

West Midlands

By Peter Cousins

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Station for Kenilworth

The branch has welcomed the award of a contract to John Laing plc for the design and construction of a new station at Kenilworth to replace the one closed in 1964. Restoring a local passenger service to the Leamington-Coventry line is pencilled in as Phase II of the Centro-supported NUCKLE project which will start north of Coventry with an upgrade of the Coventry-Nuneaton line and a planned new station at the Ricoh Arena near Foleshill.

Tamworth line study

A Halcrow report on the feasibility of providing a new local service to reopened stations at Bromford Bridge, Castle Bromwich and Kingsbury on the former Midland line to Tamworth and Derby was received in November by Centro's transport strategy committee. The report considered a number of service options, including a new service on the Sutton Park line, on the basic assumption that all of these could run into reopened platforms at Moor Street station if the two proposed Camp Hill chords at Bordesley were constructed. The consultants said a two trains per hour Tamworth to Moor Street local service, via the Whitacre Loop and Coleshill, was feasible and would be good value for money, but only if the capital cost of the Camp Hill chords was funded by another project. Many passengers suggested the notional benefit of releasing capacity at New Street station by diverting both current Leicester-Birmingham services into Moor Street station would be sufficient to cover the £100 million cost of new chords. Even if this calculation stands up to detailed analysis, our colleagues in the East Midlands would oppose such a diversion because many passengers value the connectivity provided at New Street.

Chiltern Railways Evergreen III project

The branch has welcomed confirmation that Chiltern Railways Evergreen III project will see the reinstatement of two of the currently disused terminal platforms at Moor Street station. The planned reduction in journey times to London Marylebone which the company promises when the upgrade is complete will bring a significant benefit to passengers at Birmingham, Warwick Parkway and Leamington Spa.

Stourbridge update

The two class 139 Parry Movers have now been operating on the steeply graded Stourbridge Town branch for just over 10 months, with only a short break for unexpected wheel profiling. Although the branch is only 3/4 mile, the faster acceleration of these lightweight vehicles has allowed a more frequent, 10-minute-interval, service to operate compared to the 15-minute service that was provided by a conventional single-car class 153 diesel. It gives Stourbridge residents their best service ever.

Consultations

The branch has responded to the draft East Midlands rail utilisation strategy, stressing the need for a three trains per hour service between Birmingham and Leicester and pointing out the lack of a direct service from the West Midlands to the new station near East Midlands Airport. Our response to the draft Great Western RUS commented on the need for a comprehensive analysis of the main CrossCountry network, rather than the piecemeal approach of addressing segments of long-distance services in each RUS. Members of the branch have also been working on a detailed response to the West Midlands Integrated Transport Authority's new local transport plan which will set out its broad policies on all transport modes for the next five to ten years.



URBAN TRANSPORT
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White elephants

The concrete busway from Cambridge to St Ives has been described as a white elephant.

So the jokers had a field day when the man who has become the public face of the busway, Bob Menzies of Cambridge County Council, was reported to be a delegate at an Australian conference which had an elephant logo (see above).

The Hilton Hotel in Sydney might seem a long way from the Cambridgeshire fens but one of the topics up for discussion was said to include comparison of the performance characteristics of busways and railways.

Many Railfuture campaigners would have happily volunteered to explain the advantages of rail over guided buses – and could have saved people the trouble of journeying to the far side.

For one thing, rubber wheels have seven times more rolling resistance than steel wheels on steel rails and therefore a vehicle on rails will always use less energy than a vehicle on tarmac.

We could also point out the highly successful reopening of the Ebbw Vale line for £30 million which transformed travel opportunities and was far more successful than even its most enthusiastic backers had dreamed of hoping.

The guided busway will probably cost at least four times more and might eventually operate – but it will be successful only when compared to an ordinary bus from St Neots to Cambridge. Sadly common sense took a backseat when it was decided to rip up the Cambridge-St Ives railway and replace

it with a guided busway. But the same attitudes are still prevalent in Luton where there are plans for another railway to be wrecked to make way for a busway.

Perhaps the Government could use the sensible excuse that because of the economic climate, money is in too short supply to spend on a busway for Luton-Dunstable.

Even after the years of neglect the line has suffered, it would be far better as a rail-based system with options to be extended to Leighton Buzzard and Welwyn Garden City.

Railfuture has written to Lord Adonis asking him to cancel the Luton-Dunstable busway and consider the line for tram-trains.

In February it was reported that some English transport projects could be at risk because of budget cuts. Let's hope the Luton-Dunstable busway is at the top of the list.

One sceptical rail campaigner said: "The busway fans are looking for cities where local representatives are still too gullible, needy and poorly informed to make their mark. These have to be cities without a transport authority, hence all the misery in Exeter, Bristol and Cambridge."

"The Busco pitch to government was that busways are quicker and cheaper. 'Shorter lead times than rail investment' was undoubtedly in the PowerPoint presentation. Now we know that busways are slower and more expensive."

Another said: "It is pretty obvious to everyone that busways are not cheaper. Vehicle costs may initially be lower, for example, but buses



BETTER THAN ANY BUSWAY: A computer-generated image of what Edinburgh's trams will look like when they take to the streets in 2012

More info: www.edinburghtrams.com/

require replacement before rail, especially with half-life refurbishment of rolling stock."

But there are still "experts" claiming that busways are cheap. Bring on the white elephants!

Independent experts who attended the "public information" meetings held in Dunstable and Central Bedfordshire were unhappy with the quality of the information.

Maps and diagrams were said to be inaccurate, not reflecting the recent abandonment of the "Luton East" housing expansion, nor the diversion on to normal road to Kimpton Road and up to the airport.

Junctions of the busway with the road network were less than clear.

However, the Association of Train Operators' recent *Connecting Communities* report supported reopening the line as a railway.

And Andrew Selous, the Tory MP for South West Bedfordshire, has said that in the event of an incoming Conservative government, the

busway will be cancelled. Meanwhile in Edinburgh, a much more attractive transport option is taking shape – the tram.

Railfuture Scotland secretary Mike Harrison said: "It's quite exciting being in Edinburgh at the moment, as the whole thing is beginning to take shape. "There's still lots to do, but we seem to be past the long periods of stagnation that seemed to occur during the diversion of services."

Railfuture campaigners will not be surprised to learn that major transport spending decisions across England may be made using analysis from computer models that are not fit for purpose.

That was the conclusion of an audit of regional and sub-regional models released by the Department for Transport in February.

The review, led by respected modelling expert Densil Coombe, examined 30 models and concluded that 21 were either unsuitable or doubtful.

Guided busway is a transport disaster

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Hills Road to Trumpington Park and Ride? Will the details ever be published? Have the busway land acquisitions been correctly transferred or were they discounted against the infrastructure work, network shutdown and possession costs at Cambridge station?

A council transport scrutiny committee report dated 8 March 2008 stated: "There was a considerable degree of uncertainty earlier in the project about the price of Network Rail land."

"Potential impact of this risk reduced until agreement was reached at a price less than the budget. The risk was not only eliminated but turned to a benefit."

Did the Transport Secretary, the DfT, the Rail Regulator, Network Rail and the county council act in a transparent manner and in the best interests of the taxpayers and transport users?

Most of what the public was told has been dubious.

They were promised a "step change" in public transport to commence in 2006, and that it would be financially viable by 2007.

They were also told the Government would only fund a busway, and not a rail reopening.

The service was to run from Hinchbrook to Addenbrookes on "day one of operation"

No contribution would be required from Cambridgeshire taxpayers.

The cost of reopening the railway was much higher than the busway. Many of these claims came in glossy county council leaflets.

The complete busway may never become financially viable and cracked guideway beams may not remain serviceable for the 30-year life of the project. Other defects remain to be corrected.

Concrete piling would not have been necessary to keep the railway operational for both passengers and freight.

The railway could and should have been used to transport millions of tons of aggregate and other material for the construction of the A14 and Northstowe. The Government and Network Rail ignored

this potential and disposed of valuable assets to allow an inferior system to be built against overwhelming public opinion.

Agreements with the county council have seriously inconvenienced rail passengers and train operators and compromised the long overdue Cambridge station upgrade. This is indeed a public transport disaster!

■ Mike Mason is a South Cambridgeshire district councillor for Histon and Impington and represented the parish councils at the guided bus public inquiry in 2004. He was formerly a BR traction engineer working in the Eastern and London Midland regions and also served as a deputy traffic commissioner for the Cambridge area in the 1970s. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the authority on which he serves as a member.

Thames Valley

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Evergreen project

The East West Rail Link has taken a major step forward with the publication by Chiltern Railways of the draft Transport Works Act Order to improve the Oxford-Bicester line to provide a new service to Marylebone in 2013. The order specifies the work to be undertaken including the link between Chiltern and Oxford lines, with 100mph double track for most of the line, new stations at Bicester Town, Islip, Water Eaton Parkway (near Kidlington) and facilities at Oxford. A twice an hour service is proposed. Outline plans of station layouts are included. The Department for Transport has extended Chiltern's franchise as a result. Railfuture and user groups have welcomed the proposals. The proposals allow for further work for the EWRL when funding has been acquired.

Oxford station will gain an extra platform, south of the existing station. The Oxon and Bucks Rail Action Committee is looking forward to the range of new journey opportunities and increased capacity for the Thames Valley and Oxford area. There is speculation that Chiltern could extend its services from Aylesbury north to Milton Keynes and possibly even Rugby. Campaigners hope these two moves would represent major steps on the way to restoring the strategic East West Rail Link. It is to be hoped that the Department for Transport and the East West Rail consortium will undertake their works at the same time to avoid further disruption and extra costs. Ideally East-West and CrossCountry services could be specified as part of the service provision. It is hoped that any change of government will not affect the recognition that EWRL has gained so far. Estate agents in north Buckinghamshire are already predicting that the "proposed EWRL between Milton Keynes and Oxford will undoubtedly have a positive bearing on house prices".



OXFORD GREEN FAIR: Railfuture's Hugh Jaeger at the Railfuture Thames Valley stand in December

Main line speed-up

Upgrade work for higher speeds between Marylebone and Banbury started in March and should be finished by spring next year but faster journey times will start to show from the December timetable change this year.

Reading station upgrade

Network Rail's Tony Walker met Railfuture in January and outlined features of the £851 million plan to remodel Reading station. There will be four new northern platforms and a new passenger overbridge as well as a new northern entrance to the station. There will also be lengthening of the southern platforms, reopening of the southern tunnel and a new depot. There will have to be signalling enabling work at Didcot involving a line closure for 10 days over Christmas this year, followed by similar closures at Christmas 2012 and 2013.

Extra off-peak trains

Milton Keynes Rail User Group has welcomed the provision of extra off-peak Virgin Train stops but continues to press for a wider range of destinations to be offered. They hope to meet Transport Secretary Lord Adonis to present their proposals.