

PLATFORM 3



Issue 1

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Will Stambermill Viaduct carry passenger trains again before too long?

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STOURBRIDGE JUNCTION TO WALSALL LINE

by Roger Davis

HISTORY

Despite local claims that regular passenger services ran between Stourbridge Junction and Walsall up to 1964, nothing could be further from the truth as there were two distinct services emanating from Dudley.

The Stourbridge Junction to Dudley line was built by the Oxford, Worcester and Wolverhampton Railway and opened in 1852 as part of the through route from London Paddington to Wolverhampton Low Level. It was later taken over by the Great Western Railway and, on nationalisation, became part of BR (Western Region). The line's importance as a through route to London diminished from 1910 when the joint Great Western / Great Central cut off line via Bicester North and High Wycombe opened, greatly reducing journey times between Wolverhampton and Paddington. Despite this, through services to London Paddington still operated via Dudley up to the closure of the line.

The passenger service was withdrawn on 28 July 1962 and the intermediate stations at Brettell Lane, Brierley Hill, Round Oak and Blowers Green closed (the last station closing even though passenger trains still ran through it on the Bumble Hole line to Old Hill). Great Western Railway trains served the western half of Dudley station.

Brettell Lane Station (1962). The ex-GWR 2-6-2T locomotive is on a Wolverhampton Low Level to Stourbridge Junction service.



A 57xx 0-6-0PT leaves Kingswinford Sidings south of Brierley Hill with a goods train to Stourbridge Junction in 1963



The line from Dudley to Walsall, and thence to Lichfield, was opened by the South Staffordshire Railway on 1 May 1850. The line soon became part of the London and North Western Railway (LNWR), which was absorbed into the LMS in 1923 and became BR (London Midland Region) upon nationalisation. Between Dudley and Walsall, there were intermediate stations at Dudley Port (Low Level), Great Bridge North and Wednesbury Town.

Between Dudley and Dudley Port, just east of Coneygree Road in Tipton, a line branched to the left and ran up an embankment into Dudley Port High Level platforms. The embankment remained until the late 1970's when it was removed and the area developed as houses.

The Great Western Railway also had access rights over the South Staffordshire line from Dudley to Great Bridge where the GWR's own line diverged to the right and ran via Great Bridge South to the Wolverhampton Low Level to Birmingham Snow Hill main line at Swan Village. Regular railcar services ran over the route from Dudley to Snow Hill and a small number of rush hour services ran to or from Stourbridge Junction or Brettell Lane. However, GWR services were not allowed to stop at Dudley Port station.

Round Oak station just before closure in 1962



(G E S Parker)

Parkhead Viaduct in 1956



(C B Roberts)

The line closed on 6 July 1964, and this date also saw the closure of Dudley station as the Bumble Hole line had succumbed to the Beeching axe three weeks previously on 15 June. The station was demolished and, on 6 November 1967, a Freightliner terminal was opened on the land previously occupied by the ex-GWR platforms. This remained until 26 September 1989, when it was closed and the site cleared.

The line from Stourbridge Junction to Walsall remained open to freight traffic until the section north of Round Oak was closed on 19 March 1993.

Historical timetables for services from 1922 to 1961 between Stourbridge Junction and Wolverhampton Low Level can be found on the Stourbridge Line User Group website at <http://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/timetables.html> while the 1961 timetable for services between Dudley and Walsall can be found at <http://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/Timetable%20-%201961.pdf>.

Dudley Port Low Level (1950) with the high level platforms above. The GWR railcar is passing through without stopping.



(Stations UK)

Blowers Green station shortly before it closed in 1962, despite Bumble Hole trains still passing through until 1964.



(E J Dew)

HEAVY RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE REINSTATEMENT ?

An important point is that Centro has never supported plans to reopen the route from Stourbridge Junction to Walsall as a heavy rail passenger service. There are two main reasons for this.

(1) Brierley Hill (Map A on page 5).

The problem at Brierley Hill is that the line skirts the town centre instead of serving it conveniently. All station sites would involve an uphill walk to reach the Town Centre. There are five possible station sites in the Brierley Hill area :-

Brettell Lane (1,600 yards from Brierley Hill Library) has bus service 246 to Brierley Hill every 8 minutes but no service to Merry Hill. Park and ride facilities would not be available.

Moor Street (625 yards) has bus service 226 every 15 minutes to Brierley Hill and Merry Hill. There is potentially space to provide a park and ride facility.

Station Road (the site of Brierley Hill station) (740 yards) has hourly bus service 250/251 to Brierley Hill and Merry Hill. Park and ride facilities would not be available.

Bank Street (640 yards) has a frequent (every 7½ minutes) bus service on routes 222 and 255 to Brierley Hill and Merry Hill. Park and ride facilities would not be available.

Round Oak (840 yards) has bus service 246 every 8 minutes to Brierley Hill and service 297 every 30 minutes to Brierley Hill and Merry Hill. There is potentially space to provide a park and ride facility - for instance, the site of Harts Hill Bus Garage is 200-250 yards from the railway line.

Brierley Hill Station (1958). The ex-GWR 2-6-2T locomotive is on a Wolverhampton Low Level to Stourbridge Junction service.

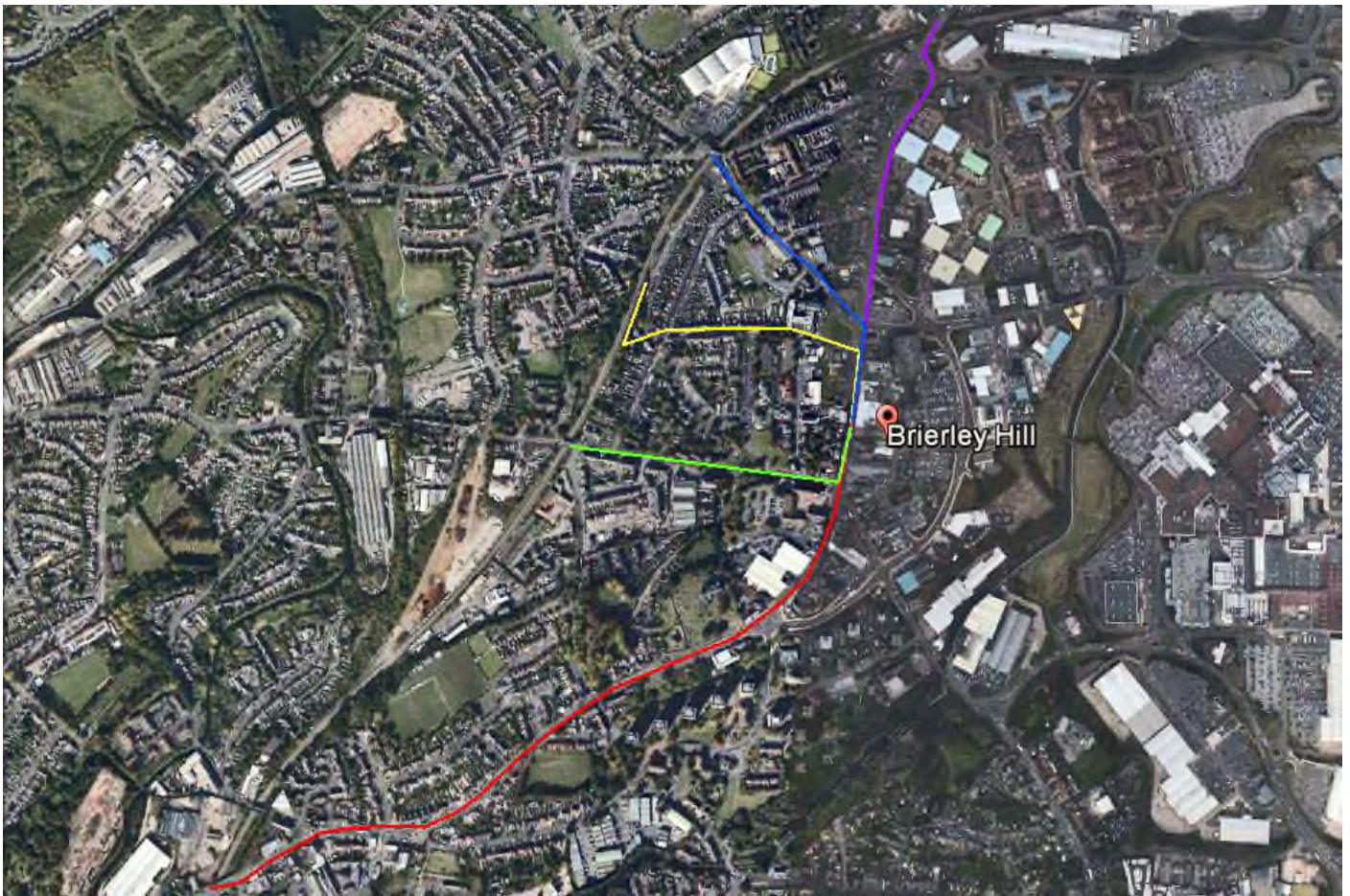


Dudley Station (1955). The GWR platforms are on the left and the LNWR platforms on the right.



(2) Dudley (Map B on page 5).

Once again, the argument from Centro is that the station site is poorly situated in relation to the town centre. The distance from the station site to the fountain in the Market Place is 820 yards, and most of that walk is uphill.



Map A - Brierley Hill



Map B - Dudley



Plans to create a Midland Metro network were developed in the 1980's and resulted in the Midland Metro Acts of 1992 and 1993 which authorised the building of Metro lines 1 and 2. Line 1, from Birmingham Snow Hill to Wolverhampton St Georges was opened in July 1999 and, at that time, the opening of line 2 from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill was estimated to take place in 2006. It was proposed that there would be three through services as follows :-

Birmingham Snow Hill to Wolverhampton St Georges
Birmingham Snow Hill to Brierley Hill
Brierley Hill to Wolverhampton St Georges

Each service was proposed to run every 12 minutes to provide a tram every 6 minutes on all sections of track.

16 intermediate stations were proposed - at Golds Hill, Great Bridge, Horseley Road, Dudley Port, Sedgley Road, Birmingham New Road, Tipton Road, Station Drive, Dudley Town Centre, Flood Street, New Road, Cinder Bank, Pedmore Road, Canal Street, Waterfront and Merry Hill.

The line would follow the heavy rail formation from Wednesbury to Tipton Road where it would then run on-street via Castle Hill, Dudley Bus Station, King Street and Flood Street to run alongside the Dudley bypass (room for which was passively provided when the bypass was built) and regain the heavy rail formation at Cinder Bank. It would follow the heavy rail line to Harts Hill where it would branch off and cross Level Street on the level to reach a stop at Merry Hill alongside the canal above Marks and Spencer. It would then cross the canal and Venture Way on the level to reach a terminus near the site of the old Brierley Hill baths.

The plan was for heavy goods trains to use one of the two lines - the northbound line from Stourbridge to Dudley and the southbound line between Dudley and Wednesbury. Trams would have used the other line although an extra tram track was proposed wherever enough space could be found to provide one, thus making as much of the tram line as possible double track.

A consultation document regarding the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill proposals, dated 15/10/2014, can be found at <https://www.centro.org.uk/media/355523/WBH-Consultation-report.pdf>



A view from Tipton road looking towards Dudley. Dudley station, the proposed site of the Dudley Ultra Light Rail project is to the left. The proposed Metro route would leave the rail line here and head past the Dudley Hippodrome site towards Dudley Bus Station.



Parkhead Viaduct is one of the major structures on the line but is in very poor repair. The cost of repair is considered to be between £10 million and £20 million. If light rail is chosen, it is possible that a diversion via Russells Hall Hospital might be considered an option.

TRAM-TRAIN PROPOSALS

By the mid noughties, it had become apparent that funding was not forthcoming to build the line from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill so Centro decided to look for cheaper options. One way to achieve this would be if the line from Stourbridge to Bescot was reopened as a through freight route, thus allowing Centro to piggyback a passenger service onto the alignment.



There were a number of reasons to hope that Network Rail would reopen the line.

(1) Funding to provide an extended passing loop at Alvechurch on the Redditch branch had been agreed with a completion date of 2014. In addition, funding for a new 4-platform station at Bromsgrove with electrification extended from Barnt Green to Bromsgrove had been agreed for completion in 2016. This would increase the number of Cross City trains between Longbridge and Barnt Green from 2 per hour to 6 per hour, between Barnt Green and Bromsgrove from none to 3 trains per hour and reduce freight capacity on the Lickey incline.

(2) Centro proposed a new local service from King's Norton to Moor Street via King's Heath, Moseley and a new south to west loop at Camp Hill, plus a local service from Tamworth to Moor Street using a new north to west loop at Camp Hill with this service continuing to Worcester. This would reduce freight capacity on the Camp Hill line.

Hill with this service continuing to Worcester. This would reduce freight capacity on the Camp Hill line.

(3) It was expected that freight traffic from Avonmouth would increase. The 2011 West Midlands and Chiltern Route Utilisation Strategy document contained the following paragraph "*Further freight traffic growth from the South West is likely to be generated by the planned Deep Sea Container Terminal at Bristol, which will have a total throughput of about 1.5 million equivalent units or approximately one million containers per annum. It is estimated that 40 per cent of this traffic would be transported to and from the port by rail, possibly triggering the need for further capability enhancements on routes via the Lickey Incline and Stourbridge. DfT consent was given for construction of the Deep Sea Container Terminal on 25 March 2010 and construction is expected to take three to four years*". However, the Bristol Post reported in November 2013 that "a new deep-water container dock for Bristol is on hold for at least five years".

In addition, on 18 March 2008, the Department for Transport released details of a proposal to trial tram-trains on the Penistone Line, the first use of such vehicles in the UK. The trial was to start in 2010 and last for two years. Northern Rail, the operator of passenger services on the line, asked potential manufacturers to tender for the design and construction of five new vehicles, which Northern Rail would subsequently lease. In addition, Network Rail planned to spend £15m modifying track and stations to make them compatible with the new vehicles.

Centro therefore changed tack and decided to use tram-train technology on the Stourbridge to Walsall corridor with tram-trains sharing the heavy rail tracks with freight trains. The northern part of the line would be extended from Wednesbury to Walsall with eight intermediate stops, while the southern part would be extended from Brierley Hill via Cottage Street, Five Ways and Moor Street to rejoin the heavy rail line to Stourbridge Junction. Six intermediate stops were planned although their actual location was not revealed (see network map on page 6). The concern is that, with major traffic congestion in Brierley Hill, the route from Cottage Street to the railway line at Moor Street will do nothing to improve matters, and the tram-train would find itself embroiled in the traffic.

However, it was announced on 15 September 2009 that a city tram-train trial between Parkgate and Sheffield via Rotherham would replace the Penistone Line scheme. The project has since been put back many times and the latest announcement, made on 19 June 2015, was that the trial was due to start in early 2017. Given that the tram-trains are being built, it is hoped that this target is realistic.

An artist's impression of one of the seven Class 399 Tram-Trains being built for the Sheffield to Rotherham trial. Inset is a photograph of one of the tram-trains under construction.



THE PARRY AND ECORAIL PROPOSALS

Parry People Movers Ltd are best known for successfully developing and introducing into service the lightweight Class 139 vehicles that operate the Stourbridge Town branch.



PPM50

A prototype PPM50 unit was first used on the branch on Sundays during 2006, with Central Trains Class 153 units providing the service on Mondays to Saturdays.



PPM60

When the London Midland franchise was awarded in 2007, one of the conditions was the introduction of PPM units on the branch. Two PPM60 units were acquired and entered service in 2009, designated Class 139. After initial teething problems, the units have proved very reliable and have done much to enhance London Midland's performance and reliability statistics.

In the March 2011 edition of Parry News, the Company proposed a passenger service from Stourbridge Junction to the Waterfront along the extant heavy goods line. Intermediate stations were proposed at Stambermill, Corbett Hospital, Brettell Lane, Brierley Hill South and Brierley Hill North. A larger vehicle (PPM120) would be used for the service.



PPM120



An artist's impression of the terminus at The Waterfront being built and in service

The proposal was picked up by the Stourbridge News on 11 January 2012, although details about station locations were more vague. A total cost of £5m was quoted with the stations being prefabricated and constructed on site. It was stated that £1m had been attracted from the Government's Regional Growth Fund.

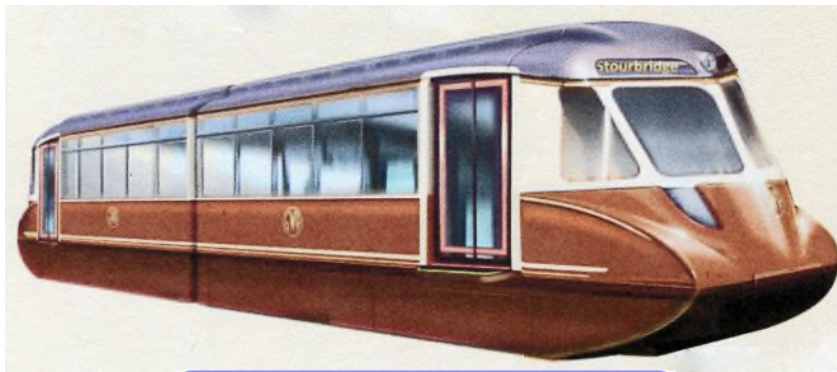
It was never explained how the scheme could be delivered for just £5m given that three PPM120 units would be needed to operate the service and access to the proposed stations would need to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act.

Whatever happened behind the scenes after that is unknown but there was nothing in the public domain until 5 March 2015 when the Black Country Bugle led with the following headline

NEW PLANS TO BRING BACK HISTORIC TRAINS TO DUDLEY

The article stated that Ecorail Limited, a company with the same registered address as Parry People Movers proposed to open a 1 mile section of the line between Dudley and Blowers Green with demonstration trains running within a year. This prompted some cynical comments which described the proposal as the Dudley Underground Railway or Dudley Scenic Railway as over half of the route is in Dudley Tunnel (949 yards long) and the rest in a deep cutting.

The proposal involved using the PPM120 but with a heritage body to make it resemble a 1930's GWR railcar fondly referred to as a "flying banana".



An artist's impression of a PPM120
Flying Banana body



Genuine GWR Flying Banana W8W at
Dudley station in 1952

However, the waters were muddied somewhat when Ecorail contacted Stourbridge Line User Group in July 2015 stating its intention to reinstate regular passenger services between Stourbridge Junction and Brierley Hill, initially via a Sunday only service to test the public reaction.

Ecorail also revealed that it was investigating the whole line right through to Lichfield City Station to see what parts might be opened in isolation in the belief that public pressure will force the joining up of individual parts.

Ecorail also had an idea to reinstate the small section of line from the former Dudley station up to the rear of the Black Country Museum and a connection right into the town centre to be run using earlier models of the Parry People Movers.

Since then, nothing has been forthcoming and there has been no mention of these proposals in the local press, on the Internet or on local television or radio.

We await developments!

DUDLEY ULTRA LIGHT RAIL PROPOSALS



On 1 December 2014, the Express & Star exclusively revealed that the Warwick Manufacturing Group proposed to open a multi-storey National Centre for Development of Very Light Rail Technology at Dudley station. The proposal was to lay two tracks between Dudley and Dudley Port Low Level with one track (presumably the northerly track) being used as a development track and the other as a passenger track. The claim in the Express & Star was that the train would transport thousands of visitors from the main line at Dudley Port to the Black Country Museum, Dudley Canal Trust and Dudley Zoo.

In January 2015, Black Country LEP allocated £4.5m of funding to the project. A £13.9m bid was made to the European Regional Development Fund in May.



The fact that must be recognised is that, if the total funding of £27.8m is forthcoming, the scheme will probably go ahead as it has the support of the politicians on the ITA and the Black Country LEP. The consultation document for the Black Country Rapid Transit Review workshop showed it as a project that was currently being built or a committed project - along with Metro New Street extension, Metro Wolverhampton Interchange extension, Metro Eastside extension, Metro Edgbaston Five Ways extension and the Hagley Road SPRINT Bus Rapid Transit to Quinton.

Unfortunately, no detailed plans of the proposals have been published. The original plan for Metro Line 2 specified that one of the two tracks would be reserved for heavy

freight and the other for Metro services with an additional track added where there was room to do so to allow for a double track Metro service wherever possible. While, this is not necessary in the short term, a full extension of a light rail system to Stourbridge and Walsall needs as much double track as possible between Dudley and Dudley Port. The Innovation Centre is a permanent building, so any idea that the test track may be transferred for use by passenger services is probably a fanciful one.

The original Metro and Tram-Train proposals also included intermediate stops at Birmingham New Road and Sedgley Road. The guess is that these will not be included in the ULR proposals which will mean a non-stop service between Dudley and Dudley Port. In this case, the journey time would probably be three minutes, which would theoretically allow a service similar to that on the Stourbridge Town branch. The difference is that Dudley Port only sees two trains per hour in each direction - towards Wolverhampton at 23 and 54 minutes past each hour and towards Birmingham at 00 and 30 minutes past each hour. Given that most residents of the area are probably as close to a 74 bus stop as the low level station, the majority of passengers will be transferring to/from trains on the Birmingham to Wolverhampton line. Therefore, the service needs to be tailored to connect with main line services and, given that transferring from the high level to the low level requires going down stairs to the booking hall then left along the car park to the footbridge then down to the low level platform, a connection time of about 5 minutes is probably needed. Therefore, it is likely that a 30 minute service will suffice as follows :-

Dudley	15	..	..	45	..	..	Birmingham New St	08	..	..	39	..	..
Dudley Port LL	18	..	..	48	..	..	Dudley Port HL	23	..	..	54	..	..
Dudley Port HL	..	23	..	..	54	..	Wolverhampton	..	20	..	..	50	..
Wolverhampton	..	34	..	..	05	..	Dudley Port HL	..	30	..	..	00	..
Dudley Port HL	..	..	30	..	..	00	Dudley Port LL	..	..	35	..	..	05
Birmingham New St	..	..	45	..	..	15	Dudley	..	..	38	..	..	08

The second problem is that the station at Dudley will be situated on the site of the old station - that is, about half a mile walk uphill to the town centre. Therefore, if it is catering only to visitors to the attractions, the train will be empty for much of the year. The answer is to extend the line to Dudley Bus Station, but the question is how. The artist's impressions suggest that the Innovation Centre will be built on the site of the old GWR station, which would make it impossible for the line to be extended south of the Innovation Centre onto Castle Hill. Therefore, if the southbound line is used for passenger trains, any extension will have to cross the test track north of the Innovation Centre, if there was enough room to do so.

However, the building's location might preclude any extension towards Dudley Town Centre, and thus scupper plans to reintroduce rail services between Stourbridge Junction and Walsall. If this proves to be the case, then pressure needs to be put on Dudley Council, not to abandon the project, but to relocate it somewhere else in the borough.





Three alternative options for the siting of the Innovation Centre have been put forward.

1. Transfer the test track to operate along the formation of the OWW line towards Wolverhampton as far as the Birmingham New Road. Unfortunately the trackbed has been breached by a new road and there would still be the problem of the track from Stourbridge to Walsall having to cross the test track, unless the Innovation Centre was moved further north.
2. Move the Innovation Centre to the LNWR side of the station site and use the trackbed south from Dudley station for about 2 km to Cinder Bank, thus using the section of heavy rail through the tunnel that would not be used by a Metro or Tram-Train service.
3. Relocate the Innovation Centre to Moor Street, Brierley Hill (still within Dudley MBC) and use the mothballed Pensnett branch for the Ultra Light Rail development. If the Metro or Tram-Train service was extended from Brierley Hill to Stourbridge, an interchange at Moor Street would allow onward journeys on the Ultra Light Rail line to Pensnett Trading Estate.



In August 2015, the ITA published the public consultation draft of “Movement for Growth : The West Midlands Strategic Transport Plan”. This document proposes that Brierley Hill to Wednesbury be opened by 2026 as a rapid transit route (probably Metro) as part of the HS2 Connectivity Package, with extensions to Stourbridge Junction and Walsall after 2026. This brings into question the role of the Dudley Ultra Light Rail scheme which takes up about 1½ miles of the proposed route. Answers to questions raised by SLUG have suggested that there could be changes to the Dudley Ultra Light Rail proposals. Network Rail have also indicated that they wish to ensure that heavy rail operation is safeguarded for reinstatement sometime in the future - although that may mean post-2043. The fact is that a future heavy rail passenger service would only need stations at Round Oak, Dudley, Dudley Port and Wednesbury if it was to act as a true inter-regional line linking the South West and South Wales with the East Midlands and North East via Worcester, Dudley, Walsall and Lichfield. For that reason, there is no need to insist on high level platforms at light rail stops as split level platforms could be built at these four locations.

In the shorter term, the best chance of a rail based system across the Black Country is light rail (Metro or Tram-Train). The starting point must be that the line runs from Stourbridge Junction to Walsall before 2026 and from not Brierley Hill to Wednesbury, if only to provide an outlet at Stourbridge Junction for onward journeys to HS2 Curzon Street and to Worcestershire and the South West. It was pointed out at the Rapid Transit Strategy Meeting that the two Worcester stations have a joint footfall of 3m passengers, Kidderminster 1.5m and Droitwich and Hagley about 0.5m - a compelling reason for providing connections at Stourbridge Junction.

Having accepted that, the question is the route to be taken and there are a number of options.

(1) A single line following the route as already proposed by Centro, i.e. heavy rail to Moor Street, via Brierley Hill and Merry Hill to Harts Hill, heavy rail to Cinder Bank, via Dudley Town Centre to Dudley station, then heavy rail to Walsall. The drawback to this route is the traffic situation in Brierley Hill which would need major improvements to make the tram route work efficiently.

(2) Remain on the heavy rail line between Stourbridge and Cinder Bank with stops at Brockmoor and Bank Street. Provide an interchange station at Round Oak/Harts Hill with a branch line running to Merry Hill and possibly Brierley Hill (Cottage Street).

(3) Campaign for Rail has suggested that a light rail line should serve Russells Hall Hospital. This would bypass Parkhead viaduct and avoid the high cost of repairs.

The Stourbridge Line User Group needs to be proactive in ensuring that any rail based solution along the Stourbridge to Walsall line is the best possible for passengers in the area. We will be working to achieve this aim.