

# Great Western Mainline: Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS): Response to Consultation from Rail for Herefordshire

*Consultation comments to the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) by Gerald Dawe, Chair, Rail for Herefordshire, PO Box 299, Hereford, HR1 2YE. E-mail: Railfh@aol.com*

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**On the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2005. The deadline for responses is 8 April 2005.**

The document was originated on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

## Part 1: Introduction to our Response

First of all, what is Rail for Herefordshire? It is an independent group of active rail users, managed by volunteers, and representing many rail customers at the Hereford end of the railway line. It has good working relationships with the Cotswold Line Promotion Group (CLPG), Friends of Leominster Station, the Golden Valley Pro Rail Group, the Crewe and Shrewsbury Passengers' Association (CASPA), the Ludlow Rail Users' Association and local MPs Paul Keetch and Bill Wiggin.

We are concerned that the Rt. Hon. Alistair Darling, Secretary of State for Transport, says in his letter to Rail for Herefordshire, of 4 November 2004:

“Performance on the Hereford – Birmingham line at Hereford end was not raised by stakeholders as a significant issue in the development of the West Midlands RUS nor has it emerged as a notable point of poor performance in the SRA's [Strategic Rail Authority] performance analysis”.

**We asked the SRA who the stakeholders were in the development of the RUS but have not received a reply.**

This is most unsatisfactory, because Herefordshire currently experiences:

- § an average of one cancellation a day Hereford-Birmingham trains;

- § frequent dumping of passengers at Ledbury or Malvern for an unspecified time waiting for the next train to complete their journey
- § extreme overcrowding on trains to and from Birmingham (via Worcester) at peak hours
- § trains very often late from to and from Birmingham (via Worcester)

**Does this not constitute poor performance?** Why did this bad service not emerge in stakeholder discussions? We ask again, **who the stakeholders were**, who engaged in the SRA consultation, in Herefordshire.

We now raise the specific issue of train timetable changes:

### **Timetable Frequency Changes: Reduction in through trains to Hereford.**

**Weekdays/Saturday**, the December 04 timetable changes led to only two through trains to/from London compared with four or five previously. Connections at Great Malvern are not good, with 30 minute waits. In the evening there are no facilities at Malvern, e.g. no live timetable, waiting room or toilets. The frequency of Hereford-London through trains needs substituting to its previous level.

**Sunday**, there has been a reduction in service, with now a long period in the afternoon with no through train (this gap is between 13.32 and 16.31 p.m.). The Sunday afternoon trains were very important for Herefordshire people, and they need restoring by First Great Western Link.

The statement under Section 4 of the RUS: “Thames franchise to First Group, significant changes to the GWML timetable took place from December 2004 including: Journey time reductions and additional capacity between Paddington and Oxford/Worcester by the use of 125 mph *Adelante* rolling stock in place of 90 mph *Turbo* trains on the majority of existing fast services;” ... ignores the fact that services to Hereford **have been downgraded**.

There now follow our responses to the Great Western Mainline Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS).

## **Part 2: Consultation Questions and Rail for Herefordshire’s response**

### **Taken from RUS Appendix H: Consultation questions**

#### **RUS 1. You are invited to comment on the boundaries chosen for the RUS and the timeframe covered.**

Our comments have taken some time to prepare. They should be treated generically, e.g. they will apply equally to the West Midlands RUS. The main comment on the ‘boundaries’ of the RUS is that, by the very process of setting geographical boundaries,

the SRA should not exclude comments directed at another RUS, just so long as there is some overlap between stations within the RUSs.

**RUS 2. Are the connections with other parts of the network correctly identified?**

Within reason.

**RUS 3. Are the linkages with major projects correctly identified?**

There are apparent contradictions in the Foreword between “At the same time, there is a need to accommodate continuing growth in passenger and freight demand on many routes and to consider potential opportunities for changes to train services **and infrastructure which could be implemented if funding becomes available in future years.**” and, for example, “Route Utilisation Strategy for consultation. It proposes deliverable and affordable changes to train service patterns and rolling stock deployment which aim to improve performance and align services more closely with current and future levels of demand **without requiring expenditure on infrastructure enhancement.**” (our emphases)

Is infrastructure to form part of the RUS, or is it not? The Foreword does not make this clear.

Quite plainly, the RUS needs to make provision for infrastructural changes if it is to have a hope of improving services.

**RUS 4. Are there any other major projects that should be taken into account?**

**Infrastructural changes are important**, e.g. a passing loop on the Hereford-Ledbury line, the justification for which is given **within the RUS** under section 3.5 (long single tracks causing delays on the Worcester-Hereford route).

**RUS 5. You are invited to comment on whether the commentary provided fully reflects the status of the Great Western Main Line routes.**

We fully endorse the RUS statement (3.5 Current network utilisation and performance) that: “Long sections of single track on the Oxford – Worcester – Hereford route and between Swindon and Kemble significantly reduce route capacity and have an impact on performance with delay being transferred from one train to another”. This has been the experience of many of our members when travelling between Hereford and Worcester. Train cancellations at Ledbury and Malvern are common, and these induce delays ranging from a few minutes to several hours for rail passengers travelling to/from Hereford.

**RUS 6. Do you agree with the assessment of current passenger demand and train loadings?**

Trains are very crowded at commuter hours between Hereford and Birmingham, and Hereford and London after Worcester. This (especially the Birmingham line) must **suppress demand** considerably.

**RUS 7. Do you have any comments on the analysis of freight traffic freight path utilisation?**

No.

**RUS 8. Do you consider that the descriptions of infrastructure capability and network utilisation are accurate and representative?**

Not entirely accurate. Frequent overcrowding of trains as they get towards London from Hereford was not mentioned, only being dealt with generically. Local knowledge by the SRA of the line around Hereford may also be limited. For example, singling of the track between Hereford and Ledbury is stated, in the RUS, as occurring in the 1970s when in fact it happened much more recently, in the mid-1980s.

**RUS 9. You are invited to provide your views of current performance, where caused by the structure of the timetable rather than by infrastructure or rolling stock failure.**

From the Executive Summary, the RUS is (apparently) to address: “The continuing need to improve operational performance on the route. The Strategy examines the structure of the timetable to identify areas where changes could deliver better performance, and, potentially, more regular service patterns”.

**Point 1:** The RUS should therefore address the repeated cancellation of Birmingham – Hereford through services at Malvern and Ledbury. These service failures have been caused by companies’ decisions (First Great Western (FGW), and Central Trains), not by failure of rolling stock. In the RUS it is stated that Central Trains’ “local and regional services via Birmingham operate over the RUS area between Worcester and Hereford”. However, this is very far from being the truth at present. **Hereford is very often missed out as the final destination.** The penalty system must change, and should also be made public. For example, FGW/Central presumably are fined less by turning around at Malvern or Ledbury and returning to Birmingham without completing their journey to Hereford, than by completing the journey, and then running slightly late on the Birmingham return journey. Fining of the franchise operators simply must take Hereford passengers’ needs into account. **We are not getting a fair deal.**

**Point 2:** First Great Western should not be reducing Saturday or Sunday through services or putting poor connections into them (e.g. at Malvern or Worcester), since this affects Hereford customers.

**RUS 10. Is there additional information about the Great Western Main Line routes which should be included in the baseline analysis?**

The likely effects of minor infrastructural changes (e.g. installation of passing loops) on punctuality and capacity of lines would be useful. For this, a track diagram is needed in the RUS.

**RUS 11. You are invited to comment on current engineering access practices.**

They tend to be introduced at very short notice and cause great inconvenience for passengers, whilst no explanation for the necessity of the operations is ever given (see answer to question 18 below).

**RUS 12. Are there any other initiatives which are committed which you feel we should have included?**

Infrastructure works.

**RUS 13. You are invited to comment on the broad drivers of demand outlined in this chapter and on whether you agree with the view set out of forecast passenger and freight growth.**

No time to respond to this point.

**RUS 14. Do you agree with the approach to forecasting passenger demand?**

No time to respond to this point.

**RUS 15. Does section 5.3 adequately describe future freight path requirements?**

Not relevant to our concerns.

**RUS 16. The focus of the RUS is addressing crowding, changes in demand and improving performance. Are there additional aspirations (appropriate to a RUS and not requiring infrastructure enhancement) which should be considered beyond those set out in this chapter and in Appendix C?**

You need to include infrastructure enhancement within the RUS, provided it is of a fairly minimal nature (e.g. installation of a passing loop) since, in many ways, this will overcome the very problem of **improving performance** which the RUS sets out to address. Since there is also an Appendix F concerning potential infrastructure developments, this is clearly inherent within the RUS. However there are confusing ambiguities about inclusion of infrastructure throughout the RUS.

**RUS 17. Do you agree with the SRA views on stakeholder aspirations set out in Appendix C?**

There is a problem with these stakeholder aspirations, so far as they affect the Hereford end of the line. This has been outlined in *Part 1: Introduction*, on page 1. **Stakeholders' names should not remain anonymous: they should be published in full. Rail for Herefordshire needs to know who, in Herefordshire was consulted.**

**RUS 18. Do you have comments on the proposed future engineering access arrangements?**

Engineering access requirements should be publicly explained to rail travellers in detail, and the full justification for them spelled out. At present we understand that engineering access can lead to cancellation / substitution of services at 24-hours' notice. This is far too short a period and should not be permitted **except for emergencies**. Normally, four weeks' notice should be given because this will enable passengers to better plan their journeys around problematic 'engineering works'.

We quote now, from the RUS's Appendix D:

“Appendix D: Detailed engineering access proposals from Network Rail Worcester to Hereford. This section will be maintained mainly within annual midweek night possessions. The exception is Henwick Junction, which is used for turning back services which terminate at Worcester Foregate Street. This junction will continue to require an annual all-line 16-hour weekend possession. Worcester Tunnel Junction, which affects train services to and from the West Midlands, will also require an annual all-line 16-hour weekend possession.”

Night possessions, as are indicated in the above statement, **should be the rule**, rather than the exception. Weekend possessions cause great inconvenience –see Q. 27 below.

**RUS 19. What are your views on the proposal by Network Rail to smooth the demand for engineering resources and undertake more major maintenance and renewal work during the week?**

It depends quite clearly, on what the effects on rail passengers will be.

**RUS 20. Are the issues and relationships fairly described?**

No. Not as concerns the performance of trains to Hereford station. Under RUS section 8.0 Key Issues, the following is stated for the Oxford – Worcester – Hereford line:

“As a result of infrastructure rationalisation in the 1970s, the configuration of this route reflects the low service frequencies operated at that time with **several long single track sections which significantly limit capacity and timetabling flexibility**. Subsequent increases in the volume of train services have led to current high levels of capacity utilisation and **risks to performance**. Short platforms at certain stations constrain the length of trains and the deployment of rolling stock. Several local stations are very lightly used. From December 2004, the majority of services to and from London are provided by 125 mph *Adelante* rolling stock which has reduced journey times between Oxford and London. Stakeholders seek regular hourly through services to and from London. Demand on services to and from Birmingham and the West Midlands is significant on the Hereford – Worcester corridor. Options for these services are being considered in the development of the West Midlands Route Utilisation Strategy.” (my emphases)

We would point out that the single-tracking of the Hereford – Ledbury route took place not in the 1970s, but in the mid-1980s, as a way of saving signalling costs. Otherwise, we would largely agree with the statement in 8.0. However, what are the implications? We need reassurance that the SRA has taken on board **the implications of its own findings**: For example, a simple passing loop is needed on the Hereford-Ledbury line to ensure that **risks to performance** are reduced. At present there are frequent delays to trains at Hereford and Ledbury due to the single track.

**RUS 21. Are there additional route utilisation issues which you would like to see included?**

We would like to see: ‘Provision of a passing loop on the Hereford – Ledbury line’ within ‘Appendix F: Potential options for inclusion in major infrastructure renewals’. This option needs to be included, especially given the above statement by the SRA that “several long single track sections ... significantly limit capacity and timetabling flexibility ... [and have subsequently led to] risks to performance.” (see above)

Alternatively, the following should be considered to reduce delay:

1. If the back platform at Hereford Station was brought back into use for trains from Ledbury, they could readily use it since the point work and signalling is all there.
2. The southbound line between Shelwick junction and Hereford station should be made bi-directional which would mean installing a couple of signals. This would allow the Ledbury trains to reverse safely. This would mean Birmingham-Hereford trains would not have to wait for north-south trains as they currently do because they use the same track.
3. Between Shelwick and Ledbury a passing loop could be built at Withington with spring loaded points that are locked in the facing direction by Hereford signal box. This would double the capacity of the line. The system is in use in many parts for the country where single lines are used.
4. The curve at Shelwick could be eased to a larger radius than at present which would allow a faster speed. The present junction points at Shelwick for up line to Ledbury are too short and force trains to reduce to 20/25 mph, they should be changed to longer ones to allow a faster transit through them

**RUS 22. Are there options not set out above that you feel might produce better utilisation of the existing capacity of the routes?**

See above response to question 21.

**RUS 23. Do you consider that the conclusions reached so far are appropriate?**

Yes, but there needs to be a clear commitment by the SRA to the following:

- a) Ensuring that fines to rail franchisees for ‘late-running’ do not result in franchisees’ simply shortening their routes, and failing to operate to their

destinations (e.g. the frequent cancellation of through trains to Hereford at Ledbury or Malvern).

b) Ensuring that infrastructural alterations which will greatly enhance services (e.g. our additions to Appendix F) are included. We would like to see some commitment towards improving the single track east bound lines, Hereford-Ledbury to Birmingham or London. A passing loop or twin tracking would greatly help matters.

Otherwise, if there is a failure to take these points into account, in our view, services to Hereford will continue to suffer.

**RUS 24. Does the proposed strategy incorporate the most appropriate changes to capacity utilisation?**

Not really. See the rest of our responses.

**RUS 25. Are the proposed implementation methods appropriate?**

No time to comment on.

**RUS 26. Has the process adopted led to the consideration of appropriate options for use of the existing network?**

Constant (apparent) exclusion of, and ambiguity of infrastructural changes in relation to the RUS limits the consideration of appropriate options.

**RUS 27. Has an appropriate balance been maintained between performance improvement, service provision and engineering access?**

Probably not. Engineering gives rise very frequently, to excessive delays between Hereford and Worcester. There are often bus services substituted, with minimal notice and ?Ua simply appalling fact this?U**no guarantee that they will connect with rail services. We know of instances when buses have been timed deliberately to arrive at Worcester five minutes after the critical rail connections. Why?**

**RUS 28. Do you agree with the conclusions reached and the changes proposed?**

Provided they incorporate our concerns, yes. Otherwise this exercise will count as yet another example of time-consuming **non-consultation**.

**RUS 29. Is there more information and analysis that you would like to see included in future RUS consultation documents?**

Track diagram, cost estimates of minor infrastructural improvements and financial benefit-cost analysis, following the statement given in 4. Drivers of change – Commitments and Affordability, i.e.: “The RUS has to recognise and be consistent with

the affordability constraints which apply to the rail industry. The financial resources of the SRA and the industry as a whole are limited and the options developed and recommended by the RUS reflect this position. Where possible, the RUS seeks to generate additional financial value for the industry and reduce the overall level of subsidy needed over time. Certain potential train service or infrastructure proposals, whilst currently unaffordable, may generate wider economic or social benefits could justify financial contributions from stakeholders and other parties outside the rail industry. The SRA will work with relevant parties in order to secure such contributions and improve the affordability of proposals wherever possible.”

Also, the system of penalties / fines on the franchise operators needs to be made unambiguous and explicit to customer / passenger groups such as ours.

A final question needs to be asked: Just what financial constraints can there be on companies receiving of the order of £1.5 billion in subsidy over the few years of franchise operation?