

Consultation on Network Rail Strategic Business Plan

Response from West Midlands Regional Rail Forum

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Rail Forum coordinates responses to rail consultations on behalf of the Assembly. It welcomes the opportunity to comment on Network Rail's Strategic Business Plan for Control Period 4.
- 1.2 The Rail Forum is presently completing rail priorities for the Regional Transport Partnership and the plan includes proposals which are emerging from our technical work.

2. West Midlands Growth

- 2.1 The West Midlands has been experiencing extremely strong growth levels over recent years, and these have been outstripping those seen in London and the South East. While HLOS predicts continued growth over Control Period 4, it implies a considerable slowing of current growth rates. It is not clear whether the growth assumptions for the new London Midland franchise would be consistent with this, and there remains considerable economic regeneration occurring around Birmingham city centre that will continue to fuel peak commuter growth. It is also expected that the 2009 West Coast timetable will also generate additional growth, both along the route itself, and also on local services connecting into it.
- 2.2 While it is recognised that the Network Rail have been formally set the task of catering for an additional 4,600 passengers into Birmingham in the 0700-1000 period over CP4, this could represent a significant understatement of actual growth levels. It is therefore important that Network Rail's plans are not rigidly based around the HLOS requirements, but are flexible enough to cater for possible demand growth that is considerably higher than the DfT's current predictions.

3. Proposed Schemes

- 3.1 Most schemes in the West Midlands are included in the Route 17 Route Plan. This includes a number of schemes to enhance capacity, and these are strongly supported by the Region. The priority scheme for the region remains the Birmingham Gateway project, which not only will provide the essential additional passenger capacity at New Street station, but is also likely to increase the overall attractiveness of the network and stimulate further demand.
- 3.2 Other schemes we strongly support include:
 - a. Enhancement of Redditch service through additional capacity and frequency enhancement. This is important in order to provide a way to expand the capacity of the peak Redditch trains which are 6 cars long, full and limited to every 30 minutes. The

Cross City Line has been growing at over 10% per annum recently, and spreading the Redditch demand across more services will put back the need to extend platforms along the entire route to cater for 8 or 9 car trains.

- b. Extension of Cross City services to Bromsgrove is needed to adequately service the rapidly developing Bromsgrove market. Growth here is likely to accelerate following the relocation of the station and the expansion of the car park, which will release some of the suppressed demand from this location. It will also provide an improved Bromsgrove to Longbridge link, which is needed to support the major regeneration from the Longbridge Area Action Plan with 10,000 new jobs and over 1,500 houses.
- c. Platform Lengthening is supported as running longer trains will be the primary way growth will be accommodated on many routes in the West Midlands. Platform lengths are already a significant operating constraint on many parts of the network and there are only a few low-use stations where Selective Door Opening is likely to be feasible. It will therefore not be possible to cater for the predicted growth without a considerable platform extension programme. The proposals by corridor seem appropriate, but will clearly need to be reviewed in the light of clarity over future rolling stock strategy.
- d. The proposed linespeed improvements are strongly supported as these can be a considerable operational constraint as well as giving unattractive journey times and creating inefficient stock utilisation. The highest priority would be the Cannock line where the 45mph current speed is wholly inappropriate for the traffic on the route.
- e. Reinstatement of the Round Oak to Walsall route for freight would deliver considerable benefits for the West Midlands as it would shorten freight journey times, divert freight trains away from the congested central Birmingham area, increase reliability for both passenger and freight and creates the opportunities to develop freight terminals along the route. It also might be able to be developed in tandem with Centro-WMPTA's plans for a Metro route along the corridor, possibly on a tram/train basis which could create economies for both organisations. This project would appear to meet many of the criteria set for the £200m allocated to the Strategic Freight Network.
- f. The proposed NRDF schemes in association with the resignalling programme will deliver significant benefits for the region. Many of our proposed future service developments are dependent on these planned additional capacity schemes being delivered. Without this package of incremental capacity enhancements it will be impossible for services in the West Midlands to be improved to meet the changing transport needs

of the region. In particular, there is concern that it will be necessary to replace 3-car sets with 4-car.

- 3.3 A key scheme that the Region considers essential in the medium term to deliver increased capacity is the Bordesley Chords and re-opening the terminal platforms at Moor Street. This project will allow some services to be diverted away from congested New Street station, and also allow new services to be developed. While this project may not be deliverable during CP4, it is essential that funding exists for development and preparatory work associated with it.

4. Stations and Park and Ride

- 4.1 The proposed stations strategy is, however, very weak when it comes to Park and Ride provision as virtually all car parks in the region are full and the future growth will not be possible without a significant expansion of capacity. Rail has already proven itself to be highly effective at encouraging road users to switch mode for the key city centre flows, and Park and Ride has been a key element in this. This has resulted in many car parks being grossly oversubscribed and discouraging travel after the morning peak. Without a substantial increase in car park capacity, capturing the predicted growth on the network will not be possible and investment in rolling stock and infrastructure will be undermined.
- 4.2 While delivering expanded car park capacity may not in many instances sit with Network Rail, it is essential that NR does all it can to plan for and facilitate car park expansion, and ensures that its overall plans for expanding the network are fully consistent with where Park and Ride is being provided.

5. Performance

- 5.1 The Rail Forum notes the proposed improvements in PPM for operators in the West Midlands. We believe these should be deliverable, subject to close management attention and the delivery of the proposed capacity and resignalling schemes. The delivery of the 2009 West Coast timetable will be especially important for the West Midlands, and this needs to be very carefully managed if performance is not going to be affected. The significant amount of engineering work associated with the Gateway Project and various resignalling, renewal and enhancement schemes could also create performance risks.
- 5.2 On Cross Country, PPM is measured at the end of the journeys rather than as the services pass through the West Midlands. It is important that Cross Country has as high a level of punctuality as possible as they pass through the region as the impact of delay on other services is considerable. Separate monitoring of Cross Country performance at Birmingham (as well as at destination) would be helpful for monitoring trends and identifying issues.

- 5.3 The extremely congested nature of the West Midlands rail network means that there is a very high risk of reactionary delay following any incident. There is also a risk that a focus on achieving a delay target above everything else means that customers' real needs are overlooked. It is important that Network Rail and operators become better attuned to the impact of operating decisions on customers, and look to better meet their immediate travel needs in the event of disruption, rather than focusing on targets.

Conclusion

The Rail Forum welcomes the good consultation from Network Rail in the development of the SBP, and the plan is therefore closely aligned with our network development priorities. We will welcome continued high levels of engagement from NR during the delivery of the plan, as this will be essential for our ability to plan and implement transport improvements across the West Midlands.