

Central Bedfordshire's draft Local Transport Plan London & South East regional branch response to Summer 2024 initial engagement

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and shape future activity on the Council's Local Transport Plan. We've seen other correspondence that confirms that a revised Rail Strategy will be an integral component, and we welcome this; we see this as an important decision.

Railfuture is Britain's leading independent organisation campaigning for a bigger better railway. It is a voluntary group representing rail users, with 20,000 affiliated and individual members. Railfuture is not affiliated to or funded by train companies, political parties or trade unions, and uses one-member one-vote democracy.

This response has been shaped by input from local members of Railfuture, in particular through coverage during our local meeting on Thursday 27th June.

We are of the view that, to date, rail has been of peripheral relevance to local transport within the council's boundary – a single station on the West Coast Mainline, a pair on the Midland Mainline, three on the East Coast Mainline and four stations on the Marston Vale Line. As we note further below, rail currently has greater importance when residents need to travel outside the Authority and when visitors to Central Bedfordshire from elsewhere are considering their travel choice.

East West Rail and the Marston Vale line

The arrival of East West Rail will be transformative for rail as an inside the authority's boundaries option for travel. Journeys such as Leighton Buzzard – Flitwick and Ridgmont – Sandy will now become much more viable when using rail. The LTP and the rail strategy need to thoroughly explore this aspect to detail and quantify the likely benefits, and, consequently, linked actions.

A key issue that needs to be thoroughly explored for East West Rail / the MVL is the station plan between Bedford and Bletchley. Both the suggested options (fewer stations, with local services calling at all of them and all stations, but some only served less frequently) have upsides and downsides. We think a proper start again from first principles assessment of door-to-door transport options for current and possible future Marston Vale Line stations is needed. As yet, we are not aware of an evidence base that allows a proper choice between the options. The stations decision cannot be made in isolation as the need is to understand door-to-door travel. This includes better door-to-station active travel, bike and e-bike secure storage, walking options, timetabled and flex-bus options, et al.

The impact of the possible Universal Studios at Stewartby is clearly significant. If this proceeds it will both significantly impact the common journeys in Central Bedfordshire and also be a very significant constraint on how capacity between Bletchley and Bedford is used (as a high but unknown portion of all traffic on the line will be Bletchley to Stewartby and Bedford to Stewartby [although there is presumably an option that much of this latter flow is instead a Bedford to Wixams flow]).

We think that all of the above is preferably completed as a joint venture with Bedford Borough and Milton Keynes Councils and England's Economic Heartland.

www.railfuture.org.uk www.railfuturescotland.org.uk www.railfuturewales.org.uk
www.railwatch.org.uk

Longer distance travel by rail

Stations inside Central Bedfordshire on the West Coast, Midland and East Coast Main Lines already offer good connections with London, and, in the case of the latter two, also with stations south of London on or near the Brighton Mainline, including Croydon and Gatwick Airport.

However, connectivity northbound is more problematic, particularly on the Midland Mainline. This is because of the number of changes required – a Flitwick to Leicester journey currently requires two changes at Bedford and Kettering.

Whilst generally outside the Council's area we think the following options are relevant to Central Bedfordshire residents and visitors:

1. A change to the East West Rail plans so that Bedford Station has a platform built on the up fast (London-bound) line. This will much reduce the time required for a Bedford station stop, which in turns makes it more viable for longer distance services to call at Bedford. This would significantly increase the number of destinations Central Bedfordshire residents and visitors can reach with a single change of train.
2. Four-platforming of the planned Wixams station if Universal Studios does proceed. Four platforming of this station has benefits now (as services can continue to call during disruption and engineering works that close the slow lines), but these benefits will be even more important if Universal Studios opens. Whilst we do not have an evidence base to support this, our view is less "important" and more "essential".
3. The design of the new Tempsford station will be important, including again four platforms on the East Coast mainline, for the same reasons as for Wixams. Additionally, sensible access for all features, including avoiding reliance on single lifts.

These options should be explored properly.

Stations where rail is the key public transport option

We observe that some villages such as Harlington rely on the railway as their main option for public transport. Thus features such as accessibility facilities at the railway station take on a greater importance than simply suggested by the community size and/or existing use. On Thursday 27th June for Harlington there were 9 buses (the 42) to Bedford, with a last service at 16:16; by contrast, 78 train services were scheduled – between 05:43 and midnight at least every 30 minutes (approx) and often every 15 minutes.

These days a bus service is typically accessible by default with options for wheelchair boarding et al, but this is not true for existing rail stations, where there is considerable variability. LTP work needs to effectively identify villages where rail is the primary public transport and then look for accessibility improvements; as well as headline projects such as lift installs, other smaller improvements usually make sense, such as reducing the train door to platform gap by increasing platform height (as Central Bedfordshire stations are used by a variety of types of train, including freight, at least some of which pass through without stopping, a zero gap between doorway and platform can only be achieved by on train features, such as the extending doorways seen on Merseyrail's new trains).

Concluding

Railfuture welcomes the opportunity for further involvement in the development of the LTP.