

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER by Roger Davis



After a two month delay, seemingly caused by the calling of the General Election, West Midlands Trains Ltd was named on 10 August as the preferred bidder to run the next West Midlands franchise which now starts on 10 December 2017 (eight weeks after the original start date of 15 October) and runs until March 2026.

West Midlands Trains Ltd (WMT) is a joint venture between three companies (Abellio, East Japan Railway Company and Mitsui & Co Ltd), and we will profile these three companies in more detail in the next issue of *Platform*.

On the day of the announcement, a document was issued by West Midlands Rail (WMR), a consortium of 14 local authorities from across the West Midlands who will take responsibility for the management of the majority of passenger services in the West Midlands region. This document detailed the benefits in store for the Stourbridge line.

- free Wi-Fi will be available on all main line trains by the end of 2019. This does not include the Stourbridge Town branch
- carriages will be fully refurbished and supported by an investment in 80 brand new diesel carriages introduced from 2020 dedicated to operating services in and around Birmingham
- enhanced evening frequencies between Birmingham and Kidderminster in each direction Monday to Friday by December 2018
- enhanced frequencies by May 2021 on the Snow Hill lines on a Sunday with services from Birmingham increasing to 6 trains per hour to Stourbridge Junction with 4 extending to Kidderminster
- earlier first services on the Snow Hill lines by May 2021 on a Sunday
- a service quality regime to improve the quality of stations, trains and customer service for passengers
- earlier first services between Stourbridge Town and Stourbridge Junction on a Saturday in both directions
- frequency on a Sunday increases from 4 to 6 services an hour by May 2021 on the Stourbridge Town branch



To get more information on how the new franchise would benefit Stourbridge line passengers, SLUG officers William Whiting and Roger Davis visited the headquarters of the West Midlands Combined Authority and spoke to Tom Painter, Franchise Delivery Manager at West Midlands Rail. Tom was willing and able to provide us with the following extra information.

The current fleet of diesel multiple units consists of 135 carriages, of which 132 are used in the West Midlands. The new franchise will see 80 brand new carriages with 2+2 seating and extra wide doors and vestibules introduced from 2020 and these will be made up into 2- and 4-car units. In addition, 16 Class 172 carriages (similar to those currently used on the Stourbridge line) will be cascaded from London. These 96 additional carriages will replace 66 carriages that date from the 1980s and 1990s. While the brand new carriages will be predominantly used on Shrewsbury and Hereford services, they will be seen on some Stourbridge line services alongside refurbished Class 172s. WMT have also stated that they are committed to keeping a 2nd member of staff on every train service. In addition, WMR and WMT have agreed that, before March 2021, they will conduct a joint review of the Stourbridge Town shuttle to investigate capacity issues plus the condition of the two PPM railcars.

WMT have also said that they want to introduce earlier train services on a Sunday morning from May 2021, but this will be subject to a successful application to Network Rail to permit earlier services.

However, some potentially good news has just emerged. As part of the franchise bid, the bidders were asked to promote schemes that exceeded the base requirements set out in the Invitation to Tender. WMT have responded by saying that they are undertaking feasibility studies to potentially introduce service improvements from December 2018 onwards. This includes potentially introducing four brand new services. Walsall to Wolverhampton and local services to Moseley and King's Heath are two of them, while the other two are extensions of Stourbridge line services.

- A new service to West Midlands Safari Park from December 2019 as an extension of Birmingham to Kidderminster services which will operate along the Severn Valley Railway
- A new service to Brierley Hill as an extension of Birmingham to Stourbridge Junction services



The former plan would need co-operation from the Severn Valley Railway, but the precedent of National Rail services accessing heritage lines has been set across the country - including the Paignton & Dartmouth, Swanage, West Somerset and North Yorkshire Moors Railways. The latter plan would require the reversal of trains at Stourbridge Junction to operate to Brierley Hill from December 2019, with an extension to Round Oak (Canal Street) from December 2023 to connect with the Midland Metro route to Wednesbury and provide a direct heavy rail link from the Waterfront Business Park to HS2 in Birmingham. These new services would need approval from TfWM so we will have to wait and see whether they ever come to fruition. However, the fact that the new train operator has put them on its wish list must be encouraging.

In conclusion, the future looks bright with committed improvements such as better evening and Sunday services, and more carriages available for Stourbridge line services. If the uncommitted new services to the Safari Park and Brierley Hill do go ahead, then we may look back on this franchise as a huge success. Time will tell!