

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Response to the Consultation on the Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy

The Stourbridge Line User Group (SLUG) represents passengers on the rail route between Worcester (both Foregate St and Shrub Hill) and Birmingham (Snow Hill and Moor St) via Kidderminster and Stourbridge (Junction and Town). Services on this line serve stations in Worcestershire from Worcester to Hagley, and passengers from the County also drive to Stourbridge Junction as a railhead for accessing Birmingham. It therefore welcomes the Draft Rail Investment Strategy (hereinafter referred to as the “WRIS”)

We also recognise the importance of the WRIS in terms of the significance of the Stourbridge line for growth in employment and housing, particularly in the Wyre Forest District Council administrative area. However the line will be an important access point to HS2 as Moor Street is more convenient to Curzon Street than Birmingham New Street.

SLUG wishes to make the following specific comments with regard to the WRIS which are of relevance to the Stourbridge Line.

1. Two trains per hour from Worcester to London Paddington.

Key observation: Services from Worcester to London are inadequate considering the population of the city in comparison to other cities and towns of a similar size.

We agree to this proposal. However whilst this would be welcome for a Kidderminster or even Stourbridge Junction to Paddington service SLUG is concerned about potential negative consequences of pursuing this without considering the transport needs northwards to Birmingham. SLUG would wish to see easy connections from north Stourbridge line stations into any such new service and no reduction of current service patterns.

An alternative means of achieving better southbound connectivity might be the extension of some Stourbridge line services to Worcestershire Parkway, coupled with Cross Country services calling there.

2. Calls at Worcestershire Parkway by Cross Country Services

Key observation: Single change journeys on the Stourbridge Line are unnecessarily limited

SLUG welcomes the proposal for Cross Country Trains to call at Worcestershire Parkway but this would only benefit passengers on the Stourbridge line if a Kidderminster- Worcester- Oxford- Paddington service is introduced. Reference is made in 7.4 that the Cross Country calls could only be made subject to electrification of the line from Birmingham to Bristol. It is also stated in 7.7 that electrification of this route will take place in Control Period CP6/7 whereas it is stated in the same table this service will commence in CP6.

SLUG supports electrification but it has to accept that there is little prospect of these schemes starting before CP7. This would not be fast enough to achieve Worcestershire connectivity requirements so SLUG considers that service improvements should not be dependent on electrification.

3. Regional service between Kidderminster, Worcester, Cheltenham Spa, Gloucester and Bristol.

Key observation: The current level of service from Worcester stations to the South West is infrequent and in many cases necessitates passengers travelling to Birmingham to access services to Bristol and beyond.

SLUG supports the provision of this new service indicated in table 7.7 from Birmingham. However, as stated in paragraph 2 above, the introduction of this service should not be dependent on electrification. SLUG has identified the need for passengers to be able to travel along the Midland Connect Corridors to the South West and previously advocated in its response to the franchise consultation (due to be awarded shortly) one train per hour to achieve single connection journeys to Swindon, Reading, Bristol and the South West.

4. Improvements to Worcester stations.

Key observation: Worcester Shrub Hill requires substantial improvement

SLUG welcomes improvements to Worcester Shrub Hill as identified in paragraphs 5.16, 7.6 and 8.1 of the WRIS. It notes that a Shrub Hill Master Plan is currently being prepared in consultation with Worcester City Council with a view to not only improving facilities at Shrub Hill station including improved access, particularly for those with a disability and car parking but regeneration of the area.

5. Infrastructure

Key observation: Apart from the resignalling at Kidderminster and Hartlebury there have been no improvements to increase capacity and reliability of the infrastructure for many years

SLUG supports elimination of infrastructure constraints to enable improved services as identified in paragraph 5.10.3 of the Strategy. We are of the view that the main priorities are infrastructure and signalling improvements in the Worcester City area, Droitwich and Malvern Wells. These improvements require urgent attention as they are causing operational difficulties and the equipment is continuing to fail despite Network Rail attempting to extend its life.

6. Blakedown and Hartlebury Stations

Key observation: There is a need to provide better parking facilities at Worcestershire stations including identifying park and ride facilities

It is noted in 7.3 that the introduction of the service from Kidderminster to Paddington is conditional upon but not exclusively the provision of additional car parking capacity at Kidderminster Station and/ or development of Hartlebury or Blakedown stations to accommodate demand. SLUG supports expansion of car parking provision in order to improve accessibility of rail services but is not convinced that the proposals are robust in the availability of extra car parking space at Blakedown and the effect on the A456. It is considered that Hartlebury is more convenient as a railhead for Stourport and Bewdley and be considered as a park and ride facility in the WRIS.

7. Existing Stourbridge Line pattern of services

Key observation: The present level of service has been a success of the route together with Class 172 rolling stock

SLUG supports the Rowley Regis turnback facility which should significantly improve peak time commuting. It notes in 5.6 reference to an indicative timetable by CENTRO and the pattern of train services shown in figure 5.12. SLUG does not wish to see a reduction in the current service pattern from Kidderminster or Stourbridge Junction. This is a success of the turn up and go service which should not be reversed. We note the WRIS gives the opportunity to improve services at the south end of the line which we support.

SLUG also wishes to see a more predictable pattern of services into Worcester Stations, ideally with two trains per hour to Worcester Foregate Street and a clockface service pattern from both Foregate Street and Shrub Hill stations.

8. Other considerations

SLUG wishes to raise the following additional matters which are not specifically referred to in the WRIS.

8.1 The importance of single change journeys to Birmingham Airport and the desire to improve connections at Smethwick Galton Bridge together with improvements to the existing station.

8.2 The provision of earlier trains on Sundays on the Stourbridge line. SLUG considers this essential to enable passengers to travel to work on a Sunday particularly if they are employed in retail or leisure and earlier connections at Birmingham stations. SLUG considers this should be pursued with the new operator of the West Midlands Franchise and Transport for the West Midlands. This has long been an aspiration of SLUG.