



## STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

### Response to the Consultation on the Great Western Franchise

The Stourbridge Line User Group (SLUG) represents passengers on the rail route between Worcester (both Foregate Street and Shrub Hill) and Birmingham (Snow Hill and Moor Street) via Kidderminster and Stourbridge Junction and the branch line from Stourbridge Junction to Stourbridge Town.

Although Great Western Railway does not currently operate services on the above line, connections are regularly made by members of our group at both Worcester Foregate Street and Worcester Shrub Hill onto Great Western Railway services towards Oxford and London Paddington, Cheltenham Spa and Bristol Temple Meads, and Hereford.

The Stourbridge Line User Group therefore welcomes the opportunity to make the following specific comments with regard to the Great Western Franchise Consultation which are of relevance to Stourbridge Line passengers wishing to travel via Worcester to destinations on the Great Western Railway network.

Given that the Stourbridge Line User Group represents passengers who are not currently directly served by the Great Western franchise, it does not feel qualified to answer consultation questions 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15 and 17.

#### CONSULTATION QUESTION 1:

The Stourbridge Line User Group fully agrees with the objectives for the 2020s. These are objectives which should apply to all franchises.

#### CONSULTATION QUESTION 2:

The Stourbridge Line User Group disagrees with the proposal to split the Great Western franchise into smaller franchises. Train connections between the two operators (West Midlands Railway and Great Western Railway) at Worcester are already less than satisfactory. This would only get worse as the proposed split would mean three Train Operators serving the stations, with services from Worcester to London Paddington via Oxford or Cheltenham Spa operated by one Great Western area franchise and those to Bristol Temple Meads and beyond via Cheltenham Spa operated by the other Great Western area franchise.

In addition, despite some issues when First Great Western, First Great Western Link (previously Thames Trains) and Wessex Trains were first merged into a single franchise, the Great Western franchise has evolved into one of the better franchises responsible for many innovations. For these reasons, the Stourbridge Line User Group believes that the Great Western network should remain as a single franchise.

#### CONSULTATION QUESTION 3:

- a) The Stourbridge Line User Group has no firm opinion either way on whether the Greenford branch be transferred to the Chiltern franchise.

- b) The Stourbridge Line User Group strongly opposes the transfer of the Brighton to Southampton portion of the current Great Western Railway Great Malvern to Brighton service to the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise for three reasons.
1. The Stourbridge Line User Group has consulted members who use this service. Despite the fact that the journey takes over 5 hours, these members prefer to use the direct service from Worcester rather than suffer the inconvenience of having to change trains, especially since the alternative direct service from Birmingham to Brighton was withdrawn due to the Arriva CrossCountry network being rationalised. Most rail travellers prefer to travel directly to their destination, especially when the change of train includes the hassle of transferring from one London terminus to another. While a change at Southampton Central would only involve getting from one platform to another, there is no guarantee that the connection time would be low, given that the TSGN Southampton service is only hourly, and that one franchise would not hold a train to await the arrival of a late running service run by a second franchise. If the current timetable was maintained, the connection time at Southampton Central would be 58 minutes, which is totally unacceptable.
  2. The Stourbridge Line User Group is concerned that the service will be transferred to a company which has lost the travelling public's confidence and which has been condemned recently by both the Commons Select Committee and the National Audit Office.
  3. Objective 2 for 2020s reads "Focus on the needs of the travelling public", while objective 3 reads "Maximise the benefits for passengers". Making a journey from the Great Western network to Brighton more difficult for passengers would contradict both these objectives.

## CONSULTATION QUESTIONS 5, 8 AND 10:

For a city with about 100,000 inhabitants, Worcester has poor rail connections from all directions other than from the Birmingham area. The services currently provided by Great Western Railway can be split into three groups.

### (1) London Paddington - Oxford - Worcester - Hereford

Although operating at approximately hourly intervals, the timetable is irregular, especially on services towards London Paddington. In addition, the originating/destination stations at the Worcester end of the line have no fixed pattern.

On Mondays to Fridays, London Paddington services currently leave Worcester Shrub Hill at 0511, 0537, 0619, 0735, 0839, 1014, 1122, 1205, 1259, 1359, 1522, 1555, 1607, 1733, 1853, 2002, 2103 and 2244. Of these 18 services, 6 start at Hereford, 4 at Great Malvern, 6 at Worcester Foregate Street and 2 at Worcester Shrub Hill.

Return trains leave London Paddington at 0547, 0652, 0750, 0821, 0921, 1022, 1122, 1221, 1322, 1421, 1522, 1621, 1722, 1752, 1822, 1922, 2022 and 2148. Of these 18 services, 3 terminate at Worcester Shrub Hill, 5 at Worcester Foregate Street, 5 at Great Malvern and 5 at Hereford.

While infrastructure restrictions from Shelwick Junction to Malvern Wells, Henwick to Worcester Shrub Hill, Norton Junction to Evesham, and Charlbury to Wolvercot Junction currently preclude any major enhancements to the service level, particularly west of Worcester where West Midlands Railway operates an hourly clock-face service to Hereford, the Stourbridge Line User Group feels that a clock-face hourly service should be introduced on this route between London Paddington and Worcester, with a regular interval 2-hourly service to Hereford. This hourly service should be supplemented by additional services towards London Paddington in the morning rush hour, and from London Paddington in the evening rush hour, either via Oxford or Cheltenham Spa (see below).

### (2) Westbury - Bristol Temple Meads - Gloucester - Worcester - Great Malvern

Local hourly services through Bristol Temple Meads used to operate from Cardiff Central to Westbury (and beyond) and Worcester to Taunton. They were changed for operational reasons to operate from Cardiff Central to Taunton and Great Malvern to Westbury (and beyond).

Clock-face services operate hourly on the core section between Westbury and Gloucester. At the southern end of the route, most services continue to Brighton, Southampton Central, Warminster or Weymouth. At the northern end of the line, services extend every 2 hours to Great Malvern, although early morning and late evening services only serve Cheltenham Spa or Worcester Shrub Hill.

The Stourbridge Line User Group believes that all services that currently terminate at Gloucester or Cheltenham Spa should be extended to Worcester to provide an hourly service. This would provide a decent connecting service to Cheltenham Spa for Worcester passengers continuing their journey on CrossCountry services on the Scotland or Manchester to South West services. The Stourbridge Line User Group also believes that these services should continue to operate as cross-Bristol services, although it has no firm opinions on whether they should operate to/from the Westbury line or the Taunton line.

### **(3) Worcester - Cheltenham Spa - Swindon - London Paddington**

Great Western Railway currently operates a two-hourly service between Cheltenham Spa and London Paddington, supplemented on the alternate hour by a Cheltenham Spa to Swindon shuttle service, providing an hourly service on that section of the route. A small number of the shuttle services are extended beyond Swindon to Westbury via Melksham.

A small number of the London Paddington services start from Worcester Shrub Hill, with two services to London Paddington at 0528 and 0708 on Mondays to Fridays and a single journey on Saturdays at 0837. A return journey leaves London Paddington at 1948 on Mondays to Fridays, but there is no Saturday return service.

The Stourbridge Line User Group believes that consideration should be given to extending more morning peak Cheltenham Spa to London Paddington services to start from Worcester Foregate Street and to extending more evening peak London Paddington to Cheltenham Spa services to terminate at Worcester Foregate Street. This would complement services via Oxford and provide extra capacity at peak time.

In addition, consideration could be given to merging the off-peak two-hourly services from Cheltenham Spa to Swindon via Stroud and from Swindon to Westbury via Melksham, extending the northern terminus to Worcester Foregate Street, and possibly extending the southern terminus to provide a new long distance service, linking Worcestershire to East Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

### **Onward Connections at Worcester**

Connections between West Midlands Railway services on the Stourbridge line and Great Western Railway services on the Oxford and Cheltenham Spa lines are poor, to the extent that passengers from Kidderminster regularly find it a lot quicker to reach destinations in the South and South West by travelling northwards to Birmingham (Snow Hill or Moor Street), walking to New Street and then travelling south, thus adding 30 miles to the journey. There are two reasons for this :-

1. There are many instances where a Stourbridge line service arrives at one of the Worcester stations while a Great Western Railway service departs from the other, and vice versa. As an example, a number of Great Western Railway services terminate at Worcester Shrub Hill rather than continue to Worcester Foregate Street to connect with departures towards Stourbridge.
2. There are times when a Stourbridge line service arrives at one of the Worcester stations at the same time as, or just after, a Great Western Railway service departs from another platform at the same station, and vice versa. One example on Mondays to Fridays concerns the 0939 departure from Stourbridge Junction (0947 from Kidderminster) which arrives at platform 2 of Worcester Foregate Street station at 1009, exactly the same time as a Great Western Railway service to Oxford and London Paddington departs from platform 1. This means that the connection cannot be made, resulting in a wait of 66 minutes for the next service.

The Stourbridge Line User Group believes that services in the next Great Western franchise need to be designed to provide decent connections in the Worcester area. As a bare minimum, clock-face hourly services on the London Paddington – Oxford – Worcester and Bristol Temple Meads – Cheltenham Spa – Worcester line, are a necessity, possibly supplemented by two-hourly services on the Swindon – Cheltenham Spa - Worcester line, with these services timed to connect with trains on the Stourbridge line.

However, Worcestershire County Council produced its Rail Investment Strategy document in 2017 and this expressed an aspiration for through services between the Stourbridge line and London Paddington and between the Stourbridge line and Bristol Temple Meads.

North Worcestershire has a large catchment area and the footfall figure for Stourbridge Junction was 1,466,966 in 2016/2017, while Kidderminster had the second highest footfall in Worcestershire (behind Worcester Foregate Street) with 1,613,640. The footfall at both stations is far more than Hereford (1,228,284), Ledbury (210,098), Great Malvern (559,494) and Malvern Link (354,414).

In addition, Midlands Connect, in their 2017 strategy document titled “Powering the Midlands Engine”, has identified the West Midlands to Bristol and South West corridor as an intensive growth corridor. The document also identifies the Brierley Hill area as a major growth site, with both the Transport for West Midlands “Movement for Growth” document and the West Midlands Trains franchise agreement proposing the reopening of the railway line from Brierley Hill to Stourbridge Junction to passenger services, potentially increasing passenger numbers at Stourbridge Junction.

Although Kidderminster and Stourbridge Junction have through services to and from London Marylebone, these only run towards London Marylebone in the morning and from London Marylebone in the evening. A service from Kidderminster via Worcester Shrub Hill would take about 2½ hours to reach London Paddington, almost the same time as the Chiltern Railways service takes to London Marylebone. A previous experimental service operated by Network South East in 1993 was not a success, but this was due to it being a single return journey departing Stourbridge Junction at 0922, arriving London Paddington at 1214, departing London Paddington at 1248 and arriving Stourbridge Junction at 1536, which was of no use to any day traveller.

Therefore, the Stourbridge Line User Group would like consideration to be given to the following pattern of Great Western services through Worcester.

1. An hourly service from London Paddington via Oxford, operated by 10-car IETs which would split at Worcester Shrub Hill, with one 5-car unit continuing to either Great Malvern or Hereford and the other 5-car unit continuing to Droitwich Spa, Kidderminster and Stourbridge Junction.
2. An hourly service from Bristol Temple Meads to Worcester Shrub Hill via Gloucester and Cheltenham Spa, originating from either the Westbury line or the Taunton line, extended every 2 hours to Great Malvern and every 2 hours to Droitwich Spa, Hartlebury, Kidderminster, Blakedown, Hagley and Stourbridge Junction.
3. Morning peak services from Worcester Foregate Street to London Paddington via Gloucester and Swindon, with return evening peak services.
4. A 2-hourly service from Worcester Foregate Street to Westbury via Cheltenham Spa, Swindon and Melksham, possibly extended at each end of the route.

### **CONSULTATION QUESTION 12:**

The biggest criticism of the current Great Western franchise was probably the problem with overcrowding on some services, including the Worcester to Westbury service. These services are currently operated using 2-car units and, on some occasions, suburban units are used on a journey that takes up to 5½ hours. However, during 2018, journeys on the Worcester to Westbury service will be operated by 3-car units, with more comfortable 2+2 seating, designed for longer distance services, and the Stourbridge Line User Group supports the use of these trains on these services in the next franchise.

On Worcester to London Paddington services, 8-car HSTs are starting to be replaced by IETs and it must be hoped that this will not result in a reduction from 8-car to 5-car on some services.

### **CONSULTATION QUESTION 13:**

The Stourbridge Line User Group is unable to answer this question as the two stations that we serve, Worcester Shrub Hill and Worcester Foregate Street, are managed by West Midlands Railway.

However, the Stourbridge Line User Group understands that Worcestershire County Council wishes to promote a Worcester Shrub Hill Master Plan which would make substantial improvements to Shrub Hill Station and accessibility and act as a gateway to the city centre as part of a regeneration scheme. It is hoped that the new operator as a key partner will be engaged with the County Council and support the proposed scheme.

### **CONSULTATION QUESTION 16:**

Worcestershire County Council supports the forming of a Community Rail Partnership for the whole of the County and has met with relevant user groups and the Association of Community Rail Partnerships to discuss a way forward. The Stourbridge Line User Group welcomes this initiative and hopes the new operator will contribute towards the Partnership to enable a paid Community Rail Officer to be appointed on a long term basis.

### **CONSULTATION QUESTION 18:**

The Stourbridge Line User Group would like to see service improvements to Great Western services at Worcester between 2020 and 2022 to improve connection times with West Midlands Railway services, subject to the restrictions imposed by the infrastructure in the area.

the Stourbridge Line User Group realises that, to radically improve services in the Worcester area, the four pinch points on the line between Oxford and Hereford - Shelwick Junction to Malvern Wells, Henwick to Worcester Shrub Hill, Norton Junction to Evesham, and Charlbury to Wolvercot Junction – would need to be upgraded, with the section through Worcester Foregate Street most in need of early upgrade, to improve flexibility by replacing the two parallel single tracks through the station with genuine double track, thus allowing trains from both Worcester Shrub Hill and Worcester Tunnel Junction to access both platforms at Worcester Foregate Street.

Hopefully, in later years, greater integration between the Train Operating Company and Network Rail will result in all of these infrastructure improvements being agreed, prioritised and delivered more quickly.

In addition, the Stourbridge Line User Group would like consideration to be given to the operation of through Great Western services to Kidderminster and Stourbridge Junction during the next Great Western franchise.