



West Coast Main Line RUS
Network Planning
Network Rail
The Mailbox
100 Wharfside Street
Birmingham B1 1RT

22nd February 2011.

Dear Sir/Madam

West Coast Main Line RUS - Draft for Consultation

Northampton Rail Users Group (NRUG) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the West Coast Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy. NRUG gives its full support to the response from Northamptonshire County Council but it also wishes to make the following comments on both general and specific points in respect of the draft RUS and the subsequent consultation meeting with stakeholders that took place at London Euston on 24th January 2011.

NRUG's interest in this RUS is primarily focused with trains that serve Northampton but it also recognises the impact of the other factors along the route that affect our services such as the current infrastructure e.g. the line speed between Northampton and Rugby, and the limited access to the fast lines that directly impact on our objective to achieve more frequent and faster trains to London. It also notes the synergies with the draft West Midlands and Chiltern RUS which has also recently been published for consultation and to which NRUG has formally responded.

Due to this overlap between RUS's, NRUG is concerned that neither RUS takes full account of the ALL services that use the common section of line between Northampton and Rugby particularly in respect of route capacity and reliability. This two track section with a maximum speed of 75mph (which is also used as diversionary route to the main line via Weedon) has recently experienced a significant growth in both passenger services and freight traffic accessing the freight terminal at Daventry. Without an upgrade to the line speed to 100mph and the renewal of signalling between Northampton and Daventry (3 to 4 aspects) along with the installation of a bi directional at freight loop at Hillmorton (originally proposed as part of the West Coast Route Modernisation project), NRUG firmly believes this route will soon run out of capacity which will pose a serious risk to the reliability for both passenger and freight operators.

1 RUS OBJECTIVES AND CONSULTATION PROCESS

NRUG is particularly concerned that the draft RUS appears to be predominately obsessed with filling any available “gaps” with more and faster high speed trains with even less intermediate stops. This is based on the WCML Strategy set out by the Department of Transport as delivered by the December 2008 timetable which left many large towns including Northampton and surrounding areas with no direct access to the “InterCity” services resulting in longer journey times; more changes and a general lack of connectivity along the whole route.

It was clear from the meeting held at Euston that the draft RUS is contrary to the needs of passengers (Passenger Focus survey put journey time low on priority) and the feedback from many of the stakeholders who attended the meeting but it is disappointing that although the Network Rail planners recognises the lack of connectivity as well as the need for additional fast commuter services from Northampton and Milton Keynes it is unable to address these gaps due to its preferred option in providing more and faster long distance services.

NRUG believes that like the WCML Strategy, the consultation process is more concerned with “ticking boxes” rather than making changes as per stakeholder requirements. It also believes that the terms of reference and objectives of the RUS are too narrow which prevents Network Rail from recasting the timetable in such a way that it can address stakeholders’ needs. The over-riding priority set out by the DfT in the delivery of high frequency long distance trains is clearly dominant in this RUS and NRUG feels that the “gap analysis” is unfairly weighted in its favour.

CONCLUSION - NRUG believes that the business case that underpins the additional long distance services with fewer stops is flawed and should be revisited on the grounds that is not sustainable. Given the current economic climate and the latest projections for economic recovery, according to the Bank of England, will not happen overnight and probably take at least 5 years. This suggests that at best there will be stagnation or at worst a fall in demand for long distance rail travel rather than a significant increase as the draft RUS predicts.

2 SPECIFIC COMMENTS

- 2.1 **Connectivity:** NRUG along with many other stakeholders recommends that the RUS should use the short to medium term to do more to remedy the connectivity gaps. This can be done by recasting the timetable making Crewe and Preston as the hub stations for the Glasgow service (without detriment to overall journey times) and a fast connecting Euston to Crewe / Preston service (IEP is still an option for this route) calling Milton Keynes; Northampton; Rugby; Nuneaton; and Stafford with the interurban trains linking the other Trent Valley Stations.
- 2.2 **Additional commuter services:** The RUS acknowledges the need to establish additional fast line paths to meet the growth on Northampton/Milton Keynes commuter services in the peaks. However, it states that it is difficult to achieve due to speed differential between the types of trains used on the route. NRUG suggests that the RUS needs to do more evaluation to address this issue and believes that there are two options that should be considered to resolve this disparity between train performance :-
- Option 1 - Retime ALL services between Milton Keynes and Euston (and vice versa) during the peaks based on 110mph timings. This would actually deliver additional paths and go a long way to addressing the speed differential between the 350s and 390s whilst having only a marginal affect on overall journey times for longer distance Intercity services.
 - Option 2 - Deployment of trains as part of the IEP programme (proposed by the DfT) to provide the additional capacity required and which are capable of operating at 125mph without detriment to the existing long distance services.

2.3 **Northampton to Rugby Capacity / Line Speed.**

NRUG is concerned that the draft RUS does not appear to include any proposals to upgrade this section of the WCML. With the ongoing expansion at Daventry along with the proposed increase in passenger services and the significant movements into and out of the newly constructed Siemens train depot at Northampton, NRUG believes that neither the WCML or WM&C RUS has recognised the potential risk this poses to route performance and reliability and thus due to its infrastructure limitations (compared with the rest of the route) means that the route as a whole will have capacity issues too. NRUG believes that this infrastructure limitation has been the main reason why Northampton has

not been able to secure a regular intercity service to either London or Birmingham. This, in our view represents a GAP as it prevents the route as a whole maximising its full potential.

2.4 Connections at Rugby

NRUG notes with concern the loss of connectivity to other operators on this route since the introduction of the 2008 West Coast timetable. This has been exacerbated by the loss of connections to the North West and Scotland at Rugby requiring connections to be made at Birmingham to short formation trains that frequently suffer overcrowding.

2.5 Timetable - Non clockface departures

Since December 2008 many long distance services have enjoyed increased frequencies and reduced journey times, but this has been achieved at the expense of local services resulting in longer journey times; uneven departures and increased and staggered stopping patterns. For example, there are two northbound departures to Northampton from Watford Junction each hour but only 10 mins apart leaving a 50 minute gap to the next one. NRUG suggests that the timetable is reviewed to even out departures wherever possible and to improve connections with other operators across the whole route.

2.6 Seven Day Railway

NRUG supports the case for additional interurban services along the Trent Valley line to operate later during the week and more frequently on Sundays as per the commitment in the WCML Strategy.

2.7 HS2 (Alternative Route Strategy)

NRUG is concerned that too much emphasis is being placed on the proposed HS2 being the cure of all future capacity limitations. Any additional capacity won't be realised until 2026 at the earliest if it is delivered at all. NRUG believes that the RUS omits to consider how the route should be developed irrespective of HS2 as demand for interurban and local needs will still need to be satisfied whether HS2 is built or not. The RUS should therefore consider how additional capacity can be delivered in case HS2 does not proceed or is delayed.

2.8 InterCity Express Programme (IEP)

NRUG notes that the draft RUS appears not to make reference to the IEP and how the deployment of these new trains could have on route capacity and the ability to provide improved connectivity along the route.

2.9 Open Access (End of Moderation of Competition in 2012)

NRUG notes that with the ending of MOC in 2012 the draft RUS appears not to make any reference to the possible effect of Open Access operators (currently being considered by the ORR) which if approved could impact on the “gaps” identified in the RUS in respect of route capacity and available paths.

2.10 European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS)

The RUS does not appear to consider the additional capacity that will be delivered by the introduction of ERTMS to the route. This process currently on trial is expected to be rolled out across the whole network and therefore the RUS should identify when it will be introduced to the WCML and how much additional capacity it could deliver.

2.11 New Lines - Northampton to Bedford

NRUG gives its support for the reopening of the Northampton to Bedford line not only to give greater local access to the railway but it reinstates a strategic link. NRUG believes it should be funded jointly as an extension of the current Thameslink project and as enabling works to provide an alternative electrified route when London Euston is redeveloped to accommodate HS2. Northamptonshire County Council undertakes to safeguard the route.

3 CONCLUSION

NRUG hopes that you find our comments helpful and that they will be taken into consideration before the RUS is finalised. We trust that the consultation process takes all stakeholder feedback seriously and is willing to make changes where the case is made.

Yours faithfully,

Brian Bingley
Chairman, NRUG

Northampton Rail Users Group

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