

WEST MIDLANDS AND CHILTERN ROUTE STUDY - RESPONSE FROM CAMPAIGN FOR RAIL

Campaign for Rail is an organisation based in the West Midlands that advocates railway interests and the best interests of all rail passengers and groups, including (but not limited to) Rail User Groups, Freight Development, and re-opening of lines and services. We also lobby for and promote rail interests with the relevant statutory bodies.

We welcome this opportunity to comment on Network Rail's West Midlands and Chilterns Route Study. The following comments relate primarily to either current problems with the network or the capacity issues that will arise in the next ten years.

Chapter 3 - The Capacity Challenge

1. Growth in passenger numbers at many existing stations is already limited by a shortage of affordable parking spaces. Passenger growth at new stations, particularly Park & Ride stations in the wider 'Travel to Work' area will no doubt contribute to future growth in the region. In the medium term, there may also be some large housing developments, perhaps even new towns, in the region (such as the proposed Brookhay Village development near Alrewas) all of which will need good rail services if the road network is not to be further congested.

We note from the informative bar chart on page 19 (Fig 3.1) that rail's modal share of peak period travel has been rising steadily since 2001 and that as a result peak-hour demand on commuter services into Birmingham is projected to grow by a further 49% by 2023, with similar growth (45%) on the long distance and inter-urban services. The load factors shown for 2033 high-peak arrivals in figs 3.3 and 3.4 are alarming, and some train lengthening is clearly needed as soon as additional carriages become available. Consequently we welcome the analysis and forecast requirements in Table 3.4 (page 25).

However, we suggest that (although it reflects the current franchise split) the separation of 'local' and 'inter-urban' services in the Route Study is unfortunate as the services to Tamworth and Nuneaton that are currently operated by Cross Country are just as important to commuters from these stations as are the services from nearby Lichfield. The omission of these short distance Inter-Urban services from Fig 3.5 results in an incomplete picture and inhibits a holistic consideration of the wider West Midlands 'travel-to-work' area. For instance, what capacity would be needed if the Worcester - Tamworth /Nuneaton through services suggested in the West Midlands and Chilterns RUS were to be introduced?

Whilst we understand the reasons for choosing the northern boundary of this Route Study, the West Midlands 'travel-to-work' area is much wider and, at the very least, we suggest that passenger loadings from Hinckley and Burton-on-Trent should have been included. We note that in Fig. 3.10 loadings of over 100% are predicted on many services from Hinckley by 2023.

It is also unfortunate that the Birmingham - Shrewsbury and Birmingham - Stafford flows are not disaggregated in this Route Study, despite the differences in traction for services using these lines. Overcrowding is well known on services to Telford and Shrewsbury.

2. Growth on the Long Distance Cross Country services is shown in Figs 3.7 - 3.9 and we welcome the long overdue recommendation on page 27 that 68 additional carriages should be provided for this important service group by 2023. However, it is unfortunate that the 'Y' axis on these figures, which appears to be hourly departures, is not labelled and that there is not a separate table for the Newcastle – Southampton services.

3. We welcome the recommendation that 24 additional vehicles should be added to the combined Cardiff - Nottingham and Birmingham – Stansted service groups. However we suggest that, despite the slightly longer journey time, there is a case for diverting the Cardiff – Nottingham service to run via Leicester, which is a larger city than Derby. There are already 2 tph long distance Cross Country services running from Birmingham to Derby and this diversion of the Inter-Urban service would enable the local stations between Birmingham and Nottingham via Derby to be served by a local TOC or TOCs. This fits in well with the likely future electrification from Birmingham to Derby mentioned on page 45.

Chapter 4 - Connectivity

4. We note and support the aspiration on page 36 to introduce a 24 hour service to Birmingham International and suggest that this could usefully operate between Birmingham and Coventry for at least part of the night.

It is surprising that there is no mention of the lack of any through services between Worcestershire and Birmingham Airport. Although providing such a service may be operationally difficult, that is not a good reason to ignore the problem. We are also concerned that the current poor connectivity between North Worcestershire and the South West does not merit a mention in the Route Study. Passengers travelling south from Bromsgrove are currently invited to "change at University" which is effectively a half-hour detour. The new station at Bromsgrove could make a significant contribution to closing this 'gap' if the Cardiff - Nottingham trains operated by Cross Country were permitted to call, giving a through service to Gloucester and excellent connections for Bristol and Swindon at Cheltenham.

5. We welcome the inclusion on pages 38-43 of schematic diagrams showing the unconstrained "Indicative Train Service Specification" for 2043. However, these proposals (the 2043 ITSS) have received little publicity and, as a consequence, are not widely known outside the industry. It would perhaps be helpful if an outline of the additional services that could be introduced in ten years time was subject to a public consultation.

6. We welcome the suggestion that some services on the Chiltern line be diverted to serve Old Oak Common (p66). As well as alleviating congestion at London Marylebone this would also improve connectivity, with the opportunity to reach destinations in London connecting via CrossRail (the Elizabeth Line) that it are not presently easy to reach from Marylebone, with several tube connections currently being required.

Chapter 5 - Strategy

7. We are very disappointed to see on page 45 that the paragraph on electrification does not mention the value of local infill schemes such as Wolverhampton - Shrewsbury and Birmingham - Nuneaton (although the latter has since been mentioned in the Freight Network Study). Clearly any transfer from Diesel to Electric traction on a complete route will result in reduced emissions and a significant reduction in maintenance costs. We hope that the proposed devolution of spending authority to Network Rail's regions will allow such smaller schemes to be progressed.

8. We note the proposal in the Route Study to build the Camp Hill chords and introduce new local rail services from Tamworth via the Fort and Kings Norton via Moseley to Birmingham Moor Street. There have been aspirations from Centro and Birmingham City Council to build these chords for many years and a number of consultants' studies. A petition containing 1500 signatures calling for local services along the Camp Hill line from Moseley and Kings Heath was submitted to Birmingham City Council in 2007. The southern chord and the line in South Birmingham would offer an improved public transport service for residents within Balsall Heath, Moseley, Kings Heath and Stirchley with a local rail station being within walking distance. The chord to the north would allow a local service to be introduced serving Castle Vale and Castle Bromwich in an area which is currently badly served by public transport, putting a population of around 100,000 within easy reach of the rail network.

However, we have concerns that the proposal as it stands would result in disbenefits to passengers from Tamworth and Nuneaton, as the journey to Moor Street via the chords would be a half a mile longer than the current route into New Street Station. The interventions proposed in the Water Orton area (Fig 5.5 p60) must also be scheduled for the same time, so a local service from Tamworth and Nuneaton to Moor Street can supplement the existing Cross Country services to New Street.

Should the chords be built during the life-time of the route study, the minimum local service that should be offered is a three trains per hour service. We do not consider a service of any less than that to be satisfactory in an urban area with high flows into the city centre.

We note one of the key aims of the Route Study is to provide options for funders. Should the new West Midlands Combined Authority and the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP be serious about the Camp Hill chords, then they should aim to obtain the necessary Transport and Works Act powers and secure funding as a high priority.

9. In 2011, the West Midlands and Chiltern RUS demonstrated that there was a good business case for linking a future 2 tph Hereford / Worcester service across Birmingham alternately to Tamworth and Nuneaton and we are disappointed that this simple enhancement does not appear as part of the short term strategy; particularly as it would free up a platform at New Street which is currently occupied by terminating service from Hereford for 39 mins every hour. There are currently no through services from any station in Worcestershire to the East Midlands and implementing this simple 'cross Birmingham' scheme would address that gap as well as reducing the number of trains that terminate at New Street.

However, capacity for additional services at New Street is clearly limited and, even if platforms are available, conflicting moves at Proof House junction limit the number of additional services than can be pathed on the Midland side of the station. In this context it is unfortunate that the long standing scheme to divert all Cross City services into a tunnel between Duddeston and Five Ways has not been fully costed; although we note that the Study does say that the Geology is favourable (Appendix 1, page 8). Transferring the 6 tph Cross City service into new low-level platforms would release capacity at New Street station, preserving all existing connectational opportunities. As the Route Study suggests that diverting the Cross City service into new underground platforms at New Street may be needed in the long term, even if the Camp Hill chords are built, we suggest that the tunnel project should be progressed for CP7 in preference to the Camp Hill chords. However, suggestions that the local services from Coventry and Wolverhampton should also be diverted into a low-level stations should be resisted as the additional benefits are modest and the necessary junctions in tunnel would inflate that cost compared to the simple two platforms required for Cross City services.

10. We support the interventions proposed in Fig 5.5 for the Water Orton area including four-tracking and the re-doubling of the Water Orton curve. Improved access to Kingsbury and Birch Coppice terminals from the north is clearly a high priority to reduce the number of conflicting movements on what is a major cross country route. It is worth noting that Water Orton station itself is also one of the least inviting for passengers in the region and badly in need of a significant upgrade.

However, we note that the only available route for freight from Hams Hall and Washwood Heath to the North West is currently via Sutton Park, Walsall, Pleck and Bushbury to Stafford - a long detour. We suggest that a relatively simple new, northbound only, chord from the Up Arley at Abbey Junction to the Trent Valley Down Slow at Canal Farm Junction would give better access for freight to the West Coast main line and avoid many of these conflicts.

11. We support the suggestion of an upgrade to the current layout at Worcester which should clearly involve re-doubling the track between Shrub Hill and Foregate Street stations and the restoration of Rainbow Hill Junction. However, we note that trains from Droitwich are often delayed at Stoke Works Junction and suggest that it may also be desirable to re-double this junction with a short length of double track at the end of the single line from Droitwich.

The situation at Kings Norton is more complex. The present layout seems to work well, despite Cross City trains crossing the Up Camp Hill line six times an hour, but there is an urgent need to raise the line speed on the Camp Hill line so that it can be used by more of the Cross Country services.

12. We are surprised that the Route Study does not mention the pathing constraints imposed by Crane Street Junction at Wolverhampton station, and the generally slow approach to this station from the East. With an additional service between Birmingham and Shrewsbury coupled with an extension of a Birmingham – Wolverhampton local to Crewe specified in the next franchise, plus long standing local aspirations for a direct Wolverhampton to Walsall service, some intervention in the Crane Street area may well be needed.

13. We note that additional Cross City services are specified to run to Lichfield City in the next franchise. It would appear that 3 tph could be accommodated on the present single platform at Lichfield Trent Valley. This level of service would improve connectivity with the main line services and should be adequate unless a significant number of houses are built in the open country north of the station. The main driver for re-instating the Up platform at Lichfield TV would then be a future extension of the Cross City service to Alrewas and Burton-on-Trent.

14. We support the re-instatement of Platform 4 at Snow Hill and the introduction of a new turnback platform at Rowley Regis. Further south the option of re-instating some of the former 4-track layout between Lapworth, Dorridge and Tyseley should be considered. This route carries a mixture of local stopping services, long distance fast services and freight with hardly any opportunity for regulation when trains are delayed. We note that freight traffic from Southampton to the North East, which uses this line, is expected to increase.

Station Capacity

15. The authors of this Study are obviously well aware of the importance of minimising congestion at stations (sometimes termed the passenger / rail interface); but the short paragraph on page 35 does not do justice to this increasingly important issue. Neither is the list of just 19 stations earmarked for interventions in Appendix 6 an adequate response to the problems that passengers experience at stations across the region. [Water Orton has been mentioned above].

Whilst we acknowledge that there has been almost continuous growth in passenger numbers over the past 20 years at most stations, there must be a finite limit to the number of people who live near enough to walk to a local station. Beyond the metropolitan area, where bus services are at best 'sparse', many residents will always need to use a car to access the rail network. Adequate parking space is essential; but the shortfall is already acute at many of the local stations on the West Coast Main Line. Addressing this issue will be a major challenge for the industry and local authority partners.

In many cases platform widths are less than the recommended standard and too narrow for the number of passengers now using the station. Many stations still do not have the tactile strips that became a recommended fitment over twenty years ago. One other issue that is often overlooked is the need to provide adequate covered waiting space on all platforms. The traditional platform awnings provided shelter for both outbound and returning commuters; but far too often these have been removed and the needs of a significant number of 'contra-flow' passengers are now largely ignored (for example on the Down platforms at Sutton Coldfield and Lichfield City). This situation will only become worse as more trains are lengthened and passengers need to alight or board further along the platform.

Amongst the many stations in the region with inadequate passenger facilities, one deserves particular mention. Walsall has long been identified as an example of a community with relatively poor rail connections compared to towns of a similar size. Local planners have identified the re-introduction of services to Aldridge, to Wolverhampton via Willenhall and to Lichfield via Brownhills as desirable additions to the local network.¹ The next West Midlands rail franchise will be introducing direct services to London but unfortunately not through services to the North West.

¹ Walsall Rail Service and Facilities Improvement Plan, Walsall Council, 2007

However, although the present island platform at Walsall could easily cope with more through services, all northbound trains currently use the unattractive open platform 1 which isn't even directly accessed from the main station entrance. We suggest that upgrading the track layout and passenger facilities at Walsall station should be a higher priority than suggested in Appendix 6 of the Route Study.

Depots and Stabling

16. We note that additional stabling and maintenance facilities will be needed for the expanded fleet of EMUs that are expected to be running in the West Midlands in 2018.

However, we suggest that there are two other local sites which could be considered for stabling other than Duddleston. Firstly, there are already at least three lines on the south side of Bescot Depot which are already wired and could perhaps be available at short notice. Bescot is an ideal location for early morning access to Walsall, Wolverhampton and Coventry as well as New Street. Secondly there are two unused sidings between the On-Track Plant depot and the main line at Kings Norton. Although these tracks are not currently wired the location would be good for trains starting from Bromsgrove and Redditch in the early morning.

Conclusions

17. The Route Study covers a 27 year period up to 2043. The growth in rail usage has been phenomenal over the last two decades. Network Rail need to be bold, and funders need to commit to supporting some of the options contained in the study, given all of the various environmental, housing and economic challenges the region faces.

***Campaign for Rail,
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