

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

12th JULY 2022

CABINET MEMBER RESPONSIBLE FOR ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT, HIGHWAYS AND WASTE: COUNCILLOR PHIL LARRATT

Report Title	West Coast Rail Partnership
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List of Appendices

None

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To seek the agreement of Cabinet for the service aspirations which will form the basis of continued discussion with the rail operator West Coast Partnership so as to influence improved rail services for West Northamptonshire on the West Coast Main Line following the opening of HS2.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 National Rail stations on the West Coast Main Line (WCML), principally Northampton, Long Buckby, Rugby and Milton Keynes, serve the WNC area.
- 2.2 Although the present service has some good features, planned services at such stations take second place in timetable development to fast, long distance trains. This leads to deficiencies in the service at those stations in terms of journey time, connectivity and regularity of the service.
- 2.3 Diversion of the long-distance city-to-city traffic to HS2 presents the opportunity to repurpose services on the WCML around the needs of intermediate stations such as those serving West Northamptonshire. However, initial assumptions published by the Department for Transport (DfT) are deficient as a whole and in respect of the needs of West Northamptonshire in particular. The DfT has delegated to the West Coast Partnership (the current operator of WCML long distance services) the task of further developing service patterns for eventual implementation.
- 2.4 WNC has sought to open discussions with the West Coast Partnership (WCP) as to our aspirations for improved conventional rail services in the post-HS2 service. These aspirations focus on enhancements to connectivity, service frequency and journey time for West Coast Main Line stations serving the council area.

3. Recommendations

That Cabinet agree the aspirations for future rail services as set out in paragraph 8 for the purposes of continuing discussions with West Coast Partnership (WCP).

4. Reason for Recommendations

- 4.1 There is an opportunity now to influence emerging proposals in favour of West Northamptonshire. Direct contact with West Coast Partnership has been agreed by the DfT. Without constructive contact, the proposals now under development may not fully reflect the specific needs of West Northamptonshire in the face of alternative and even conflicting requirements.

5. Report Background

- 5.1 National Rail's West Coast Main Line (WCML) forms the principal railway line serving West Northamptonshire. The principal station within the Council area on the WCML network is Northampton, with services also offered at Long Buckby. However, West Northamptonshire passengers also access the WCML at stations outside its boundaries, principally Milton Keynes Central and Rugby.

- 5.2 West Northamptonshire passengers also access rail services on the Midland Main Line at Market Harborough, Kettering and Wellingborough, and on the Chiltern Line at Leamington, Banbury, Kings Sutton and Bicester. However, these are outside the scope of the work currently being undertaken by West Coast Partnership.
- 5.3 The WCML is a four-track railway through West Northamptonshire, but between Roade and Rugby the tracks diverged to form two double-track routes. Faster long-distance passenger services normally use the more direct route which passes by Blisworth and Weedon, while only slower passenger services and freight traffic normally use the tracks which pass through Northampton and Long Buckby stations. However, in order to offer the best possible journey times for long distance travellers only a minority of long-distance services call at Milton Keynes or Rugby.
- 5.4 Northampton Station is vital to the economic prosperity of West Northamptonshire with over 3.2 million passengers using the station annually, prior to the pandemic. Train stations are integral to placemaking, offering accessibility that is a key factor in the regeneration of an area. Accessibility is not the catalyst for regeneration, but the making of place itself; offering commuters and visitors alike an opportunity to access the town by foot minimising both their carbon impact and their time to embrace the rich history and heritage of town centres.
- 5.5 As our town centres look to attract a new wave of business, investment and people in the coming years, train stations will continue to be at the heart of urban modernisation projects. WNC will be bringing forward key sites such as Four Waterside and sites at Northampton Station for new employment uses which need strong rail services to be able to secure investment in these opportunities, as well as to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to cater for the 239,000 existing jobs across West Northamptonshire.
- 5.6 The new high-speed rail line, HS2, currently under construction, is intended to cater for city-to-city traffic between London and Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and Scotland. Introduction of train services on HS2 thus brings the opportunity to repurpose services on the existing WCML around local and interurban flows. The DfT has tasked the current operator of WCML long distance services, West Coast Partnership (WCP), with assessing potential service patterns to operate after introduction of public services on HS2.
- 5.7 Representations to the DfT by WNC have resulted in their approval for us to open discussions with WCP as to our aspirations for development of rail services for the council area, and an initial discussion was held on 2 March 2022.
- 5.8 Phases 1/2A of HS2 are critical to the release of capacity on the WCML allowing the timetable to be repurposed around the needs of intermediate stations such as those

serving the WNC area. The Integrated Rail Plan¹ (IRP) published in November 2021 confirmed that these Phases are to proceed.

- 5.9 Intended timescales for introduction of Phases 1/2A public services on HS2 have recently been set out in an update of the HS2 Business Case² as:
- Limited service terminating at Old Oak Common in 2029;
 - Full service through to Euston in 2034.
- 5.10 Whilst it is the full service that triggers released capacity on the WCML, some limited benefits might be achievable with the initial limited service. In terms of planning a major timetable change, even 2034 is not far off, so that development of service options is being undertaken now, and selected options will be difficult to influence if engagement is not undertaken imminently.

6. Current Rail Services

- 6.1 This section briefly reviews the positive and negative features of rail services currently (Pre-Covid) offered at WCML stations serving West Northamptonshire.

6.1.1 Northampton and Long Buckby

Positive:

- Services available to Birmingham and London, calling at selected intermediate stations in both cases.

Negative:

- Intermediate calls make the services relatively slow;
- Northampton passengers compete for capacity on trains with shorter distance travellers, particularly on evening return flows;
- Due to the limited stops by long-distance trains at Rugby, opportunities to travel Northwards are minimal to non-existent without a time-consuming diversion via Birmingham

6.1.2 Milton Keynes Central

Positive:

- Principal services are to London, but calls by selected long distance trains give fast services Northwards, to Birmingham, Manchester, and Crewe/Chester;
- Services provided by long-distance trains are fast, e.g. best time to London of 30 minutes;

Negative:

- Pre-Covid, peak crowding was severe, especially as at peak times long-distance trains do not serve London commuter flows;

¹ *Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands*, Department for Transport, November 2021

² *HS2 Phase 2b Western Leg: Crewe to Manchester - An Update on the Strategic Outline Business Case*, Department for Transport, January 2022

- As the pattern of service is in effect an add-on to long-distance services, other features such as clockface intervals are less satisfactory - e.g. fast trains to London bunch in one half of the hour with none in the other;
- To minimize stops on long distance trains, connectivity with other regional centres, e.g. Rugby, Watford, tends to be provided only by local trains with unattractive journey times as a result;
- Frequencies to key locations Northwards are poor e.g. out of three trains per hour from Euston to Birmingham, only one calls at Milton Keynes. Similarly, the service to Manchester is only hourly;
- An hourly fast service to Birmingham in particular is unattractive over the relatively short distance, e.g. as a feeder service to/from Birmingham Airport.

6.1.3 Rugby

Positive:

- Some peak services are provided by long-distance trains, offering attractive peak journey times to/from London;

Negative:

- Other than at peak times in the peak direction, the only long-distance trains serving Rugby are an hourly Birmingham service and an hourly 'all stations' to Crewe;
- Lack of calls by long-distance trains severely limits opportunities to travel Northwards with only an hourly stopping service to Crewe for connections there.

7. Issues - Future service patterns

7.1 It is the task of WCP to advise the DfT as to future service patterns, and this is work in progress now - it is the aim of this paper and our liaison with WCP to influence this progress. However, there have been some indications that may be taken as a starting point.

7.2 Assumed service patterns for purposes of demand modelling and business case development were published in the April 2020 Full Business Case for HS2³. However, these have been criticised for lack of ambition, as well as being operationally impracticable and commercially deficient, and so should be regarded as a starting point only.

7.3 So far as the WNC area and its gateway stations is concerned, key features of these proposed service patterns are:

7.3.1 Northampton and Long Buckby

- Three trains per hour to London off-peak, making between two and seven stops south of Northampton;

³ Full Business Case - High Speed 2 Phase One, Department for Transport, April 2020

- Six trains per hour to London at peak times (five from Long Buckby), making between two and seven stops south of Northampton;
- Four peak and three off-peak of these extend to or via Birmingham, stopping patterns undefined.

This appears to be a slight improvement in peak frequency but not on journey time.

7.3.2 **Milton Keynes Central**

- Two fast services per hour between Euston and Birmingham, both calling, except at peak times when only one call per hour is shown;
- Hourly Euston - Manchester service calling at Milton Keynes;
- Hourly Euston - Chester service calling at Milton Keynes;
- Slower services as for Northampton, plus one additional hourly trains to Euston, one hourly service to East Croydon, together with two hourly services to Oxford and one hourly service to Aylesbury using the new East-West Rail line.

Broadly this replicates the current provision, except that the fast service to Birmingham effectively doubles off-peak frequency so represents an improvement in that respect.

7.3.3 **Rugby**

- Calls made by one Birmingham fast service and the Chester service both peak and off-peak.

This is an improvement on the current position especially off-peak, enhancing the service both Northwards and to London.

8. **Choices - West Northamptonshire aspirations**

8.1 For the WNC area and its gateway stations, the following 'shopping list' is tabled:

8.1.1 **Northampton and Long Buckby**

- Faster services to London, also easing competition for space on trains by omission of local stops;
- Improved services Northwards, potentially by operation of either the Chester or Manchester service via Northampton.
- Alternatively this might be achieved by enhanced feeder services to connect with northbound trains calling at Rugby. To make such connections attractive, it would be necessary to have a higher-frequency service to Rugby, with four trains per hour as a minimum.

8.1.2 **Milton Keynes Central**

- Although pressure on seating capacity for commuters is eased by Covid and potential post-Covid changes to travelling patterns, the opportunity remains to create a more frequent and particularly more regular service of fast trains to London, both peak and off-peak;
- Improved fast links to regional centres such as Rugby and Watford;

- More frequent fast service to Birmingham. DfT service patterns provide this off-peak but not at peak times, for no apparent operational or commercial reason.

8.1.3 Rugby

- Additional fast services to London contra-peak and between the peaks as well as simply for peak travel;
- Restoration of stops by long-distance services Northwards. Both Manchester and Chester services should call, ensuring a direct link to the major commercial location of the North West, as well as connections into other rail services e.g. to Liverpool or Scotland, from Crewe.

8.2 In meeting these aspirations, good features of existing services need to be retained, particularly:

- Journey time from Milton Keynes to London;
- Provision for morning commuting into Northampton from residential centres between Wolverton and Watford, and evening return services.

8.3 Connectivity between West Northamptonshire stations and Bletchley will also take on increased significance, as Bletchley will be the access point to East - West Rail, enabling journeys such as Northampton to Cambridge.

8.4 To maximise use of public transport overall, connectivity to WCML stations by bus is important now, and will be increasingly important as services at WCML stations improve.

8.5 It must be acknowledged that some of these aspirations are in opposition, e.g.:

- Running a long-distance service to the North via Northampton extends the journey time for Milton Keynes passengers by an estimated 11 minutes, and potential calls at Rugby might have to be omitted to minimise this;
- Extra calls at Rugby by long distance trains extend the journey time for Milton Keynes passengers by an estimated 4 minutes;
- Extra calls at Watford by trains from Northampton and Milton Keynes to London extend those journey times by about 4 minutes.

8.6 Providing adequate capacity to meet demand is fundamental in a rail service. But broadly, where journey time, connectivity and service frequency are in opposition to each other, it is suggested that connectivity and frequency should be prioritised, except that from Northampton to London improving journey times is the prime objective.

8.7 Released capacity is also intended to provide further opportunities for freight, including services for Rail Freight Interchanges within the council area. Choices may be constrained by capacity on the Northampton loop as, in addition to aspirations for passenger services, there is likely to be a need for additional freight paths.

9. Implications of Covid 19

- 9.1 The scale and nature of rail demand post-Covid is inevitably uncertain at the time of writing, particularly in respect of London commuting. However:
- Rail use overall is back to 75% of pre-pandemic levels as a 28-day moving average, and 80% on some recent days⁴;
 - Whilst rail commuting was below 50% of pre-pandemic levels throughout 2021, in the first months of 2022 it has passed that level, whilst leisure travel in recent weeks has reached 104% of pre-pandemic⁵.
- 9.2 Anecdotally, road traffic is now at or above pre-pandemic levels, suggesting that a general propensity to travel persists. Leisure travel by rail may have gained greater social significance after lockdowns and with 'working from home', whilst longer distance commuting may actually increase if working less than a full week in the office becomes normal. Post-Covid, passengers may require greater 'personal space' so that pre-Covid seating provision and extent of standing may no longer be acceptable, implying that more trains would be needed to move a given passenger demand.
- 9.3 Although there is uncertainty of scale and nature of rail demand post-Covid, this is not judged to invalidate our aspirations.

10. Implications (including financial implications)

10.1 Resources and Financial

- 10.1.1 All contact and discussions can be undertaken within existing resources.
- 10.1.2 In the event of a significant mismatch between WNC aspirations and WCP proposals, there may be a need to commission consultancy support to demonstrate the business case for our aspiration, but that is not envisaged at this stage.
- 10.1.3 Implementation of aspirations to the extent they prove to be feasible would be at no cost to WNC, as rail services are specified, contracted and funded by the DfT. Our contact is aimed to influence proposals that are being developed anyway.

10.2 Legal

- 10.2.1 There are no legal implications.

⁴ *Domestic transport use by mode: Great Britain, since 1 March 2020*, Department for Transport

⁵ Evidence of Andrew Haines (CEO of Network Rail) to House of Commons Transport Select Committee, 30 March 2022

10.3 Risk

10.3.1 There is no risk to WNC from continuing discussions with WCP.

10.3.2 There is a reputational risk from not engaging in constructive discussions and thus missing an opportunity to optimize rail services for the WNC area.

10.4 Consultation

10.4.1 Consultation on future rail services is the responsibility of the DfT, and will be undertaken when a range of proposals is available. Our objective is to influence the proposals that will eventually be consulted on.

10.5 Climate impact

10.5.1 There is no climate impact from simply undertaking discussions. However, optimisation of rail services aligns with a general objective to promote public transport and reduce car use.

10.6 Community impact

10.6.1 Rail services optimized around the needs of West Northamptonshire will promote economic development by improving access to jobs and enabling workers without an office base to maintain contact with clients and partners at a wide range of destinations. Our aspirations also align with aims to develop Northampton as a tourist destination.

11. Background Papers

11.1 *Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands*, Department for Transport, November 2021

11.2 *HS2 Phase 2b Western Leg: Crewe to Manchester - An Update on the Strategic Outline Business Case*, Department for Transport, January 2022

11.3 *Full Business Case - High Speed 2 Phase One*, Department for Transport, April 2020

11.4 *Domestic transport use by mode: Great Britain, since 1 March 2020*, Department for Transport

11.5 Evidence of Andrew Haines (CEO of Network Rail) to House of Commons Transport Select Committee, 30 March 2022