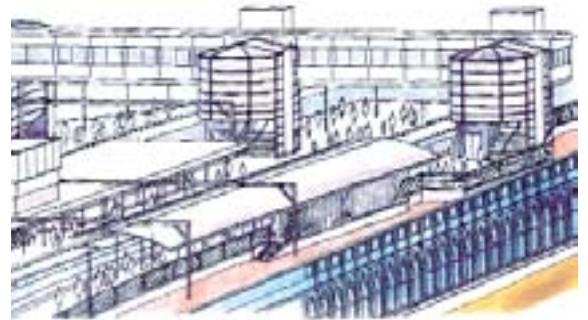


Midlands makeover

NEWS ANALYSIS 1: CASH FOR CONGESTION

It was once a depressing scene of inactivity and under investment, but now it's a different picture. Investment in the Midlands rail network is increasing slowly, and at the same time helping to solve some of the region's most worrying problems



REGULAR RAIL PROFESSIONAL READERS WILL BE WELL aware that, in the past, the Midlands region has suffered when it comes to cash for much-needed improvements in the local rail network. Congestion at New Street Station of trains, and more recently of passengers, is a topic that has been covered on more than one occasion. Capacity on the network itself is another major issue where transport officials have felt that the region is being overlooked. However, in recent months, at last, some money is being spent – and it's very welcome!

Over the last couple of months, engineers have been working hard to improve a 20-mile stretch of railway between Leamington Spa and Banbury. The section has been a major bottleneck because signalling headways were not sufficient

Extra investment at Birmingham's New Street station has been warmly welcomed by passengers.

for the level of traffic using the line. Now a re-signalling project costing £30m will deliver a variety of benefits to all train operators on the line, including Virgin Trains, Chiltern Railways and freight services. There will be greater capacity, allowing long-term growth. New signalling and track work should allow more trains to run on the line and improve timetable performance. The route can also provide a convenient alternative for West Coast Main Line passengers. That line is currently undergoing a major upgrading programme. More on that later! The Cherwell Valley resignalling has been jointly funded by the Strategic Rail

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Authority and Network Rail, and is being delivered by an alliance that includes Network Rail, Birse Rail and Westinghouse Rail Signals Ltd.

On the other side of the West Midlands conurbation, they're spending a further £11m on another capacity improvement, this time at Wolverhampton station. The station, last modernised in the 1960s, is getting a new platform and a new look.

Work started before Christmas and is due for completion in the autumn. The new platform will cater for trains up to 10 cars in length and will be built opposite the existing platform 3, dramatically enhancing the capacity of the busy station. There'll also be other improvements that will please regular passengers, including new lifts, a new footbridge, a new waiting room and new toilets.

In May, the new glass and steel footbridge spans will be lifted into place. The new footbridge will not only provide access to all the current platforms and the new platform, but it will also allow disabled access to all the platforms for the first time. The scheme has come as a direct result of SRA's West Midlands Strategy and is being implemented through the West Coast Main Line upgrade works. Robbie Burns, Midland Regional Director said: 'We are delighted to announce the start of works to improve Wolverhampton station. In addition to the cosmetic changes, rail travellers will also benefit from increased platform capacity and the operational flexibility that the new platform will bring.'

the new concourse area will provide a modern and attractive facility and additional space to help ease congestion during peak hours. She says: 'Stations colour the experience of every traveler, forming a vital part of every journey, and expanding the concourse at New Street is an important part of our programme to rebuild the railway.' Funding for the work is through the construction of additional retail space within the new concourse and the project is scheduled for completion soon.

While the improvements at New Street are welcome, they fall a long way short of what's actually needed at the station to enable growth of both passenger numbers and trains in the future. Plans for new underground platforms and an ultra modern airport-style concourse appear to have been consigned to the pending tray once again in favour of small-scale improvements that will only solve the short-term problems at the station. The lack of investment at New Street is being seen by some as very strange, particularly when you consider how much is now being invested on the West Coast Main Line, a spur of which passes through the station.

And on the subject of the West Coast work, after what seemed years of inactivity, modernisation plans have moved up a gear. Network Rail claims that it's spending £5million per day on the upgrading scheme, which is now valued at around nine billion pounds. Major engineering works over the next few months will mean widespread disruption. One recent disrupted journey from Nuneaton required passengers



Further station improvements are taking place down the line at New Street. Although nowhere near the kind of investment that's really needed to solve the problems at the station, it has been welcomed by both passengers and those who have expressed concern in the past about the poor state of what is one of the country's busiest stations. Recently, the new Bull Ring shopping centre has been opened and it's already led to a big increase in the number of people passing through the station. In an effort to provide a short-term solution to the problems of a lack of space for passenger circulation, the station is getting an extension to its existing concourse. Work is already underway on the scheme, which is costing almost £2m. According to the Carol Stichman, project development manager for Network Rail Midland Regions,

New Street station has had an extension to its concourse following a sharp rise in passengers numbers.

to take a bus to Coventry, a train to Northampton, another bus to Hemel Hempstead and then a local train into Euston. It meant a journey that normally takes one hour and 20 minutes became a three-hour nightmare. Ultimately, as Network Rail officials keep telling us, it'll mean faster and more frequent services with drastic reductions in journey times. The first major benefits should be delivered by September, when trains will go faster and be able to tilt around the bends in the track. Let's hope the scheme, which is now years behind schedule and billions of pounds over budget, will have been worth waiting for!