

Let's have some action

A whole host of problems face rail in the West Midlands. Here John Boynton outlines the difficulties and explains how Railfuture Midlands is campaigning to get improvements.

There can be no doubt that the biggest bottleneck, in local and national terms, is Birmingham New Street station. It was rebuilt in the 1960s with a design capacity to handle about 400 train movements per day. Ten years ago this had risen steadily to about 600. Now there are 1,350 train movements there.

There are too many trains for the track available. Access to and from the station is difficult, confined to just two pairs of tracks at either end.

Since privatisation there has been an almost total lack of progress with station reopenings, or with any increase in track capacity. There have been consultation documents, consultancy reports, lobbying by Railfuture, rail user groups and other bodies, all to no discernible effect.

Blizzards of paperwork have been generated and each year notional sums of money have been set aside by local authorities for station reopenings. All this however, is a fantasy world, a virtual reality in parallel but far removed from the real world because – in reality – nothing is happening.

For example, a vital freight route extends from Stourbridge through Dudley and Walsall to Lichfield and beyond. It bypasses Birmingham but serves the important yard at Bescot. Ed Burkhardt, a dynamic American fully aware of the value of railways to the economy, pushed hard for its reinstatement before the end of the last century, when he was chairman of the freight company EWS. John Prescott no less, made favourable noises about the line last year but, to date, no progress whatsoever has been made on the ground.

Even when a reopening has been achieved there is little attempt to build on it by promoting growth. The Walsall-Rugeley line, closed to passengers in 1965, reopened between Walsall and Hednesford in 1989 after a long hard-fought campaign by Railfuture Midlands and others.

The final section, between Hednesford and Rugeley, eventually opened in 1998, with trains running through between New Street, Walsall, Rugeley and Stafford. The peak hour service was sparse at the northern end of the line, particularly for Rugeley, and of minimal use to commuters but there has been no attempt to improve the service in the six years since.

Inflated costs and tortuous bureaucracy have strangled the reopening of many stations in recent years, including those at very useful "journey to work" locations such as Aldridge, Churchbridge, Kenilworth and Frankley.

At Frankley, efforts to co-ordinate all the parties which need to be involved for this short but important branch line to be brought back into use have

descended into farce. The region's newest station is Warwick Parkway, which opened in 2000. The service provided here serves as an illustration of what happens when the railway is fragmented. The station is managed by Chiltern Railways and all its trains between Birmingham Snow Hill and London Marylebone call there. As such Warwick Parkway is an undoubted success.

However, other important services run along the same line, the local trains between Birmingham and Leamington, operated by Central Trains, and the Paddington-Stratford service, operated by Thames Trains. These operators would have to pay Chiltern for the privilege of stopping at this Chiltern station so instead they go through without stopping, depriving the railway of revenue and passengers of a full service.

Virgin Cross Country runs a half-hourly service between Birmingham and Reading, hourly via Solihull and hourly via Coventry. Those via Solihull, which formerly called there, no longer do so, robbing that town of over 100,000 people of all its long distance services.

This has not been done for operational reasons, as the schedules remain unaltered, but because Virgin is anxious, as far as possible, to keep local passengers out of its trains, even though Solihull generated a considerable number of long-distance passengers too. The situation is worse on the Birmingham-Reading route via Coventry. These trains provide the only rail passenger service between Coventry and Leamington but Virgin actively discourages travel between the two towns. The service is hourly but alternate trains run non-stop – to the same schedules – between Coventry and Oxford. They thus deny a proper full train service, not just to Coventry and Leamington, but also to Banbury and Oxford.

The double-track line between Rugby, Coventry, Birmingham and Wolverhampton is at capacity. Either extra tracks need to be provided, something the London and North Western Railway planned as long ago as 1912, or the volume of trains has to be rationalised.

Two facts will illustrate just how saturated this line is. There are four level crossings, at Canley, Tile Hill, Berkswell and Tipton. The first three, which carry relatively minor roads, are closing to road traffic; the Tipton crossing, which carries a major road with important bus routes, is being replaced by a bridge. During the day, the volume of rail traffic is such that the crossing barriers at Tipton are down for 48 minutes in every hour!

Between Birmingham and Coventry, the requirement to find extra paths for Virgin Trains to and from Euston (up to four per hour in the peaks), is causing the severance of the through local service between Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Coventry and curtailment of Silverlink County's half-hourly semi-fast trains between Euston and

New Street, which will be confined to the Euston-Northampton part of the route.

These well-filled trains are slower than Virgin, but they are operated by reliable electric units, generally keep to time and offer a reasonable walk-on return fare which is a fraction of the Virgin equivalent.

Even when improvements actually happen they come with a price, as conditions are attached which leave a bitter taste in the mouth of all those who want to see the proper and full development of the railways in our area. I give three examples:

In the centre of Birmingham is Moor Street station. The original terminal platforms closed in 1987. They have been refurbished and upgraded by Chiltern Railways in readiness for its improved service to London Marylebone. The refurbishment is of the highest quality and this is now the city centre's most attractive station, just over the road from the new Bullring, which is having a dramatic effect on the number of people coming into Birmingham, by rail as well as by other means. However, track at Moor Street's three new platforms cannot be connected to the main line for perhaps two more years because of alleged signalling problems.

While it is true that the local power boxes are life expired and are set to be replaced by a new box at Saltley, this attitude displays a lack of will, an inability to think positively and make a serious commitment to the railway, so that a short-term but important problem can be met with a short-term solution.

Second, improvements to the West Coast main line at Nuneaton mean that trains along the main line will be completely segregated from those crossing it. Birmingham-Leicester-East Anglia trains will use a once-redundant flyover and new platforms now being built. However, no provision will be made for the hourly Coventry-Leicester-Nottingham service.

A planned and approved burrowing junction was deemed too expensive by the Strategic Rail Authority. Railfuture Midlands branch has suggested a simpler scheme whereby an existing disused burrowing junction could be utilised and the integrity of this important service, which has been built up from nothing since 1988, could be maintained.

The alternative, as decreed by the SRA is for a Coventry-Nuneaton shuttle service, involving a lengthy walk within Nuneaton station for ongoing passengers. Centro has proposed scrapping even this and replacing the trains with a tramway, the trams having to mix with the line's freight trains which would, presumably, continue to run.

Mention of trams and freight brings me to the third improvement with a bitter taste. The freight line alluded to earlier, between Stourbridge, Walsall, Lichfield and beyond would also, we believe, be suitable for a regional passenger service

directly linking, say, Worcester with Derby and all the significant centres of population in between, including Brierley Hill, Dudley and Wednesbury, which have no access to the railway at present. Midland Metro still consists of the original line, opened in 1999, between Birmingham Snow Hill and Wolverhampton St George's.

Extensions are planned, including a much needed route into Birmingham city centre. However, one extension would utilise much of the railway trackbed between Wednesbury and Brierley Hill, jeopardising restoration of the railway, as the formation is not wide enough for a double track railway and a double track Metro. Clearly there is conflict, and potential for conflict between the interests of rail and Metro here, instead of a spirit of co-operation and co-ordination.

In conclusion, it is certainly true that many local rail services are more frequent now than they were 10 or even five years ago and, in keeping with the national trend, they are used by more people than ever before. It is certainly true that Centro, the local passenger transport executive, is committed to improving rail services as part of its aim to enhance the public transport infrastructure and ease congestion. Many of the train operating companies that serve the West Midlands – notably Central Trains, Chiltern Railways and (for the present) Silverlink – offer a generally good service, given all the constraints under which they have to operate. However, for reasons which I hope are clear, our rail services are living on borrowed time.

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The four-page colour leaflet, illustrated right, has been produced by Railfuture Midlands to draw attention to the West Midlands rail network. It includes an impressive A3 size map of the region. The leaflet calls for capacity expansion and electrification as well as new and reopened lines and stations. The branch has also produced a leaflet calling for action to stop the important Nottingham-Leicester-Coventry trains being terminated at Nuneaton.

If you would like a copy of one or both please contact Peter Hughes, 19 Redwood Road, Kings Norton, Birmingham B30 1AE.

Enhancing the Rail Network in the West Midlands



Transport consultants, Train operators, Network Rail, Regional authorities, three Multi-Modal studies and rail passengers all agree that more track and capacity is needed for many key routes and junctions in the Birmingham area. The growth in passenger and freight traffic is already being inhibited by Beeching-era route closures, track singling, station closures and by the lack of investment over many decades.

To meet the forecast growth in rail usage and to help combat road congestion, pollution and the other disadvantages of our over-reliance on cars, vans and lorries a substantial capital investment programme is now urgently needed to expand our rail infrastructure. With Birmingham at the 'cross-roads' of our rail network surely the area has to be given priority for investment to avoid delays, problems for the cross-country routes and the development of urban services.

Railfuture is proposing a range of improvements to the Midlands rail network which include:

- Doubling and quadrupling key routes • track and signal improvements to increase capacity • many new or reopened stations • in-fill and local electrification • new and reopened passenger lines • new and improved freight lines.

Improved Customer Services

Alongside the new and improved track and trains must come improvements in the level of customer service passengers can expect, for example:

- Integrated ticketing and fares with buses and trams
- a reduction in fares to compete with cars • vastly

improved stations with up-to-date facilities and more staff to assist passengers • accurate, easy to understand and widely available information.

Larger Birmingham Stations

With both New Street and Snow Hill stations now operating at maximum capacity top priority must be given to:

- Reclaiming platform 4 at Snow Hill for local rail services • four more platforms either added 'deep-level' to New Street Station or within a brand new 'Grand Central' station in the Curzon Street area.

Without these developments the vital extra trains and services to many new stations in the West Midlands cannot be provided.

Main Line Capacity

The Coventry-Birmingham-Wolverhampton main line is at maximum capacity with its four London expresses, a Cross-Country, a semi-fast London and two local trains per hour, leaving no scope for the planned extra train and service improvements. The faster, more frequent passenger trains and greater freight flows now urgently dictate the need to quadruple the tracks along this vital main line.

Ahead of this extensive and disruptive work the alternative twenty mile New Street - Water Orton - Nuneaton line should be electrified to provide a diversionary route for the London expresses. Without electrification of the Water Orton route, the quadrupling of the Coventry - New Street main line cannot effectively be undertaken.