

SLUG News - 2011

27 November 2011
The North-South Divide

On 16th November 2011, Centro, which is the Integrated Public Transport Authority for the West Midlands, issued a press release to the effect that its senior managers were meeting with Transport Secretary Justine Greening. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposed Initial Industry Plan devised by the Government to kick-start the economy and boost jobs. Centro used the press release as a pre-emptive strike, attacking the list of railway infrastructure projects which had been identified as having priority. Centro highlighted schemes in the West Midlands which were omitted in favour of those for London and the South East. The effects on the Stourbridge Line caused by delaying key schemes prompted the Group to issue its own press release, supporting Centro. It is shown here in full:-

Rail User Group backs call for more investment in the West Midlands

A local rail passenger representative group has come out strongly in support of transport authority, Centro. The Integrated Transport Authority (ITA) which is lobbying the Government for more investment in the West Midlands has identified projects which have been left out of the Initial Industry Plan. Key schemes highlighted by Centro are also long standing aspirations of the Stourbridge Line User Group (SLUG). Among the ambitions are a re-opened Stourbridge to Walsall Railway line, reinstatement of platform four at Birmingham Snow Hill and providing a turn back facility at Rowley Regis station. In addition, SLUG supports Centro on the construction of the Camp Hill Chords which would provide links to Kings Norton, Water Orton and beyond. SLUG Chairman, Rob Hebron was quoted as saying:-

“This Group unhesitatingly supports Centro’s stance. The Government wants to kick start economic recovery and create employment by investing in public transport infrastructure. This is a commendable idea but the West Midlands has been allocated a disproportionately small quota of improvements compared to London and the South East. £57 million for this region is paltry compared with £349.5 million (lowest estimate).

He continued:-

“We are seeing sustained passenger growth on the Snow Hill Lines. New Class 172 trains have raised standards but are struggling to cope with demand. Addressing capacity issues will safeguard revenue and provide for future demand. Resignalling and remodelling track in the Worcester area would have a significant effect on line speeds and timetable patterns. This sort of work maximises the use of existing resources – it’s cost effective and “win-win” for train operators and customers”.

Centro bosses have arranged to meet new Transport Secretary, Justine Greening to discuss the level of investment in the West Midlands between 2014 and 2019. The Initial Industry Plan has not been finalised but having been drafted by the Office of Rail Regulation, Network Rail, The Association of Train Operating Companies, the Rail Freight Operators Association and the Rail Industry Association, it carries a lot of weight. The priorities set out by this league of stakeholders are by no means unworthy.

SLUG’s Chairman concluded:-

“We don’t want to scupper any schemes elsewhere on the network. The size of the original list is a measure of how the national railway has been underfunded and constrained. The Chancellor should increase the budget rather than spread it thinly. Investment in rail would ultimately reduce the need for more roads and airports.

5 September 2011 Fewer trains to London

It is a relatively rare event when the Stourbridge Line User Group has cause to criticise Chiltern Railways. The company's track record is almost exemplary and it is thanks to Chiltern's investment in new tracks and infrastructure that the train service from Kidderminster to London Marylebone is improving in terms of reduced journey times and reliability. However, the number of through trains in the day is limited and will be more so with the introduction of the company's September timetable. The popular 0630 ex Kidderminster has been withdrawn leaving no replacement train to take up the capacity. The following train, operated by London Midland is formed of less stock, owing to the fact that it calls at Hartlebury where platforms cannot accommodate any additional carriages.

Although SLUG is involved in decisions taken by Chiltern planners, through consultation at passenger board meetings, this withdrawal is now a fait accompli.

All available rolling is probably allocated to boosting the Chiltern network elsewhere and SLUG has no alternative than to resort to action which will persuade the company to restore the 0630 train in the December timetable.

This action involves rallying passengers, Worcestershire County Council rail planners and Centro. In addition, SLUG has joined forces with The Campaign for Better Transport (West Midlands) www.bettertransport.org.uk to issue a press release condemning the cutback.

SLUG Chairman, Rob Hebron has provided quotes for the press release. His full statement is as follows:-

"The 0630 service is well patronised and nearly oversubscribed, leaving the Group to believe that the early morning train is being sacrificed for no clear commercial reason. There have been reliability issues but this was always the case due to the intensive Kidderminster to Birmingham timetable. Chiltern have not taken into account the much improved interface with London Midland services when the brand new Class 172 trains enter service, enabling greater headways for acceleration en route.

The Group wants to foster development of the London service. Kidderminster has every right to be on the destination blind of a Chiltern train and not just on evening return journeys. It is the gateway to Worcestershire, a vibrant town and within easy access of premier tourist spots. The impressive footfall figures for the station cannot be ignored and no operator should risk losing its slot in the timetable. I hope that Chiltern will talk to us about this. This end of the line needs more marketing. Rail enquiry websites do the company no favours when passengers are looking for the cheapest tickets to London. Let's do the job properly and restore the 0630 through train. In fact, Chiltern could direct a little investment towards the much needed new Kidderminster station as a sign of commitment".

24 July 2011 Reviewing and Re-grouping

An article in August's edition of Today's Railways UK which concerns revamping rail franchises has aroused considerable interest amongst the SLUG committee and caused much speculation. The report by Jacobs Consultancy was commissioned jointly by the DfT and the ORR specifically to review the franchise map. The report recommended six significant changes to the franchise map, one of which would affect us if implemented.

Without any consideration for the implications of HS2, the Jacobs Consultancy boldly tackles the operational problems of the West Coast Main Line by suggesting a consolidation of electrically powered London-bound trains under one train operator. Effectively this would be a merger of services presently run by Virgin Trains and London Midland. The result would be a simplification of timetables and fares for journeys between London Euston, Birmingham New Street and beyond.

This proposal would leave Snow Hill Line services as a separate, diesel-run, package which would be ideally suited to be merged with the Chiltern Railways network. This does not diminish the importance of Snow Hill services or downgrade the resulting infrastructure. The Chiltern franchise was extended as a result of investment undertaken by the company (the Evergreen Projects) and general good practice. The Group has a good working relationship with Chiltern and would welcome the type of station makeovers which it has carried out. Alterations to Leamington Spa and Solihull have been highly commended.

Consultancy reports are not necessarily binding or executed but can cause concern for station staff and train crews who naturally fear for their jobs if streamlining takes place. They know that this report will not be viewed in isolation as it supports many of the arguments of the McNulty Report which looks for efficiencies in the rail network.

The London Midland franchise is large but is also largely efficient and enjoys the financial support of Centro in the West Midlands County. This partnership has delivered many substantial improvements for passengers over the years and sometimes it is better to say "if it isn't broke, don't fix it".

(Source of material – Paul Abell and Team, Today's Railways UK)

2 May 2011
IMPORTANT NOTICE – change of venue for AGM/Public Forum.

Owing to unforeseen circumstances, the venue for the SLUG AGM and public forum has changed from the Severn Valley Railway Station, Kidderminster to THE KIDDERMINSTER RAILWAY MUSEUM. The date and time of the events is unchanged (Tuesday May 17th at 7:30 pm). Persons wishing to attend should still arrive at the SVR station, as the route to the museum is via the station concourse and access will be either through the booking hall or the King and Castle bar.

14 April 2011 The SLUG AGM & Public Forum

The SLUG AGM & Public Forum will be held on Tuesday May 17th at Kidderminster S.V.R. Station, commencing at 7:30. The Public Forum is open to all stakeholders, SLUG members and non-members alike. What is a “stakeholder”? As distinct from “shareholders”, whose interest lies in the financial benefit to be gained from their investment, “stakeholders” may have other interests at heart, including those of the customer or user, e.g. we are all stakeholders in the NHS. The Stourbridge Line User Group is a stakeholder in the line it represents.

Local railway operation is different to how it was in the days of the GWR or British Railways: It enjoys the expertise of and financial input from the counties in which it operates. The private train companies alone could not provide the level of service which the passenger enjoys now, without the grants which are levied in taxes from us – the general public. Members of SLUG are stakeholders in the railway, not only as taxpayers but as users of the railway line.

Stakeholders have a voice. Each voice needs to be heard and what better opportunity than at the SLUG A.G.M. and Public Forum? Representatives from London Midland, Chiltern Railways, Centro and Worcestershire County Council will be on hand to answer questions and to take on board suggestions as to how the railway could be improved. Don't be afraid to ask awkward questions such as:-

“Will London Midland's new Class 172 trains be any less overcrowded than the ones that are running now?”

“Can we count on Chiltern's commitment to Stourbridge and Kidderminster, considering that their sister company abandoned Shrewsbury's direct link to London?”

“Is Midland Metro Line Two dead in the water, as illustrated by plans for a rapid transit bus network?”

“Is Worcestershire's Local Transport Plan invalidated by wholesale cuts to bus services instead of improved links to railway stations?”

You may have your own concerns – please voice them. Our guests are very knowledgeable and approachable. They want your feedback. The Chairman and Committee also want your feedback on their performance this year. Do you want to stand for office in SLUG? Do you want to re-elect the existing officers? Do you want to play a less active role but still make a contribution? Please come along, there's no obligation to do any more than just attend. It's your right as a stakeholder.

12 March 2011 Intransigence

Friday March 11th proved to be a black day for commuters on the Stourbridge Line and other lines operated by London Midland. An escalating industrial dispute caused widespread cancellations of train services and considerable inconvenience for passengers. As a result of an overtime ban by train drivers union ASLEF, units were unable to leave Tyseley depot in time to commence scheduled journeys in the morning rush hour. The cost to employees and employers cannot be underestimated nor can the damage to London Midland's reputation.

At the heart of the dispute is the union's desire to harmonise pay and working conditions of former Central Trains and Silverlink train drivers who were taken on by London Midland. London Midland management accuse the union of "cherry picking" the best elements of both company's terms. As if this situation was not bad enough, another grievance has raised its head – Sunday working: London Midland has cut the rate of pay for Sunday working but maintains that double time payment was only a temporary arrangement. A deliberate discouragement of volunteers for Sunday overtime will effectively wipe out Sunday services on the Stourbridge Line for the foreseeable future. This is an intolerable state of affairs which is exasperated by intransigence on both sides.

The Stourbridge Line User Group does not take sides with union or management in this dispute. The Group is on the side of the long suffering passenger. Sunday working is part and parcel of being a train driver, running a service is the responsibility of management.

Clearly, both sides need to look again at their franchise agreement because if they don't fulfil their obligations, it may be the last time that they procure the franchise.

SLUG implores both sides to negotiate and while negotiations are taking place, they should run the advertised service or pay compensation. The Group would like to draw attention to the fact that passengers can claim refund for delays to their journey of over half an hour.

12 March 2011
SLUG attacks station staff cutbacks
(An extract from a press release* on 7th March 2011)

A local passenger representative group has reacted fiercely to proposed cutbacks to station opening times. The Stourbridge Line User Group (SLUG) which supports users of the Birmingham to Worcester Railway has criticised plans by London Midland to reduce availability of booking office facilities and to withdraw the provision altogether at specific stations. Amongst the stations affected are Stourbridge Town which will be closed from late afternoon and Lye which will lose its ticket-issuing staff completely.

Although London Midland has promised to install ticket vending machines and CCTV cameras at affected stations, SLUG is concerned about the downgrading of the service. SLUG Chairman, Rob Hebron was quoted as saying:-

“At a time when train usage is increasing and the public should be encouraged to use public transport, London Midland is actually discouraging passengers. It’s the wider picture and the implications of cuts which worry SLUG. Face to face contact with staff not only assists the enquiring traveller but it reassures he or she that they are personally secure at a station.

He added:-

“Lye is not a village station in a remote location – it is in a highly populated area. It deserves a new station building and not a basic waiting shelter. Stourbridge Town is to become part of a new bus/train interchange – this is no way to introduce integrated public transport. The only people who will gain are fare dodgers and so the whole exercise will be counter-productive”.

SLUG has contacted London Midland and raised its concerns. In the meantime, the Group urges rail passengers to protest to the train company or to write to their Member of Parliament. If they are dissatisfied with their response, they can also contact rail watchdog Passenger Focus by letter (PO Box 4257, Manchester M60 3AR) or e-mail (<mailto:info@passengerfocus.org.uk>)

*Editor’s note:-

Two other versions of the press release were issued simultaneously: One was produced for Sandwell and Birmingham areas referring to curtailing of Smethwick Galton Bridge/Hawthorns office opening hours and closure of Jewellery Quarter booking office. The other press release was produced for the Worcestershire area, criticising reduced opening times at Droitwich Spa and Worcester Shrub Hill stations.

The Dudley area version reproduced above, generated a hard hitting article in the Express and Star on Thursday March 10th.

2 February 2011 Universal ticketing

Amongst its campaigns, the Stourbridge Line User Group lists “Quality of Connections” as a standard it aims to achieve for passengers. In pursuit of a seamless journey, there is much common ground between the Group and train operators. Of course, not all journeys are made by rail alone and buses play a significant role in bringing passengers to their rail station. Bus timetables are devised in a different way to train timetables and the different factors involved, sometimes fail to make a connection between the two modes.

The websites of Centro, Worcestershire County Council and Traveline provide comprehensive information and are deserving of praise for their excellent presentation of it. However, the fact is that Centro and Worcestershire CC websites only offer localised information. Recognising that fact, SLUG officer Roger Davis has compiled a document listing all bus connections for Stourbridge Line stations in both the West Midlands and Worcestershire. As well as enabling passengers to plan a journey (which they might not realise was possible), it highlights the weaknesses of a fragmented privatised industry. The “one bus in service” practice is economical but does not lend itself to planning clock-face timetables. Therefore, potential connections are hit and miss.

Roger’s summary of station bus services gives an insight into what could be a comprehensive, user-friendly transport network. We are still a long way off achieving that goal. In fact, wholesale cuts are proposed to the Worcestershire bus network and residents of that county will need to register their disapproval in the current consultation process.

A common complaint from local public transport users is that their travel cards are valid during the day but not on the night when other operators take over. This is not integrated public transport. The Stourbridge Line User Group is seeking a universal ticket which is valid on all modes of public transport, not only on and around the Stourbridge Line, but in the long term throughout the United Kingdom. Although multi-mode tickets exist and pre-pay plastic cards are being trialled, no one has incorporated all the elements as well as per the London Oyster Card. A universal travel card, in its true sense would be a travel VOUCHER which could be purchased at any retail outfit. The Group has researched the capabilities of the technology in the manufacture of readable plastic travel cards. A universal card is perfectly possible. It already exists for Senior Citizens. Does SLUG have to campaign against REVERSE age discrimination?

12 January 2011
Hard-pressed commuters face more misery
(Extract from a story in the STOURBRIDGE NEWS - January 6th 2011)

Hard-pressed commuters face more misery this New Year as the cost of train and bus journeys throughout the Black Country rockets and VAT on fuel pushes the price of petrol closer to the £1.30 per litre mark. After last month's arctic weather caused major congestion and disruption to road and rail services, travellers now have to dig deeper into their pockets to cover the costs of getting to and from work.

The 2.5 per cent increase in VAT, coupled with a rise in fuel duty of 0.76p a litre, has added around 3.5p per litre to the price of fuel. The biggest hike has been on the rail network, with London Midland pushing up peak time travel, including season tickets, by 5.9 per cent - one of the largest increases in years. A company spokesman defended the decision as a result of Government policy to reduce the taxpayer's contribution to rail services, requiring passengers to pay more.

Stourbridge Line User Group chairman Rob Hebron said the train operator should have absorbed some of the increase instead of passing it on to peak time commuters.

"It is an unfair increase given that we still face overcrowding and unreliability on the peak services and we do not get value for money," he said.

Mr Hebron criticised National Express's bus fare rises which also came into effect this week, warning that the combined public transport hikes would do nothing to ease congestion on the roads.

"Car parks at stations like Rowley Regis are over-flowing. This latest bus fare increase does not help. We want to see an integrated public transport system where buses are designed to meet the trains," he added.

National Express has put up adult fares by 10p to £1.60 for short hops, £1.80 for standard journeys and £3.60 for daysaver tickets. The evening saver has been scrapped.

A company spokesman said the new fares reflected rising business costs and would support massive reinvestment this year. Bus users faced similar increases only last June, and although National Express had pegged prices for 18 months up to that point, the January 2009 increase was 10 per cent - more than twice the rate of inflation.

Halesowen and Rowley Regis MP James Morris blamed the previous Government for the VAT rise and said his Government was committed to ending Labour's "war on the motorist."

"Already this year, the Coalition is repealing guidance which encouraged higher car parking charges and placed limits on car parking spaces in new developments," he said.

Mr Morris added that bus and rail services must be improved in line with fare increases.

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