

CHANGE IS GONNA COME by Roger Davis

I apologise to the late, great Sam Cooke for using the title of his iconic 1960s civil rights anthem. However, the title is apt to describe this year's Public Meeting as it was one of the most positive in years in terms of our aspirations. The meeting was addressed by senior managers from the five organisations who specify and operate our railway line - Brenda Lawrence from London Midland, David Heathfield from Chiltern Railways, Tom Painter from West Midlands Rail, Peter Sargant from Transport for West Midlands and Ian Baxter from SLC Rail who are consultants to Worcestershire County Council.



Left to right : Brenda Lawrence, David Heathfield, Ian Baxter, William Whiting, Tom Painter, Peter Sargant

After an opening resumé on SLUG's activities over the previous year by Acting Chairman William Whiting, the five guest speakers treated an attentive audience to interesting presentations. Brenda Lawrence set the ball rolling by detailing the improvements made by London Midland and the challenges they have faced and are attempting to resolve in conjunction with Network Rail. Hartlebury had been a major beneficiary with additional services stopping there in both the December 2016 and May 2017 timetables, while ticket vending machines had been installed at Hartlebury, Blakedown and Lye. In addition, a group had adopted Stourbridge Junction station under London Midland's Station Adopting Scheme. Therefore, if any group wishes to adopt any other Stourbridge line stations, they can contact London Midland. Details are at <https://www.londonmidland.com/get-in-touch/adopt-a-station>.

Peter Sargant told the meeting that rail usage was still increasing. In 2001, 17% of morning rush hour journeys into Birmingham were made by rail compared with 51% by car. By 2015, rail journeys had increased to 34%, the same percentage as car journeys. One major reason was the provision of free TfWM car parks, with over 2,400 spaces available at 8 of the 10 stations along the Stourbridge line. A "save-a-space" trial would shortly be taking place at Rowley Regis. In the future, two major projects were planned in our area. Firstly, an extra turnback platform at Rowley Regis will be built with platform 4 reopened at Snow Hill at the same time. We will keep you abreast of progress in future editions of Platform. Secondly, work on the extension of the Metro from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill had started with the trackbed having been cleared of vegetation. A full report on the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill proposals follows on pages 7 and 8.

Tom Painter, who had recently been appointed as Franchise manager for West Midlands Rail detailed the plans for splitting the new West Midlands franchise into two business units with the West Midlands services managed locally. He then detailed the advantages of local service management. He confirmed that, despite the impending General Election and the possibility of a change of Secretary of State for Transport, there had been no official announcement of any delay to the timetable with the winning bidder (Govia or Abellio) due to be announced in June and the franchise due to start on 15 October.

However, the two “exclusives” were delivered by David Heathfield and Ian Baxter and point towards a successful conclusion to two long-standing SLUG campaigns. David announced to the meeting that Chiltern Railways had bid to provide more through services at weekends to and from Kidderminster from December. These services would need to be ratified at a Timetable Conference to be held shortly. The services that Chiltern want to extend are :-

Saturdays - 1055 BMO to MYB, 1710 MYB to BSW, 1810 MYB to BSW and 1940 MYB to BSW
Sundays - 1012 BSW to MYB, 1155 BMO to MYB, 1810 MYB to BMO, 1940 MYB to BSW and 2040 MYB to BSW.
(Note BSW = Birmingham Snow Hill, BMO = Birmingham Moor Street, MYB = London Marylebone)

This campaign, led by SLUG Officers Don Barton and Keith Flinders, has been a long running one, so Chiltern must be commended for listening to the arguments and proposing to introduce even more services than SLUG asked for.

Finally, Ian Baxter detailed that Worcestershire County Council were well aware of the very poor through services from the county to the rest of the country. The exceptions were excellent connections to Birmingham and average connections to London. One aspiration of the County Council is for an hourly service from Kidderminster to London in the future. He also highlighted the chronic lack of car parking spaces with only 1,235 spaces available at Worcestershire stations, about 10% of the number available at West Midlands stations. However, Ian’s exclusive was to provide the audience with a first look at artist’s impressions of the rebuilt Kidderminster station. After consultation with London Midland and the Severn Valley Railway, it had been decided that the new station building would be a modern glass-fronted building to highlight that one station was for the heritage railway and the other for the 21st century railway. The forecourt would be redesigned with the trees bordering Comberton Hill removed to open up the view. Improved bus stops would be provided in Comberton Hill, with a pedestrian crossing provided.



Thus, as Sam Cooke wrote, “It’s been a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come”. We have a new franchise, new through services to London, a new Kidderminster station and a new Metro line to look forward to and we will report in more detail on some of the major subjects raised by our speakers in future editions.