

West Midlands and Chilterns Route Study Consultation
Network Rail (Group Strategy)
The Mailbox
100 Wharfside Street
Birmingham, B1 1RT

please reply to:
20a Park Road
Bromley
BR1 3HP

austinca2@googlemail.com

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Dear Network Rail Planner,

Railfuture Response to West Midlands & Chilterns Route Study

Railfuture is the UK's leading independent organisation campaigning for better services for passengers and freight. A voluntary organisation to which many rail user groups are affiliated, the organisation is independent both politically and commercially.

This response is made by Railfuture; the routes covered in the study run through the area served by our West Midlands, Thames Valley and London & South East branches, with implications for the East Anglian branch which has also been consulted. The comments made are not confidential, and we would be happy for them to appear on your website and you are welcome to use them in discussion with funders and other stakeholders. We would be happy to enlarge on any of the points made above or to work with you to identify the best options for the future.

Scope and Objectives of the Study.

Railfuture welcomes the comprehensive and forward looking approach adopted in the study, and the theme of expansion and upgrading embodied in the document. It is an uplifting change from the philosophy of controlled decline which characterised the railway in much of the latter half of the twentieth century in the West Midlands. We endorse the approach adopted in Network Rail's Passenger Market Study with its long-term view and strategic outcomes-based approach. We are pleased that this is followed through in this draft Route Study, looking ahead over a 30-year period which is the lifespan of many industry assets, and reflects the lengthy lead-times necessarily involved in planning, funding and delivering significant developments on the railway. We recognise the difficulties of forecasting that far ahead, but would endorse doing so as a basis for planning.

We particularly welcome the work done in preparation of this study with the West Midlands Combined Authority, Midlands Connect and the LEP, and as a consequence we are pleased that the study really starts to address many local and regional needs.

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www.railwatch.org.uk

As a general point, it would be helpful to see the names of stakeholders consulted during the preparation of the study.

For reasons that are well understood, the study focusses predominantly on Birmingham, which is in many ways at the heart of the national rail network. However, it would be wrong to focus exclusively on Britain's second city at the expense of the wider city region, where demand from centres like Wolverhampton, Dudley and Coventry is also substantial and growing. This is particularly true in terms of the need for better connections with the East Midlands, which are good from Birmingham, but relatively poor from Wolverhampton and Coventry. To address this, we would propose the reopening of the Walsall – Lichfield – Wichnor Junction line (see below), and the provision of a service from Wolverhampton to Walsall, Lichfield, Derby and Nottingham or beyond, which we believe would serve a substantial market. Similarly, there is a case for introducing direct service between Coventry and Leicester, although we recognise that this may involve grade separation at Nuneaton.

Forecasts. We note the phenomenal growth in the market share of rail commuting noted in the Executive Summary, and believe that this is the best evidence supporting the need for investment to meet this demand and that forecast for future years.

Even so, we note that the base figures for the high peak in 2013 are low compared with our own on-train passenger counts, and that in 2016 more services than shown on Figure 3.2 (page 21) are busier, with trains full and standing particularly between Worcester and Bromsgrove. We would recommend that the figures should be updated (perhaps calibrated from sample TOC counts, or LENNON data), and the forecasts adjusted accordingly before the final study is published. Our concern arises from the fact that previous forecasts of demand have generally proved to be underestimates, with the consequent shortfall in capacity and overcrowding that we see today.

We welcome the way in which the study sets out to tackle the real need for increased capacity over this long timescale. If demand continues to grow at the rate forecast, then the problem (and it is a good problem to have) will be what can be done in the years following 2043. If demand exceeds forecast, this problem may come sooner. At that stage, though, the interventions required will be very significant and may include investment to provide, for example, additional platforms at New Street at a lower level.

Electrification.

We would endorse the committed electrification schemes of Oxford – Bletchley, Walsall – Rugeley and Barnt Green – Bromsgrove. Similarly, we would support the proposed development of schemes for Bletchley – Bedford, and particularly Oxford – Nuneaton, *inter alia* to allow the extension of Birmingham – Coventry local services to be extended to serve Kenilworth.

We agree that the potential of further electrification of Bristol – Birmingham – Derby should be built into the strategy and this should include Lichfield Trent Valley to Wichnor Junction, for freight, for resilience and for the introduction of passenger services described below. We would strongly support future electrification of the Chiltern line, through to Birmingham, and the opportunity should also be taken to consider increasing capacity, particularly between Tyseley and Solihull which would still bring benefits even with the diversion of all Cross-Country services via Coventry.

Given the 30 year timescale of the study, we would also advocate that planning should include extending electrification from Birmingham Snow Hill to Kidderminster and Worcester

and also the North Warwickshire lines to Stratford-on-Avon so that the local network through Snow Hill can become an all-electric service.

We believe there would also be a good case for electrifying Wolverhampton to Shrewsbury earlier during the study period so that the London to Shrewsbury service can use Pendolino trains rather than Voyagers and so that the local service to Telford and Shrewsbury can be developed and accelerated.

Rolling stock.

We support the approach suggested of increasing the length of Voyagers, noting that this is already a priority, particularly for four-car trains, given the level of overcrowding on some Cross-Country services. We would also underline the need to strengthen cross-city services so that all run with 6-cars during the peaks. Similarly, we would endorse the proposed cascade of DMU vehicles following Walsall – Rugeley electrification to strengthen Worcester services via Bromsgrove.

Infrastructure

We agree that the key routes requiring additional infrastructure as a priority are between Birmingham International and Stechford and Leamington and Coventry.

We would also support the four tracking proposal as far as Water Orton, and the construction of the Bordesley chords (see below).

At Worcester we agree that additional capacity is needed, particularly to overcome the very limiting constraints of the current layout installed by BR to minimise costs.

We think that the need to provide a turnback at Rowley Regis might be avoided, if trains turned back at Stourbridge Junction instead. Levels of demand might justify this in the medium term, and the capital cost of the work would be avoided.

Level Crossings

We note and endorse the proposals to reduce the risk at level crossings and to eliminate a number of them. We accept that some of these will relate to increased use of the lines concerned as a result of proposals in this study. However, we are strongly of the view that this is a shared responsibility between the rail industry and highway authorities, and indeed road users. We are concerned that the great efforts being made by Network Rail to reduce risks and eliminate problems are not matched by equivalent commitments from the other parties, and that the high cost of the level crossing programme may squeeze out other important investments which would encourage a shift from road to rail, with significantly higher safety benefits. This is perhaps an area where the three key West Midlands stakeholders - West Midlands Combined Authority, Midlands Connect and the LEP – should be involved, not just from a safety perspective, but because of the economic benefits of reducing road journey times, and the value to rail passengers in terms of improving resilience and reducing delays where it has been possible to remove level crossings.

HS2. We believe that this opens up a great opportunity to improve connectivity and maximise the benefits of the high speed network by closer integration between New Street, Moor Street and Curzon Street to create a Birmingham Hub. This would mean *inter alia*, departure screens covering all three stations and internal subway and traveller links between the stations, avoiding the need to go out onto the street to interchange.

The proximity of Curzon Street and Moor Street opens up further connectional opportunities, and we would support the construction of the Bordesley chords to develop this concept further. Indeed, we would suggest that Cross-Country services might be rerouted to serve Moor Street rather than New Street to give the best possible connectivity with HS2 as well as

excellent city centre access. This would help to extend the transformational benefits of HS2 to a wide range of major towns and cities that will not be directly served under present plans.

In the longer term, these trains might move to Curzon Street, and indeed make use of HS2 for journeys to the North West, Yorkshire and the North East and Scotland.

We can see the case for moving some other inter-regional services to Moor Street but would suggest that this should not include the Worcester/Bromsgrove services, as there is substantial direct traffic already from Worcester line stations to University and the growing regional nature of medical services at Queen Elizabeth Hospital will increase this demand. We also believe that Hereford/Worcester trains via Bromsgrove should continue to serve New Street and continue to Birmingham International to provide direct services from the SW Midlands to the airport. There is known demand in this corridor, and scope for mode transfer from the M42.

Chiltern Line

We support the analysis of the Chiltern Line potential and most of the conclusions that stem from it. We agree that the case for electrification is compelling, and that in the interim, the package of proposals for platform lengthening and reinstating fast lines makes sense. This will need following with expansion in the size of car parks at a number of these stations. We agree that a principal constraint for the medium to long term is the capacity of Marylebone itself, and that there is merit in routing some Chiltern trains to Old Oak Common, via an upgraded route from Northolt Junction. However, we believe that trains should then continue to Paddington, using platform capacity released by Crossrail, to provide the additional connections with the Underground and buses that will not be available at Old Oak Common, as well as better dispersal by foot and cycle to West End destinations.

New Lines and stations

The study focusses on enhancing the existing network to address the capacity shortfall and to improve resilience. We support this, but believe there are also cases where communities need to be reconnected to the rail network through new stations or new lines. Even if these are not included as specific proposals, because more work is needed to establish a business case, we believe it is important for the route study to make passive provision for such schemes, and certainly to avoid doing anything to impede their development.

We welcome the referencing of ***East/West Rail*** in the study and commented on this in our response to the East Midlands Route Study.

We also believe that there is a case for some new or upgraded freight lines and a few new stations in the West Midlands. In general these proposals do not seek to solve a capacity issue, although they could help in taking some pressure off existing access points to the rail network by providing a rail link to major stations such as those in Birmingham as an alternative to car. Their value is in making better use of existing assets and in providing the social and economic benefits that have been demonstrated to stem from better access to the rail network. Briefly these are:

Walsall - Wolverhampton We believe that the growth in demand for rail travel generally, and development along this corridor would justify considering again a passenger service, including a new station at Willenhall in the short to medium term.

Lichfield – Wichnor Junction. We believe there is a case in the short to medium term to provide a connecting passenger service between Lichfield and Derby or Nottingham, with an intermediate station at Alrewas to serve the National Arboretum which has been so well

supported by Network Rail. On electrification of the route between Birmingham and Derby, this could be replaced by a through service from Birmingham via Sutton Coldfield.

Walsall – Lichfield. There is a case to reinstate this line to provide better inter-regional links between Wolverhampton and Walsall with the East Midlands as described above. It could also link the community of Brownhills to the network with a new station.

Stratford – Honeybourne. We see this as an important strategic link, which would better serve one of England's principal tourist destinations, and allow better connectivity between Coventry and Leamington, Stratford, Evesham, Worcester and perhaps Great Malvern or Cheltenham, as well as serve local demand including the major development planned at Long Marston. In terms of resilience, it would offer an alternative route between Birmingham and Norton Junction, avoiding the Lickey incline, and an alternative between London and Birmingham which would have been of so much value during the closure of the line by a landslip at Harbury in 2015.

The study lists a number of committed new stations, including those proposed on HS2, those on the Camp Hill line, and between Birmingham and Water Orton (Moseley, Kings Heath, Castle Bromwich/Vale and Nechells), which we would endorse.

Yours sincerely

Chris Austin

C.A.Austin, OBE MA FCILT
Railfuture
Head of Infrastructure & networks

07913 653594