

Chop and change

By Keith Flinders

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There's a quiet revolution taking place – the demise of the through train. With each timetable change, we see another route chopped into two separate journeys. Amazingly, the spin is that this is something we should welcome.

The motivation is political pressure to improve punctuality figures. Journey patterns and market potential seldom figure.

Terminal time, crowded platforms, fewer services

Inter-regional services across the west and east Midlands have already been badly hit. Shrewsbury to Nottingham was first chopped at Birmingham New Street and then also at Leicester.

So a journey from Telford to Loughborough used to be an attractive proposition by through train. Now, not only does it require two changes, it is slower.

When a train ends its journey, it needs "terminal time" for the driver to change ends, all passengers to alight, new passengers to get on and the route to be set by the signaller before it returns to whence it came. A through train just needs "station time" for some of its passengers to alight and others to board.

Terminal time means more platform occupancy, increases the overcrowding at stations like New Street, needs more trains and more train crew – or fewer services. In the case of Shrewsbury to Not-



START HERE: Arriva Train Wales fitted ticket gates at Shrewsbury station in January. For a traveller going to Nottingham that is only the first obstacle on the journey. It is now necessary to make two changes. Ticket gates are also being fitted at 12 other ATW stations, including Hereford, Chester and Cardiff Central stations

Picture: ATW

tingham, this meant replacing the service beyond Leicester, with the Ivanhoe line local trains extended to Nottingham.

The Strategic Rail Authority instigated the Birmingham chop to "deliver better performance". The idea of chopping up through services is so a cow on the line in Shropshire won't delay departure from Birmingham now that it's a separate train. However, just as it was in the days of the advertised through service, Central Trains continued to use the same unit for Shrews-

bury to Birmingham and the Birmingham to Leicester service three minutes later – through passengers were instructed to get off, and then get back on again!

Now Crewe-Skegness has had the same treatment, a double chop at Derby and Nottingham. A day at bracing Skeggie from Stoke-on-Trent with two changes of train and up to 77 minutes added to the journey. The middle section of the route sees these trains withdrawn to provide stock and crew for terminal time, even though they are busiest between Derby and Nottingham.

Increased journey opportunities and increased revenue

Before privatisation, Regional Railways had a very successful policy of linking services together to create better stock utilisation and more journey opportunities and therefore more revenue.

It gave us regular clockface services like the TransPennine network, and also occasional through trains for those who do not mind what time of day they travel, as long as they don't have to keep struggling with luggage. Manchester-Penzance provided a through service every day from Shrewsbury and Hereford to Bristol, Devon and Cornwall.

In the compartmentalised world of rail franchises, it is messy to have a few trains escaping from their home area. We are told new franchises are to have "closer regional identities", which is another way of saying expect more chop and change.

They are to be "better aligned to Network Rail's routes" to deliver "better services for passengers". The tidy minds at the Department for Transport rail group do not like it that some people actually want to travel beyond their home

region. The remapping of the Central Trains franchise holds out the possibility of Liverpool-Norwich going to TransPennine Express as far as Nottingham, with Nottingham-Norwich part of the new East Midlands franchise. Birmingham has already lost its few through trains to Norwich, and Liverpool-Stansted was chopped at Birmingham. Now Birmingham-Stansted becomes part of the new Cross-Country franchise.

CrossCountry is like an octopus with tentacles. Running services to the extremes of the network where the franchisee has no staff or resources is awkward and costly. There is often empty running to the nearest depot. For example, in the early hours of the morning, an empty train runs all the way from Nottingham to Liverpool to start the Norwich service.

Cutting back early and late services, and not running to the extremes is attractive to operators. Aberdeen has just one long-distance cross-country service a day, to and from Birmingham. It used to be from Plymouth, then Bournemouth until December 2005. Back in 1994, it was from Penzance!

Penalties for poor punctuality provide disincentives for long runs. It is not unusual for through services to be cancelled because they run late. A Scotland-Bournemouth service, even as little as 20 minutes late, may be terminated at Birmingham, with the spare set sent to Bournemouth on time. It is fine for Birmingham-Oxford passengers, but they already have a Manchester-Reading service to get them there only 27 minutes later. Passengers from north of Birmingham to the south coast may experience two changes and, of course, loss of their reserved seats.

New franchises, new opportunities

The proposals for the new West Midlands franchise show no aspiration to link local services across Birmingham. Not only is having to change at New Street unattractive (enough to stop some people using rail), it contributes to overcrowding. There is increasing risk of barriers being closed on safety grounds, yet here is a policy that exacerbates the problem. Too many local services turn back at Birmingham.

More cross-city opportunities should be created. The market for Walsall to University is likely to be at least as strong as from Sutton Coldfield to University. Redditch to Birmingham International deserves through trains and so does Wolverhampton to Lichfield.

They are all possible, if the politicians and the planners want to provide what the travelling public want – through trains.

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