

West Midlands Branch E-News June 2021

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SECRETARY'S MESSAGE

I have held off writing to you until the long-awaited proposals in the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail were announced and despite its' 116 pages there are many questions yet to be answered on how its proposals will be implemented in the day to day running of rail services. We have sent the Railfuture Board the questions we believe need to be answered (see below).

There have been varying predictions from pundits on the number of passengers and their patterns of travel when Covid restrictions on the public are finally lifted. However construction of new or rebuilding of stations are continuing especially those for the Commonwealth Games 2022.

Despite the Covid restrictions your new Committee have met online monthly to plan our activities in the coming twelve months (details below). We would like to increase your participation in our discussions and decisions. So following our successful online meeting in January with Dave Penney Managing Director Network Rail Central Region we are planning to have further meetings in the coming months with a guest speaker open to members online.

Colin Major

Branch AGM: -

Held online on Saturday 24th April which turned out to be the first sunny day for weeks. We were fortunate to have as the opening speaker Linda McCord Senior Stakeholder Manager Transport Focus who updated us on results of their interviews of 2,000 passengers every two weeks on their travel patterns and attitudes to using public transport. The formal part of the AGM re-elected Steve Wright as Chairman and Colin Major as Secretary. Phil Bennion, David Gausson, Peter Kennard, Roger King, Owen O'Neill were elected Committee members and the meeting agreed that the ex-Committee member Steve Boulding whose return to Shropshire from Spain was after the nomination deadline should be co-opted to the Committee at the first meeting in May. He was duly co-opted, and we now have members on the committee from most areas of the West Midlands other than Staffordshire so would welcome any member residing there to join us.

National Railfuture AGM –Just a reminder that this will take place on Saturday 17th July. Guest speakers are Malcolm Holmes, Executive Director, West Midlands Rail Executive and Karen Heppenstall, Head of Rail, Midlands Connect.

Railfuture West Midlands Campaigns 2021-22

RUG Campaigns that we support.

- Reopening the Lichfield to Burton line for passenger services, including a new station at Alrewas serving the National Arboretum Centre. This now has active WMRE support. (Lichfield Rail Promotion Group). *
- Extending proposed Lichfield to Burton services onwards to Derby as a permanent feature. **
- Improving capacity on the Birmingham - Worcester/Hereford lines. *
- North Cotswold line Task Force doubling capacity. *
- Reinstating Gobowen – Oswestry line and re-opening Baschurch station **

Local Developments with no RUG to promote – Ones we will pursue ourselves.

- New local services and stations at Fort Parkway & Castle Bromwich on the Water Orton line. *
- Ensure provision is made for future use of line from Brierley Hill to Wednesbury by freight and heavy passenger trains. *
- Reconnect Ironbridge to the mainline at Madeley or Telford, to cater for extensive new housing. **
- Earlier trains serving Birmingham Airport, seven days a week (once air travel level improves). **
- Reinstating Stourbridge Junction – Brierley Hill line - to connect with WM tram extension. **
- Reinstating line from Wednesbury to Walsall to improve Black Country connectivity and relieve congestion on Black Country road network. ***
- Reinstating Walsall - Lichfield line to provide local connectivity and, in conjunction with Lichfield to Burton reopening, to enable direct northward travel. ***
- Electrify the re-opened Camp Hill Line (via Moseley & King's Heath) ***

Regionwide, Cross-Region and Cross-RUG campaigns.

- Support West Midlands Rail Executive 30-year Rail Strategy and Midlands Connect's service plan for 2030 *
- Reinstate direct Coventry - Leicester services. (This now has active Midlands Connect support.) *
- Press TfWM for tickets providing integrated use on all Train, Tram and Bus services in the TfWM area. *
- Press Transport for Wales to include enhancement of services on the Marches Line as part of their rail strategy, specifically to improve inter-community links for stations between North Shropshire and Hereford. **
- Support electrification between Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury (this now has active Midlands Connect support.) **
- Enhance rail connectivity between West and East Midlands (joint working party with Rf EM) **
- Electrify lines through Snow Hill. Extend on to Marylebone. ***
- Complete double track between Coventry and Leamington Spa. ***

* Current active campaigns.

** Campaigns to commence.

*** Longer-term campaigns.

Railfuture West Midland's Comment on Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail and Ian Brown's Critique

Our main concern is the emphasis being so heavily on GBR leadership, decisions on track access, on fares and on timetables – with priority given to long-distance services. We believe local service provision should be decided by local agencies like Midlands Connect and West Midlands Rail Executive to suit local need and conditions. We realise that this has to be a compromise with long-distance and freight but do not think long-distance should always take priority. On fares we can see no rationality as to why GBR should set fares for local journeys. Is there scope for each route or route section being defined as primarily 'local', 'long(er)-distance', 'freight' and priorities for access set accordingly?

Taking more detail issues: -

(Note: Headings are based on those of the W-S Plan, bold italics are quotes from the Plan, normal italics are Ian's comments, normal non-bold are our comments/queries)

1) Public bad, Public good

The blame culture is a fundamental part of the money go round in an industry structurally fragmented by government, popularly expressed as Schedule 8 (operator performance blame compensation) and Schedule 4 (engineering disruption compensation).

– won't there always be a need for something equivalent to Schedule 8 when a route is shared between 2 or more operators? And schedule 4 for engineering causing delays to freight and open access operators?

2) 10 outcomes

1. Modern passenger experience

- We're curious as to what the report means by "Modern" passenger experience - equivalent to using one's own car?

3) Track Access Charges

Of critical importance, but not mentioned, is the pricing regime for running on the network, to go with it. This must be viable for the freight operator competing against the road haulier.

We think setting track access charges for freight and open access operators is likely to prove contentious and very tricky. We assume contracted service providers will not need to pay these as the contract fee will include allowance for access. However, an operator that wants to provide more services than contracted is likely to have to pay for access.

4) Our commitment to rail

Investment in the future of rail, £40bn to renew and upgrade the railways (including levelling up the rest of Britain to London and South East standards.

- £40 billion over how many years? Won't this be a perpetually moving target to have a railway up-to-date?

5) Flexible Season Tickets

New flexible season tickets will be introduced -

– 10-15% discount for longer-distance commutes is worthless, given that current seasons can offer 50-60%

6) National Fares

GBR will draw up timetables and set most fares.

– we've already mentioned local fares. We hope that train operators will have scope to make special offers of their own, although this would mean some rule about how much they keep for themselves.

7) 5-year plans

An important element of the GBR remit will be the requirement to think and plan for the longer term, requiring 5-year plans.

More thought appears necessary on this, although a 30-year strategic plan is proposed.

- We agree that 5-year plans are much too short

8) 30-year plan – must not be set in stone but reviewed regularly (every couple of years?) to ensure plans all still appropriate.

9) National brand

There will be a national brand and identity to emphasise that the railways are one connected network.

– local identities matter more for local services

10) Devolved railways

Devolved railways will be strengthened, with closer collaboration with GBR improving services, consistently and co-operation across the country.

– we should support all the English authorities if they want devolved powers for their local services (including fares and development plans)

11) Cross-sector organisations

Cross-sector organisations will be consolidated.

HS2 Ltd and East West Rail Ltd will remain separate.

– HS2 (and 3/4/...?) being separate from GBR is just about understandable – except that many HS services will use GBR tracks – but East/West Rail? Surely the latter will use GBR infrastructure in too many places to be allowed free rein? Or GBR will have to constrain EWR's use of Oxford-Bicester, Bletchley-Milton Keynes, and various stations - Bedford and Cambridge at least – and any aspirations to run south of Oxford, north of MK or Bedford, or east of Cambridge.

12) Passenger Service Contracts

Franchising will be replaced by new Passenger Service Contracts

– any hint as to the likely length of these? If GBR have defined the timetable, the fares, the livery, and the rolling stock does it matter if they are very short, say 1-2 years? Or do longer contracts give more time for "TOCs" to provide better on-board services and facilities?

13) Turn up and go.

Turn up and go fares are stressed throughout the piece.

– we do so hope that this kills the concept of compulsory reservations. It's ironic that it's the OLR LNER that has proposed this.

14) Open Access

There is an 'en passant' half-hearted mention of 'open access'. Open access, an EU initiative, has brought serious benefits to passengers but does not sit comfortably with the centralised planned system proposed. Open access has worked magnificently for freight, particularly in Britain, and is acknowledged in the white paper as the way forward for freight, with a view to strengthening it with a better industry support structure.

– if this has been so successful for freight, wouldn't be just as good for long distance Inter-City passenger services, with GBR just controlling the paths allocation (like airport slots)

15) Competition for PSCs

Competition for Passenger Service Contracts will be greater than for franchises.

– we have grave doubts that there any many operators out there wishing to compete for PSCs, other than those existing.

16) New deal for passengers

This implies that a far more customer-oriented approach is needed We need a 7-day railway, not just a commuter railway.

– we agree with the 7-day all-day railway, but we also want GBR and operators to be nimble, quick to respond to changes, able to put on extra services for special events, etc.

17) Pay as you go.

Pay as you Go and digital tickets will be expanded outside London.

– will only work if customers are quite confident that they always get the best price for the journey they have undertaken. That means a fares structure that removes any advantage of split-ticketing, but without fare prices generally going up.

18) GBR website

A new Great British Railways website-This will replace the array of over 25 train company sites, all different. It will include special offers, often currently marketed solely on individual operator websites.

– hurrah! One site to look up all trains and pay at the same portal.

19) Rail-Bus-Tram -strongly support fare and ticket integration. Railfuture must push for this one very keenly.

20) Trains made more pleasant.

Trains will be made more pleasant to travel on and easier to work aboard.

– again strongly support improvements to travel environment – comfortable seats, better space, more table bays, window view from all seats

21) Electrification

Electrification of the network will be expanded.

Railfuture has and will continue to campaign strongly for electrification. This includes the benefits of increasing rail's contribution towards overall net zero by increasing capacity through electrification, and so facilitating modal shift to rail. We will want to see a specific programme.

– as Ian suggests, we must urge GBR to establish a programme for this

22) Green Recovery

The aim is to produce a comprehensive environmental plan in 2022 that will establish rail as the backbone of a cleaner future transport system. This does include modal shift to rail as net zero is an overall transport objective.

– probably most important to get more freight off the road and on to rail as there is no foreseeable, viable alternative to diesel for lorries.

23) Workforce plan

There is no current industry-wide plan for use of the industry's key resource – its people. The difficulties this has caused, compounded by the skills issue, are key to many of the challenges recently witnessed whereby train operation has not been properly resourced, leading to cancellations. In fact, the franchise process encourages bidders to bid with insufficient cover ratios, with dramatic adverse effect on performance.

– operators should be free to decide their own workforce requirements, possibly subject to minimum standards. But will they be the actual employers or will GBR be, given the likely relative frequency of operator changes? Definitely need central planning of training and development.

Perry Barr station: - Planning consent has been given for the rebuild of Perry Barr station which together with its surrounding shops has now been demolished. Building has started to be ready in time to provide access to the new Alexandra Stadium for the Commonwealth Games 2022.

The new station building is shown below and has changed since the first design.

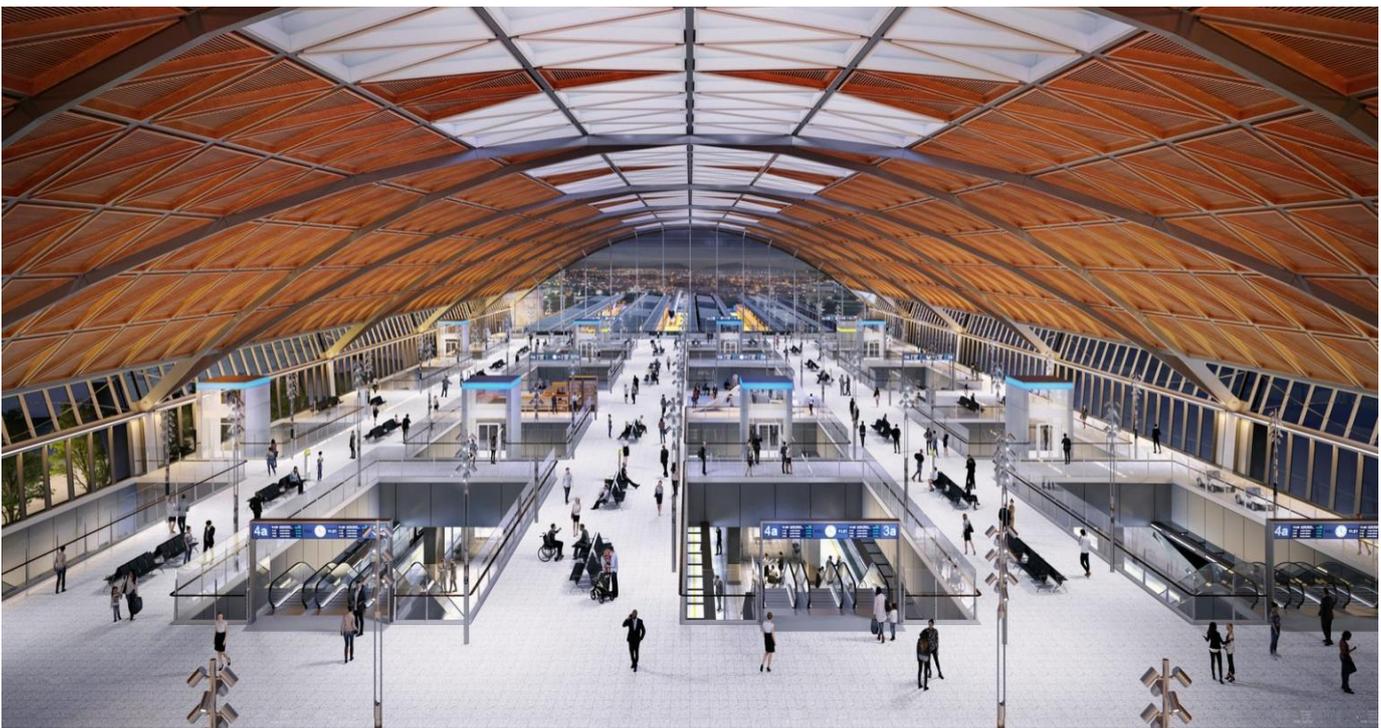


Picture TfWM

University station – extensive ground works are under way both on the Hospital side of the platforms and clearing the ground beyond the platform on the canal side. Looking at the current work unless moved the Overhead Line gantries will now be on the new widened platforms.

HS2 Curzon Street: -

The pictures show the interior of this station which utilises significant timber construction with lots of natural light in the first picture the entrance and in the second picture the concourse above the platforms.



Photos HS2 Ltd

Help Wanted-

Michael Tombs retirement has left a void in your Branch as, not only was he an active Committee Member, but he also kept our webpages on Railfuture.org.uk upto date. If you can help with this or our twitter account, please get in contact with us.

YOUR VIEWS MATTER

We would like to hear from **you** about any matters you believe your Officers and Committee should be working on. So please don't hesitate to get in touch with us on westmidlands@railfuture.org.uk.

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