

MIXED RECEPTION

FOR WEST MIDLANDS RAIL BLUEPRINT

Opinion is divided in the West Midlands about the Strategic Rail Authority's latest plans for rail services in the region. Do they, as some believe, herald an era of draconian cuts? Or are they a sensible approach to making the best use of existing rail capacity? Peter Plisner reports

In the past it was the Highways Agency that was 'sweating the assets' in the West Midlands. Now the Strategic Rail Authority has adopted the well-used concept in an effort to improve the reliability of local services and trains that pass through the region. However, while a lot of what the authority is suggesting appears to make perfect sense, some of the measures contained in its Rail Utilisation Strategy (RUS) have been greeted with dismay.

As with previous strategy documents, the name of the game is to provide short to medium term solutions to capacity problems. Since 1995 passenger numbers on the West Midlands network have risen by 44 per cent and growth at New Street Station has been even higher. When he set up the SRA, the late Sir Alastair Morton said one of his top priorities was to 'sort out' the West Midlands rail network. A major capacity study identified what needed to be done and a strategy was devised to address the problems.

Sadly, funds weren't forthcoming. While money continues to be pumped into upgrading the West Coast Main Line, the local rail network in the West Midlands gets very little money for major projects. Hopes that the SRA might be prepared to earmark more funds to the region have been dashed with the publication of the RUS. Instead the Authority is suggesting that longer trains and platform lengthening will sort the problems out in the short-term.

Phil Davis, chairman of the Rail Passengers

Committee for the Midlands, broadly welcomes the scope of the strategy but he's concerned about the lack of investment. He says: 'The proposals underline the lack of a basic strategy to increase the overall capacity of the railway to handle expanding passenger numbers.' He believes that 'the railway (chiefly Network Rail) must get its costs under control so government and taxpayers have confidence in investing the money needed to meet the still rising demand for rail travel'.

Predictions of another Beeching era have been doing the rounds for sometime. However some now feel that it's already started in the Midlands. The strategy has effectively recommended the closure of five railway stations and the removal of three local rail services. All are lightly used and the SRA poses the question: is continued support for these stations and services providing value for money?

Two of the rail services affected, between Stoke and Stafford and Stafford to Nuneaton, are already being replaced by buses following a decision last year to suspend them because of driver training and engineering blockades. Elsewhere there are plans to withdraw a service between Walsall and Wolverhampton, which was introduced in 1998 as part of a franchise commitment by National Express. Not surprisingly the stations being closed are along the lines where services are being withdrawn.

Although some local MPs seem determined to make the planned closures an election issue,



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if you canvass the views of local residents there seems to be little appetite for a fight. However, that's certainly not the case with another of the SRA's 'big ideas' set out in its strategy. In fact it's another idea borrowed from the past and it's really got people's backs up. The proposal that peak fares should rise annually by three per cent above RPI for five years, starting in 2006, looks like a blatant attempt to manage demand. Indeed it admits that such a move would 'contain demand at present levels.'

The suggestion appears to have put the SRA on a collision course with the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority. Its chairman, Gary Clarke, says: 'Reducing rail congestion by pricing passengers off the train and back into their cars would be a retrograde step.'

This isn't the only proposal that has upset the PTA. In an effort to get more people out of their

cars and onto trains, the PTA and its executive arm Centro has been spending millions of pounds on expanding its network of free park and ride car parks across the region. Latest figures suggest that the strategy is working with occupancy rates rising fast. But the SRA now wants charges for peak-time use to be introduced. It says: 'The introduction of timed car park charges based on available train capacity might encourage early peak journeys.'

It's another area where the knives are out for the SRA. Clark says 'Simply taking traffic away from one mode of transport and transferring it to another will not provide the answer the West Midlands needs.'

The SRA defends pricing measures as a way of changing people's travel habits. It wants to persuade them to make more journeys off-peak when there is more available capacity. However,

in its strategy document it admits that pricing policy can be used to 'persuade passengers to move their journeys to the shoulders of the peak or not to travel by rail.' Phil Davis from the RPC doesn't agree: 'We are concerned about the use of major price increases to manage demand. What passengers want is more capacity on the railway so that commuters and long-distance travellers can find the space they need to travel.'

Elsewhere, there is bad news for Chiltern Railways. The company provided part of the funding for an £11m restoration of the old Moor Street Station, which was to have become another showpiece terminus station like London's Marylebone. However, its terminating

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platforms still need to be connected to the mainline. Now the SRA says that shouldn't happen because it would restrict capacity for trains using the nearby lines into Snow Hill station. Chiltern doesn't agree and insists that its plans to re-open the platforms are still very much alive.

But the strategy isn't all bad news. There is continued support for measures to improve Birmingham's New Street station and a commitment to look again at direct services between Shrewsbury and London. Several other schemes also get the thumbs up. However, many of the commitments are subject to funding being available and, as a result, the feeling is that they're effectively being added to a wish list, rather than forming part of a solid plan. In some respects this part of the document is very reminiscent of Railtrack's old Network Management Statement.

The West Midlands Rail Utilisation Strategy is a massive document, which few people will have had the stamina or inclination to read from cover to cover. However, the depth of information contained in it does make interesting reading and it's not surprising that some of the more controversial conclusions have been reached. But the problem is that despite putting forward a strong argument, many in the Midlands will still see it as a strategy designed to improve the reliability of long-distance rail services at the expense of local commuter routes. And for many, that is simply unacceptable.

Peter Plisner is the BBC's Midlands Transport Correspondent.