopened station at Kenilworth.

■ Network Rail is to assess the potential for a possible fly-over

at Landor Street, Birmingham, to provide desperately needed extra capacity where the freight route from the south joins the old Midland line to Derby.

■ A potentially useful freight chord at Ryecroft Junction, Walsall, awaits evaluation by Network Rail, as does the proposed Benson Road chord. The latter would give Walsall services access from the Soho loop to Snow Hill, thereby reducing pressure on New Street, although there are differing views as to whether this change is still desirable.

However, many of the above track enhancement schemes were foreshadowed in Network Rail's 2005 Business plan which was published in March!

And finally, it looks as though the quite spectacular new terminal platforms (by no means just a film set!) at Birmingham Moor Street will be connected at last.

Win with Railfuture

The following members have won cash prizes in the Railfuture lottery which also incidentally helps raise money for campaigning:

April: H Maughan, J C Clark, Mrs I Graham

May: M Edgell, R Burrows, W Stoneham

June: D J Barr, I M Hallack, D Peters

July: K Porter, B Balmain, J W Barfield

August: Martin Parker, Tom Beharrell and Robert Kenney.

Join the winners. Send a cheque for £12 for a one-year subscription to the Railfuture lottery to Railfuture Lottery, 13 Arnhill Road, Gretton, Corby, Northants NN17 3DN.

Your chances of winning are better than with the National Lottery!

Travel with Railfuture

The main RDS Group Travel visit in 2006 is planned for the week commencing 15 May to Milan. This will be the first time that we have organised a trip to Italy in 12 years of visits to the Continent.

It is hoped to travel via Paris and Basle with an overnight stay in the latter on the outward and return journeys. As usual, the visit will go from Monday to Sunday, by train all the way, and we hope that the party will be able to meet members of our Italian sister organisation, Associazione Utenti del Trasporto Pubblico.

We are also considering a long weekend in Flanders (probably based on Ghent) in the early autumn of 2006. For details of either or both visits, please send SAE to Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Road South, Lowestoft NR32 1RQ. It is planned to send out full details of the Milan trip immediately after Christmas.

Rail at risk warning

Rail at Risk is the latest in a series of discussion papers written by Nick Lewis and edited by Chris Burden on behalf of the Railfuture Passenger Committee. With the passing of the recent Railways Act, there are indications that the Government intends, by almost any means, to reduce its financial and other support for the railways.

The paper analyses the origins of rail industry cost inflation and suggests ways of reducing it, without cutting routes or services. It also shows that the appeal of "bustitution", apparently a cheap option and one of the favoured ways of cutting local rail services, is based on flawed economics. The paper shows that in the light of the substantial and unpredicted increase in rail ridership over the past few years, which is likely to continue with the introduction of road congestion charging, cutting services would be folly. Contact Chris Burden (email: f-chris-f@clara.net) for details of how to obtain a copy.