



Promoting and Protecting the Stourbridge Railway Line

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Response to the West Midlands and Chiltern Route Study Consultation

Introduction

This document is the Stourbridge Line User Group's response to the West Midlands and Chiltern Route Study consultation.

This consultation response is unashamedly, and obviously, centred on enhancing the travel experience and opportunities for users of this line, including potential new users who can be attracted to the railway by improving its offering. Since rail users do not restrict themselves to single routes, our interest and comments naturally extend to the convenience of using connecting routes and rail links to significant destinations elsewhere.

The role of the Stourbridge Line User Group is to promote the interests of users of a particular stretch of line while taking consideration of the benefits of this railway to the economic well-being of the areas it serves. Our proposals and ideas represent our vision of how the Stourbridge line can achieve its full potential. We appreciate that resources must be spread fairly, but our obligation is to emphasise how the Stourbridge line can be improved.

The Stourbridge Line User Group recognises the purpose of the Route Study as offering advice and choices for funders, rather than as a plan for future investment and outcomes. We trust that our comments, which are made from the point of view of informed users of the route between Birmingham (Moor Street & Snow Hill) and Worcester (Foregate Street and Shrub Hill) via Stourbridge Junction and Kidderminster, will inform Network Rail and ultimately funders in developing the service on this and connecting routes for the benefit of passengers and the areas served.

Chapter 03: The Capacity Challenge

Key observation: The main Stourbridge line suffers from insufficient rolling stock.

We support the principle shown in Table 3.4 that extra vehicles are required on Snow Hill lines services.

The Stourbridge Line currently suffers from under-provision of capacity at times of high usage, not only during weekday morning and evening peaks but also during other periods of high demand (e.g. Birmingham Christmas market, sports events) and when capacity is limited, including when short trains are run at weekends and notably on the first trains on Sundays which are oversubscribed because the service starts too late, resulting in passengers who would travel earlier being forced to travel at later times once the trains start running. Standing for more than twenty minutes is routine at these periods of high demand.

We are therefore sceptical that train lengths of three (or even four) cars will be acceptable in 2019 if operated during peak periods, as appears to be suggested by Table 3.4.

Chapter 04: Improving Connectivity

1. Current Connectivity Shortfalls

Key observation: Single-change journeys to or from the Stourbridge line are unnecessarily limited

As a principle, the Stourbridge Line User Group believes that attractive public transport is offered by single-change journeys between stations along the Stourbridge line and principal destinations around the country. It is accepted that in many cases the concept of a “single change” can be extended to include transfers between Birmingham’s Snow Hill/Moor Street stations (on the Stourbridge Line) and Birmingham New Street station. It is particularly noted that Smethwick Galton Bridge station has never lived up to its potential as a significant interchange station between the Stourbridge line and the Birmingham New Street-Wolverhampton line.

The Stourbridge Line suffers from three particular examples of poor connections to other passenger rail services which contradict regional connectivity policy.

i. Worcester

Key observation: Current rail services between Stourbridge line stations and central Worcester are inadequate.

The first relates to the southern end of the Stourbridge line, at Worcester. There are two stations at Worcester: Shrub Hill and Foregate Street. However, only Foregate Street is convenient for the city centre. Current infrastructure limitations mean that trains can reverse at Shrub Hill to reach Foregate Street but not vice versa, while operational factors appear to favour Shrub Hill to the detriment of passengers’ needs. Stourbridge line services to and from Worcester do not follow a regular service pattern in serving two stations, so the train times are unmemorable and hence off-putting for potential passengers.

The Stourbridge Line User Group calls for the development of the Worcester area infrastructure to enable a regular, memorable service pattern for Worcester and a half-hourly service from Stourbridge line stations to and from Worcester Foregate Street, via a reversal at Shrub Hill where necessary.

ii. Birmingham Airport

Key observation: Current rail connections from Stourbridge line stations to Birmingham Airport do not meet the standard envisaged in the regional transport strategy.

The second example of poor connectivity concerns connections to Birmingham Airport (and Coventry). The regional strategy “Movement for Growth” identifies easy access to and from Birmingham Airport as a highly important factor. If a frequent through service from Smethwick Galton Bridge to Birmingham International existed, then a convenient single-change link would be established. However, the only service that completes this link is hourly, formed of rolling stock unsuited to a metropolitan airport link and is operated (at least for the time being) by Arriva Trains Wales. Airport connections are an exception to our acceptance of transfer to Birmingham New Street station because of the likelihood that airport users will have large amounts of luggage and/or be unfamiliar with the transfer across central Birmingham.

The Stourbridge Line User Group calls for the rail network to enable the reinstatement of frequent local services between Smethwick Galton Bridge, Birmingham International and Coventry so that the opportunities offered by convenient links with the airport are available to those served by the Stourbridge Line.

iii. The South West and South Wales

Key observation: Current rail connections from Stourbridge line stations to destinations south of Worcester are very poor and as a result contradict regional transport strategy.

The third example relates to journeys between stations on the Stourbridge Line and south west England and south Wales. The corridors between the West Midlands conurbation and these two regions are designated as priorities (“Intensive Growth Corridors”) by Midlands Connect, as illustrated in Figure 2.2 of the draft Route Study. However, the only existing option for single-change journeys from Stourbridge line stations to the south is a two-hourly Great Western service which links Worcester with stations to Bristol and beyond but no other major destinations. Otherwise, to reach the south west or south Wales from Stourbridge Line stations in a single-change journey requires first travelling in the reverse direction to Birmingham (and then a change of station). This is clearly not competitive with road transport along the M5 motorway and does not meet the regional strategic aspirations for public transport.

A new service formed from a train extended from the Stourbridge line via Worcester Shrub Hill to Cheltenham Spa (perhaps continuing to Gloucester) would provide single-change connections to destinations including Bristol, Cardiff, Exeter, Plymouth, Swindon and Reading. A service presently terminating in Kidderminster is the obvious choice to develop. By making this the sole Worcester Shrub Hill link, the existing Birmingham to Worcester services could be aligned to Worcester Foregate Street, creating a consistent, clockface service.

We note that Figure 4.4 of the draft Route Study includes a service labelled “XB33” which is also shown in Figure 4.3, where it is described as a cross-boundary service between Cardiff and Worcester Foregate Street via Gloucester, but which appears to continue to become a semi-fast service on the Stourbridge line. We are however unsure whether this is the correct interpretation since the information in the draft Route Study is not clear.

The Group would also expect connectivity with non-Stourbridge line trains at Droitwich Spa to be maximised.

The Stourbridge Line User Group calls for the rail network capacity to enable a direct service from Stourbridge line stations via Worcester Shrub Hill to Cheltenham Spa to provide new opportunities for single-change journeys between the Stourbridge line and a wide range of major destination/origin points, and for connectivity between different routes at Droitwich Spa to be improved.

2. Comments on 2043 Unconstrained Indicative Train Service Specification

Key observation: We support the principles of the service pattern indicated in Figure 4.4.

The Stourbridge Line User Group is encouraged by the service pattern indicated in Figure 4.4 Snow Hill Lines 2043 Unconstrained ITSS. We note in particular that it shows the use of the proposed Rowley Regis turnback to provide two trains per hour reversing at Rowley Regis and the retention of six trains per hours serving Stourbridge Junction (in contrast to an alternative of which we are aware that suggests reducing service frequency at Stourbridge Junction compared to the current timetable).

However, we believe that a time horizon of 2043 is too far in the future for realisation of this service pattern and call for it to be accelerated in recognition both of current levels of usage of the train service and of the considerable benefits it would provide to both rail users and the areas served by the Stourbridge line once introduced.

As noted above our preferred service pattern would include the following:

- Extension of one of the hourly Kidderminster-terminating services to (or beyond) Cheltenham Spa via Worcester Shrub Hill to provide southbound connectivity in line with the 'Intensive Growth' transport corridors identified by Midlands Connect illustrated in Figure 2.2
- Two Stourbridge line services per hour serving Worcester Foregate Street for the city centre

As such we are encouraged by the apparent reference to service XB33 which appears to represent a direct service between the Stourbridge Line and Cardiff via Gloucester, but we are not certain that we have interpreted this correctly since the references in the draft Route Study are unclear.

We would like to make specific comment with regard to the Rowley Regis turnback, mentioned above. The Stourbridge Line User Group is supportive of developments that will improve the experience of peak time commuters, and we are well aware that in the morning peak there are frequently no seats left on Birmingham-bound trains calling at Rowley Regis. Clearly this situation would be improved if the implementation of the Rowley Regis turnback enabled additional peak time trains to start from Rowley Regis towards Birmingham during this period. However, we have concerns that the existence of the Rowley Regis turnback would result in an off peak service which worsened the service frequency at stations further away from Birmingham (in particular we are aware of one such concept which suggested reversing four out of eight trains per hour a Rowley Regis in the off-peak period, thus reducing service frequencies at Cradley Heath and Stourbridge Junction from the current six trains per hour to four). The service pattern illustrated in Figure 4.4 is an acceptable use of the Rowley Regis turnback facility in our view, whereas we would be very sceptical of any proposal that reduced service frequency at any Stourbridge Line station compared to the current situation.

We call for the rail network to be enhanced as proposed in the Route Study to enable the improvements to services outlined in principle above.

Chapter 05: Strategy and Choices for Funders

1. Snow Hill Lines

Key observation: We support the proposed investment in the Stourbridge line, but have concerns over how these might affect the service.

The Stourbridge Line User Group is in broad agreement with the physical development aspects of the strategy as described. The reinstatement of Platform 4 at Birmingham Snow Hill station will be beneficial for the reasons described in the draft Route Study, while the implementation of the Rowley Regis turnback is supported for the benefits it can bring, particularly at peak times.

We are however concerned that the proposed concept of restructuring the service into 'inner suburban' and 'outer suburban' services could lead to a degradation of the overall service. We are aware of one proposal that, while increasing Stourbridge line departures from Birmingham in the standard off-peak pattern to eight trains per hour, envisages four of them making use of the Rowley Regis turnback and, as a direct result, a reduction in service frequency at Cradley Heath and Stourbridge Junction stations to four trains per hour from the current six. Our understanding of the same proposal was that the number of station pairs linked by direct trains would be significantly reduced.

In this regard, we note with interest that the value for money assessment for the Rowley Regis turnback is stated to be only poor or medium (Option Table 3), compared to higher value for money ratings for train lengthening (Figure 5.2).

The Stourbridge Line User Group calls for investment in the Snow Hill lines to be implemented in order to offer clear improvements to users of the train service.

2. Worcester Area

Key observation: We strongly support the proposed improvement to the rail network in the Worcester area.

The Stourbridge Line User Group is most supportive of the Worcester area interventions as detailed in Table 5. The current track and signalling arrangements are most restrictive and present a barrier to future desirable service enhancements (please see our comments earlier in this submission). Furthermore, the current arrangement of two single line railways operating through Worcester Foregate Street appears detrimental both during and following times of perturbation.

We call for the Worcester area infrastructure to be upgraded in order to realise significant service improvements for Stourbridge line users.

3. West Midlands Rail Hub

Key observation: We support the West Midlands Rail Hub concept.

We are supportive of the proposal to construct new chord lines in the Bordesley area with connections to Birmingham Moor Street. This is of relevance to the Stourbridge Line User Group as it significantly improves single-change connections from the Stourbridge line without the need to change between Moor Street (and Snow Hill) to New Street stations.

We call for the West Midlands Rail Hub to be implemented as proposed.

4. Electrification

Key observation: We are disappointed that the Route Study does not foresee electrification of the Snow Hill lines

The Stourbridge Line User Group is disappointed that the Route Study makes no reference to the electrification of the Snow Hill lines, including some or all of the Stourbridge line.

We consider that the operation of the route between Birmingham and Stourbridge Junction (in particular) entirely by diesel trains is an anomaly compared to comparable routes both elsewhere in the West Midlands and around the country. This section sees a usual service frequency of six trains per hour per direction, supplemented by a further two or three Chiltern Railways services in the Birmingham area. The indicative service pattern in Figure 4.4 indicates that this may be enhanced still further.

This is a clear example of a rail operation that would benefit from electrification, as this would bring improved energy efficiency (from lighter trains and regenerative braking on frequent-stop services), improved operation (from increased reliability and better performance), improved local environment (the emission of diesel particulates in urban centres and residential areas is increasingly being recognised as a public health issue), and would benefit other areas of the country through the cascade of the current diesel rolling stock.

The Stourbridge Line User Group calls for the inclusion of the Snow Hill lines in plans for the next phase of railway electrification alongside the Chiltern line, which is included in the Route Study.

5. New/re-opened routes. Stourbridge-Walsall Line

Key observation: the Stourbridge-Walsall route should be re-opened to passenger rail services of some form to support the mobility needs of the Black Country.

The West Midlands and Chiltern Route Study omits a significant opportunity by only referring to the Stourbridge-Walsall route in relation to potential freight traffic. This route also has the potential to become a key orbital passenger artery for the Black Country, linking the sub-regional centres of Stourbridge, Brierley Hill, Dudley and Walsall together and with radial routes spreading out from Birmingham.

The West Midlands regional transport strategy "Movement for Growth" promotes light rail between Wednesbury and Brierley Hill before the end of 2026 (our understanding is that it is planned to open some years earlier than that) and therefore this leaves a missing link in the public transport network between Brierley Hill and Stourbridge Junction. This missing link should be filled as soon as possible by a rail-based line (which may be light rail), particularly because development plans exist for the Brierley Hill and Dudley areas (also referred to in "Movement for Growth") which should be easily accessible from the areas of Worcestershire, the Black Country and elsewhere serviced by the Stourbridge line.

We note that "Movement for Growth" ultimately envisages passenger rail services over the full length of rail route between Stourbridge Junction and Burton-on-Trent via Walsall and Lichfield, and support this objective.

The Stourbridge Line User Group calls for the rail network to be enhanced to allow passenger rail connections from Stourbridge Junction to Brierley Hill, Dudley and beyond, in particular to connect with the Midland Metro extension to Brierley Hill.

Ends.

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