

The real answer for Birmingham

In *Railwatch* 113 I mentioned the failure to think strategically and wondered at the Conservative-controlled Cambridgeshire County Council, hand in hand with an even newer "New Labour" getting together to dig up a perfectly good rail trackbed to run buses on.

My reference to strategy provoked some interesting views from members, each with their own concerns so I decided to develop the strategy issue, but before doing so read the 224 pages of Network Rail's Strategic Business Plan and marvelled at its detail, noting the double speak, but primarily looking for key routes and key stations.

However I find it is silent upon a number of what I believe are key routes. There is no mention of the Manchester, Sheffield and Wath line through the Pennines still used as a route for electricity cables!

No mention of west of Salisbury, so presumably the single line constraints will remain.

The line from Market Harborough to Northampton is a route that could be resurrected and would be of value. Much of the old Great Central is intact. Only short-sighted fools closed it anyway but then they nearly pulled St Pancras down in the 1960s!

Still no one is looking strategically at the network, just making small tweaks.

There is much emphasis on refurbished stations which I fear will end up like Manchester Piccadilly, which has the worst platform indicators, cramped obscure entrances to platforms, and the same old platforms as before, all camouflaged by many retail outlets blocking the way.

The railway I say yet again is about passenger ease of movement and running trains – not about making it easy to sell pizzas and beef burgers.

In any event it should be the building of key stations on key routes that is concentrated on, not tarding up old stations.

Even when such strategic issues are tackled, why does it take so long?

Back in the 1980s we talked of a new Parkway station close to the East Midlands Airport and the M1, now just about a runner as it is opening in December 2008 – 25 years late.

Likewise in a report in 1979 to the British Railways Board and the Government, the London Midland Region suggested the doubling of the tracks down the Trent valley. This will be about 30 years late when it is complete.

I believe the problem is that politicians think at the most in five-year sections determined by elections so they do not tackle the problems. They themselves deal in small segments and yet demand say, of the



Network Rail is investing £350million on a West Midlands resignalling programme.

Work started in October last year but the project will not be completed until 2014.

Equipment dating back to the 1960s will be replaced and the new signalling centre at Saltley will control a vast area.

Combined with other signalling renewals in the region, including Coventry and Droitwich, the proposed area of control will include 415 route miles replacing up to 38 signal boxes.

The first stage, the 23-mile "Leamington Corridor" route between Birmingham Moor Street, Solihull and Warwick Parkway will be completed in February.

As each phase is completed, signalling operations for that area will move to Saltley.

Network Rail route director Peter Strachan said: "Investment on this scale will reduce delays by improving the reliability of the railway and provide a long-term benefit of a better rail network in the region."

aviation industry, a 30-year plan! Additionally the privatised train companies only look to the end of their franchise, so short-term thinking exists wherever you look.

Is it any wonder then that reports like Network Rail's are unimaginative financial mumbo jumbo?

The growth figures are likewise difficult to follow be it from Network Rail or the Department for Transport. They say capacity problems will not arise until 2025 for inter-city and 2045 for local travel. Anyone with an ounce of sense can see the capacity gridlock will come at around 2012.

Once again one has to consider the speed and sense, which the German government responded to the needs of a central station in Berlin, and the four years it took them, and contrast it with our attitude to a similar problem in the heart of our rail network. Birmingham needs a central station, not an increase in retail outlets above New Street.

What happens with trains in Birmingham affects the entire network. 2012 is just about the time they will have finished their cosmetic arrangements for Birmingham New Street under the so-called Gateway scheme.

Maybe, with cynical reflection, it will deal with capacity since the four or five years it will take to complete, the service will be disrupted, blocks of platforms closed

and several other bus substitution gambits will prevail, so people will have become so annoyed they will have found long term alternatives.

New Street station and its signal box, I am familiar with. The problems of operating that underground terminal where every interchange is likely to involve an escalator experience, is well known to me. The platforms are double-ended, for example 3a and 3b with a dividing signal in the middle. The plans to use nine-car local services and 11-car Pendolinos will lessen considerably platform capacity and have the reverse effect from that claimed.

The passenger circulating areas are designed to separate the "a" and "b" ends and passengers will be called down as trains become available. These circulating areas will be separated with ticket barriers out of each, across a public thoroughfare in the middle.

So an elderly person with luggage moving from 9a area to 3b platform will be able to experience several bits of inconvenience.

Incidentally most of the glossy material for the new scheme shows bright young things leaping about with the odd laptop case, but neither elderly persons with cases nor young people with luggage and pushchairs.

With two minutes notice of a train's arrival and a perhaps two-minute

dwelling time it should be interesting. It seems to me it's all about property and retail outlets.

The only sensible thing for the Government to do for the West Midlands and for the National Rail network is to stop any commercial development in the Curzon Street area, and go and look at how Berlin did it.

Build a central station (which can be done for the most part without stopping the railway while you do it) and inter-city will have links nationwide with Birmingham included.

Local services will have room to use New Street in full and Moor Street located where it is, is nicely placed between Curzon Street and New Street, and can be connected to both with travelers opening up the entire area and contributing to regeneration.

There are suggestions that the other parts of the railway, namely south of Rugby are the constraining issue.

Not so, just an attempt in my view to take the heat off the congestion in and around New Street which is permanent and has the footings of the Bull Ring to demonstrate it!

If it were up to me I would give Birmingham Council permission and money to do a limited scheme above New Street and at the same time freeze and secure the Curzon Street plot until a proper evaluation can take place.

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Rayner's Review