

## West Midlands Rail Investment Strategy 2019 Commentary

### Introduction

The [West Midlands Rail Executive](#) (WMRE) has published its 30-year [West Midlands Rail Investment Strategy](#) (WMRIS), outlining the short, medium and long-term plans for rail in the West Midlands region. This strategy has been published by the WMRE in collaboration with the Department for Transport, Midlands Connect and the wider rail industry. The purpose of this finalised publication is to highlight plans to improve rail services across the region as well as outlining new stations and services to be implemented, especially for the long-term future of the region. These are ambitious plans and involve collaborations and partnerships of the key influencers and decision-makers in the West Midlands region.

The strategy is largely centred around improving connectivity, quality and frequency of services, as well as maximising regional economic and passenger benefits of the contentious HS2 scheme. This commentary will outline some of the key parts of the report, as well as their potential benefits and negative implications from a sustainability point of view. It will also incorporate information from other sources to complement the plans cited in the WMRIS.

The remainder of this document provides a detailed commentary on the likely future changes to the local rail network as outlined in the WMRIS and the possible implications on SWM's key sustainability priorities.

### The Need

It was thought in recent years that the internet would reduce the need for rail travel and commuting for a lot of individuals as more individuals would work and communicate from home, but this has been found to not be the case with national rail passenger numbers showing a rising trend. With Birmingham New Street being Britain's busiest station outside London, the importance of the West Midlands as a transport hub is obvious and rail transport being so essential to reducing congestion, improving air quality, and lowering the CO<sub>2</sub> produced by transport in our region. [Clean Air Zones](#) could be a key driver of public transport growth in the future as individuals seek cheaper methods of travel, especially for travel into city centres. It is these factors as well as the potential economic benefits that underpin the rail strategy. London has led the way in public transport developments and investment for many years and now Greater Manchester is following suit. Could this be the time for the West Midlands to demonstrate its potential?

### "Quick Wins"

One of the short to medium term goals for the WMRE is to focus on the so-called "quick wins" from the new [West Midlands rail franchise](#) (operated by West Midlands Trains); the concepts that are considered to be among the quickest to implement and will have long-reaching benefits. These are the improvements set out in the franchise agreement and include around £1bn in investment across the franchise between 2017 and 2026. This includes £700m on new and refurbished trains, a welcome move to improve reliability, image and comfort of train travel in the West Midlands, all of which should help encourage people to use trains who might have otherwise used alternative methods of transport.

Additional pledges include improved experiences for disabled train users, making it easier for them to book assisted travel and making the rail network more accessible for all. Additionally, the roll-out of further free WiFi across the network could make the railways a more viable option for working, thus encouraging business travellers to use trains instead of cars given the potential for greater productivity. Another key commitment is for Sunday services to match either weekend or Saturday frequencies, enabling a seven-day rail service and ensuring that rail is just as much a viable travel option at the weekend as it is in the week, especially for leisure travellers who would otherwise go by car. Another priority is to simplify ticketing to make rail travel a far more appealing service where complicated ticketing can be off-putting for inexperienced travellers, including increasing rollout of the [Swift Card](#). The implementation of all these pledges should see rail become a more realistic and practical alternative to car travel especially.

### **New Stations and Lines**

Over the course of the next 30 years, a number of new stations are planned to be opened across the West Midlands, improving access to public transport for those who currently have little or no easy method of catching the train and reducing the number of those who would have to take another form of transport such as car or bus, sometimes to the nearest train station. Public transport as a mode of travel for those with limited mobility is essential so new stations should serve those communities well.

In many cases, the reopening of old lines and stations is key as population and travel demand is now shifting back towards rail. The WMRIS sets out a number of these schemes including: the reopening of the Camp Hill Line to serve areas of south Birmingham (this is due to be opened within the next few years); reintroduction of passenger services on the Sutton Park Line serving areas far from the Cross City Line such as Walmley, Streetly, and Aldridge (connecting to Birmingham city centre); the reopening of the line from Walsall to Wolverhampton, with the new stations of Willenhall and Darlaston to serve new areas; and the reopening of stations between Birmingham and Water Orton such as Castle Bromwich. All these plans reuse existing track (reducing the environmental impact of producing new track) and the reopening of disused stations involves building on mostly brownfield land, allowing for land-repurposing rather than green-space destruction. A welcome part of the strategy is the focus is on a number of different areas across the West Midlands rather than simply in the wealthiest parts of the region which traditionally can end up with greater transport investment.

### **Station Improvement Works**

An arguably critical part of improving a transport network is making improvements to the existing stations, many of which have are no longer suited for purpose due to their age. However, several schemes are already in the pipeline to improve the practical and aesthetic aspects of stations. These include the rebuilding of Coventry Station, including constructing a new platform to allow for new services, as well as improvements at some of the busiest stations in the metropolitan area (Birmingham International, Snow Hill and University to name a few).

All of these developments allow for increased future demand which is predicted and similarly help to drive that demand by creating more appealing facilities for passengers. However, these are not without high price tags, leaving them open to be questioned about their worthiness as projects and whether the money could be better spent improving other sectors.

## **New Routes**

A softer approach to improving the rail network in the West Midlands includes providing new routes on already existing track. Linking cities and towns without direct links through existing track infrastructure creates new opportunities for commuters and businesses, increasing the viability of the rail network as a mode of transport. One key example of this is the connecting of the Leamington Spa to Coventry Line with the Coventry to Nuneaton Line to form the NUCKLE Line (Nuneaton-Coventry-Kenilworth-Leamington) which will provide direct services between the towns.

The proposed extension of the Cross City Line from Lichfield to Burton is an example of expanding the network of commuter towns to Birmingham which can have ecological benefits as the expansion of commuter towns can reduce the motivation to build on greenbelt land as a method of increasing housing for cities. By providing viable commuting routes, the reach for the working population to cities grows. There are several other examples of this set out in the WMRIS Route Service Pattern which can be viewed [here](#). Not all route changes are largely welcomed though with some smaller Staffordshire towns to lose direct services to London and this has been met with some opposition.

## **Improved Frequencies**

Generally, frequency of services to most stations in the West Midlands will increase in time and you can view the full proposals in the WMRIS Route Service Pattern document [here](#). This includes more consistent times throughout the day to promote rail to be seen as a credible alternative to the freedom of travelling by car (where there aren't time restrictions). This is likely to particularly benefit towns such as Shrewsbury and Kenilworth.

## **HS2 and Midlands Connect**

[High Speed Two](#) (HS2) is the UK's new high-speed line that is under-construction, connecting London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, the East Midlands, Scotland, Liverpool and Newcastle. It will run frequent high-speed services and provide high volumes of extra capacity between some of the UK's biggest cities, as well as reducing journey times in comparison to current services. It is said to add the people-capacity of two motorways to Britain's transport network.

HS2 remains a controversial project for a number of reasons including its high cost to construct and the demolition of houses and buildings (particularly in rural areas) as part of the construction process. However, proponents of the scheme argue that it is essential to tackle the overcrowding on current West Coast Mainline services as well be a generator of economic growth for the UK. The project is supported by many political and business figures in the West Midlands and the additional capacity it will produce as well as the economic growth it could generate are supported by the WMRE. Rail travel can be a low-carbon alternative to road and even air travel and it is hoped by proponents that HS2 will encourage more passengers to travel by rail. However, one question that is yet to be answered is how much fares on the new network will be, as this could severely damage the passenger forecasts if costs are too high, effectively creating a railway for the elite.

A key principle of HS2 is that the move of some inter-city services from the West Coast Mainline to the new line will allow for extra capacity for freight trains and create a more sustainable and faster freight network (reducing the number of lorries), that will have both economic and CO<sub>2</sub>-reducing benefits. However, many freight trains still use diesel fuel so its carbon footprint is far from zero and can still have a large adverse impact on air quality, especially as freight trains often travel between cities.

HS2 is a cause of conflict for the West Midlands with local authorities such as Birmingham and Solihull supporting the scheme due to the economic benefits and connectivity the scheme is forecast to bring, whereas other local authorities have objections and major concerns about the scheme, especially in Warwickshire and Staffordshire where the line will cut through vast parts of the landscape. SWM member Coventry City Council has been one of the most vocal opponents to the scheme in the Midlands, as HS2 will not directly serve the city and the migration of London-Birmingham services from the West Coast Mainline to HS2 is likely to result in a reduction in trains from Coventry-London according to the WMRIS, hence the city may feel that investment potential is being driven away, especially in a city that is looking to develop its business hubs.

One of the key aims of the WMRE, aside from seeing the successful delivery of HS2, is to see improved rail connections on current lines to enable as many people as possible across the region to have easy connections to HS2 and ensure benefits are widespread. Curzon Street Station, the Birmingham terminus of HS2 will be adjacent to Moor Street Station and close to New Street Station to allow easy passenger transfer to and from regional and local services. [Midlands Connect](#) are championing the Midlands Rail Hub scheme as a reorganisation of train services in the Midlands to ensure better connection to the HS2 hubs for areas such as Nottingham, Hereford, and Leicester.

A key connectivity opportunity that was scrapped was a link from HS2 to HS1, meaning there will be no link to continental Europe, which could have opened up new markets to the West Midlands as well as decreased CO<sub>2</sub> where passengers choose rail over air travel.

### **Cycling**

Whilst cycling facility improvements are included in the report, taking bikes on trains is not mentioned in the strategy and provision of more bike space on trains could be argued to be a vital part of an integrated low-carbon transport network, especially as this is a goal of the [West Midlands Combined Authority](#) (WMCA). The awarding of the next West Midlands rail franchise due in 2026 (operating local services, excluding services to London and Liverpool) is likely to be devolved from the Department for Transport to the WMRE so it's possible that conditions of the new franchise could include new commitments to improving connectivity and ease for cyclists travelling by rail and this would be highly welcomed. Current provisions are mixed, and some services still require booking cycle-travel in advance which may not suit all travellers. However, the current West Midlands rail franchise has pledged to provide thousands more cycle spaces and other station operators look to do the same across their networks, increasing the viability of bike-to-train transportation. Other operators in the West Midlands also offer cycling provisions for trains and the growing integrated transport system in the West Midlands will hopefully see pledges of more cycling provisions in the future.

### **Rolling Stock**

There is no denying that rail travel in Britain frequently makes national headlines and to many has a very negative connotation. It's evident that creating passenger demand on the rail network will not simply increase by increasing the frequency and connectivity of rail services but by actually improving customer satisfaction itself in addition. The new West Midlands franchise has pledged to replace a number of the older units on the network, and if implemented, will see improvements in the comfort of passengers. Pledges of more seats, air conditioning and more standing room (to create a metro style train similar to those found on the London Overground) for commuters are proposed.

Newer trains can also mean improved reliability on services which will ideally reduce delays and improve customer satisfaction and trust in the rail network, where individuals choose other methods of transport they currently feel to be more reliable. Other operators may follow suit with pledges of new train units when their franchises are up for renewal.

However, one thing the strategy is noticeably missing is any pledges on future train types. Electric and diesel trains are in use in the West Midlands but there is no pledge to increase use of Bi-Mode trains (those that operate on diesel but uses electric power where available to reduce emissions) or consider new technologies under development such as hydrogen-powered trains which are zero-emissions. These developments could be incredibly important given the known health and environmental impacts of diesel fumes. Especially considering the implementation of clean air zones around the country, is driving an increase in diesel train passenger services really a positive alternative?

### **Other Key Transport Developments**

It is worth noting some of the other transport development plans in the region (though mostly in the metropolitan area) as these will connect to the rail network and are likely have an impact on use of the rail network. The Sprint Bus network is a new bus system connecting Birmingham to surrounding areas through faster bus lanes with more comfortable metro-style buses, incorporating air-conditioning and free WiFi: a potential alternative to rail for less well-served areas around the city. The Midland Metro is set to triple in size under current plans, reaching new areas in Solihull, Dudley, and potentially Coventry as well as having more connections to the county's main stations. There are also proposals for new technologies such as Very Light Rail in Coventry and in Dudley, a cheaper and less invasive alternative to the Metro. All of these plans increase public transport capacity and improve connectivity, especially for the metropolitan area.

### **Economic Impact Modelling**

A common major indicator of the success of railway improvement projects is the GVA (Gross Value Added) to a particular geographical area, as a result of it being one of the biggest drivers for rail investment. Whether or not this should be the major indicator of success for the WMRIS is debateable but from a sustainable point of view, widespread economic growth as a result of investment in public transport is an undeniably positive outcome (so long as the growth is sustainable), especially as networks will require consistent investment.

It has been forecast that if all the parts of the report are implemented and passenger forecasts met by 2047, these new proposals will bring half a billion pounds in GVA every year to the West Midlands. The economic boost from improved transport can be widespread and many proponents argue of the importance of bringing investment to regions outside London through improved infrastructure. However, there are not always winners and forecasts indicate that areas such as North Birmingham and Trent Valley region between Rugby and Stafford could actually lose out financially in the medium-term, seeing a reduction in GVA as a result of the schemes being implemented. Conversely, Coventry is forecast to see economic growth as a result of the WMRIS implementation, despite the controversial bypassing of HS2 to the city.

Midlands Connect predicts that correct implementation of HS2 and its local connections could bring £0.6bn to the entire Midlands economy annually by 2037 and the economic impact modelling of the WMRIS is forecast to bring a total of £2.7bn to the West Midlands Region over the course of the 30-year strategy.

The link to the full economic impact modelling by SWM member [Systra](#) can be viewed [here](#).

## **Conclusion**

The outcome of the WMRIS is dependent on the successful implementation of pledges made by a number of different stakeholders. The success of these proposals will also be heavily reliant on consumer behaviour shifting towards rail travel, but if successful, have the potential to change the face of transport in the West Midlands for good. Many individuals may ask why public funding is going into rail projects for the Midlands when there are regions elsewhere with inferior transport links as well as when public funding could be spent in other departments but the WMRE firmly believes that the implementation of this new strategy is essential and will bring benefits to the region for the long-term future. Reliance on funding though does lead to speculation over whether all of these proposals will indeed be implemented.

There are still many questions in the air, such as whether Birmingham could one day get an underground railway like London, whether the West Midlands will have a direct rail link to continental Europe and how much our region's passenger demand will actually increase in the next 30 years. One thing for certain though, is that rail is set to be a key player in our region's transport future and the implementation of the proposals set out in this strategy will have major impacts on passenger demand as well as economic development of the West Midlands region.

In terms of how this strategy meets SWM priorities, a number of the proposals are highly welcomed. The commitment to large-scale improvements to low-carbon transport choices (in this instance rail) will hopefully encourage more individuals to choose the train as a mode of transport and see an increase in the number of users in the West Midlands, reducing congestion on the road network. This will also benefit areas with poor air quality where individuals choose rail over car travel. The integration of the public transport network should additionally encourage healthier travel options such as walking and cycling to and from train stations which is in line with SWM's view on improving lifestyles. However, more clarification on the environmental impacts of rail investment, especially where construction of new lines and stations is concerned, would be beneficial to establish any negative effects of the scheme. Whilst economic growth is forecast from the investment, it's important that this growth is geographically widespread and that the economic benefits see a real improvement to the region such as reducing unemployment rates. You can view SWM's overall priorities [here](#) and statement on transport priorities [here](#).

Commentary provided by Leo Morton, Volunteer Communications Officer, SWM

28 February 2019

## **Links to key reports and sources:**

West Midlands Rail Investment Strategy: <http://wmre.org.uk/media/14045/west-midlands-rail-report-final-version-jan-2019.pdf>

WMRIS Route Service Patterns: <http://wmre.org.uk/media/14057/upload-rach-wmris-route-service-patterns-final-version-corrected.pdf>

WMRIS Wider Impact Economic Modelling: <http://wmre.org.uk/media/10730/wmre-wider-economic-impact-modelling.pdf>

Transport for West Midlands' HS2 Connectivity Package:  
<https://www.tfwm.org.uk/media/1102/hs2-connectivity-package.pdf>

Network Rail Midlands Strategy: <https://cdn.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Midlands-Strategy-Summary-document.pdf>

WMRE Single Network Vision: <http://wmre.org.uk/media/2851/single-network-vision-final-approved-version-170630.pdf>

**-END-**