

COMMENT

As Richard Dugdale showed us at our AGM on 7 May, great changes are coming - not just Network Rail's infrastructure but who takes over London Midland's franchise with promises of better services and stations. Bidders should look north for inspiration. That region is a step ahead of us, with new TOCs having taken over on 1 April.

TransPennine Express is buying 44 new 5-car 125 mph trains and bringing in new services like Liverpool to Glasgow. Northern has ordered 281 new carriages to allow it run 80% more trains. We need to increase some frequencies [think Shrewsbury], lengthen many of our services [think the Coventry Arena fiasco] and provide more direct links [think Worcestershire to Birmingham International]. Will track and station capacity allow it, even if the winning TOC promises to invest?

Northern is increasing the staffing presence at its stations. 45 unstaffed stations get staff and 54 get their staffing hours increased. How wrong London Midland's focus on its profits over customer service has been! Stations with ticket gates will have them staffed from first to last train, which neither Virgin nor LM nor Chiltern manages in our region. Main stations in the North will also have a catering outlet open throughout the time the station is staffed.

Campaign for Rail is pressing each of the three shortlisted TOCs for the West Midlands franchise to bid beyond the Invitation to Tender, due in July. An example is night services to Birmingham International for the airport. Once again, the North shames us. Manchester Airport's first arrival from York, Leeds and Piccadilly is at 04.00, but Metrolink now has its first tram of the day arriving at the airport at 03.40, catering for the 04.00 shift of airport workers. Trams are then every 20 minutes until 06.00 and every 12 minutes thereafter. What have we got? The first local services arrive at International at 06.04, too late for many fliers as well as airport workers.

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