

Meeting: West Midlands Rail Executive Board of Directors
Venue: Room 114, 16 Summer Lane, Birmingham / Microsoft Teams
Subject: Minutes
Date: Thursday 19 September 2024 at 2.00pm

Present:

Richard Parker (Chair)	Mayor of the West Midlands
Councillor Pervez Akhtar	Coventry City Council
Councillor Qaiser Azeem	City of Wolverhampton Council
Councillor Peter Butlin	Warwickshire County Council
Councillor Kerrie Carmichael	Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Laura Crane	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Peter Hughes	Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Phil Larratt	West Northamptonshire Council
Councillor Majid Mahmood	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Ian Nellins	Shropshire Council
Councillor Philip Price	Herefordshire Council

In Attendance:

Richard Allan	Chiltern Railways
Ian McConnell	West Midlands Trains
Councillor Tim Huxtable	Chair of Transport Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Denise Wetton	Network Rail
Mal Drury-Rose	West Midlands Rail Executive
Tom Painter	West Midlands Rail Executive
Andrew Leo	West Midlands Rail Executive
Peter Sargant	West Midlands Rail Executive
Roisin Lyons	West Midlands Combined Authority

Apologies:

Councillor Adrian Andrew	Walsall Council
Councillor Marc Bayliss	Worcestershire County Council
Councillor John Cotton	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Ian Courts	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Mark Deaville	Staffordshire County Council
Councillor Andrea Goddard	Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Mark Goldsmith	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Finlay Gordon-McCusker	Stoke – on – Trent Council
Councillor Ken Hawkins	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Jonathan Lester	Herefordshire Council
Councillor Jim O'Boyle	Coventry City Council
Councillor Gary Perry	Walsall Council
Councillor Simon Phipps	Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Chris Robinson	Stoke – on – Trent Council
Councillor Izzi Seccombe	Warwickshire County Council

Councillor Jacqueline Sweetman
Councillor Ollie Vickers
Councillor Philip White

City of Wolverhampton Council
Telford and Wrekin
Staffordshire County Council

DRAFT FOR APPROVAL AT DECEMBER MEETING

1. Welcome, Apologies & Introductions

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Tom Painter provided apologies and advised that the meeting was quorate.

2. Declarations of Interest

None received.

3. Minutes of the WMRL Board meeting on 30 July 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

4. Board Leadership Group Progress Summary

In the absence of Cllr Simon Phipps, Andrew Leo provided an update on strategic performance concerning the local accountability portfolio. He highlighted the general context, including the involvement of Shadow Great British Railways (GBR). He mentioned that there had been recent correspondence and announcements regarding Shadow GBR. He confirmed that the Secretary of State had initiated this process, as indicated in the press release and that the Secretary of State had written to the leaders of the three organisations involved in Shadow GBR—DfT, Network Rail, and Directly Operated Holdings Limited (DOHL)—requesting them to develop a delivery plan by October 2024. He shared that by next month, more clarity was expected on what Shadow GBR entailed and its implications but expressed that this demonstrated the government's momentum in advancing rail reform swiftly, and their ongoing announcements kept it at the forefront of the agenda. He also discussed the ongoing work on the WMRE vision for the future, mentioning that the long-form document approved by the Board in July remained in the late stages of development. A summary document was included in the pack to communicate the vision, with further engagement pending with local authority partners.

Cllr Peter Butlin gave a brief update on infrastructure, noting that there was a lot happening in the region by TFWM and WMRE. Peter Sargent added more information on the Midlands Rail Hub (MRH), confirming that Network Rail would be bringing the project through to the Full Business Case (FBC). He confirmed WMRE was engaging with partner authorities to ensure that Local Authorities (LAs) were kept informed. He emphasised that the MRH presented a good opportunity for potential growth. Denise Wetton added information regarding funding for the FBC, noting that work was being done to add narrative around the purpose and rationale behind the expansion of rail infrastructure within the region. She highlighted the benefits to the region, including job creation and apprenticeships. The Chair stressed the importance of announcing schemes once the required funding was secured. Denise Wetton also confirmed that efforts would be made to raise the profile of the socioeconomic benefits of the MRH. In response to Cllr Peter Butlin, Mal Drury-Rose confirmed that Midlands Connect would continue to be a strategic partner, with no changes to their role despite the change in government. Denise Wetton also added that Midlands Connect also facilitated connections between East Midlands and West Midlands operations.

Cllr Kerrie Carmichael and Tom Painter discussed rail customer experience, noting that the ASLEF dispute had ended, though structural challenges with terms and conditions remained to be addressed.

Resolved:

(1) The Board noted the report.

5. Chiltern Railways

The Managing Director of Chiltern Railways gave a presentation. This provided an overview of the company's vision, purpose, strategy, and values. He acknowledged that Chiltern Railways operates the oldest trains on the network and expressed hopes to transition to more sustainable trains in the future. He also gave a brief history of Chiltern Railways for the benefit of new Board members.

In his operational update, he noted that Chiltern Railways was the third best in the region for punctuality despite the trains being around 30 years old, which necessitates significant maintenance. He reported that it was becoming increasingly difficult to find parts, with work underway with the supply chain to address. He then discussed capacity for customers and shared the company's vision for improving the service. He outlined a three-phase plan to replace trains and carriages and increase capacity, all aimed at enhancing customer experience. He confirmed two 24-year-old trains had been refurbished and were set to be deployed next month. Improvements had also been made to Moor Street Station to reduce bottlenecks around the ticket gateline, and there were further plans to invest in staff and ensure their safety, with updates to Stourbridge Depot including new lighting. He also reported that passenger handling during disruption was expected to improve by closer working across the industry, and highlighted efforts to drive social value in the West Midlands, noting that seven Chiltern stations in the region had over 100 volunteers.

In summary, he stated that while Chiltern Railways was a high-performing operator, there is still work to be done regarding the age and capacity of the trains. He requested support from WMRE and expressed a desire to be involved in the Midlands Rail Hub.

The Chair endorsed this support and encouraged the Managing Director to liaise with the Executive Director for WMRE regarding the strategic case and suggested a visit to Chiltern to see the refurbished trains.

Cllr Timothy Huxtable acknowledged Dorridge's participation in the World Cup of Stations. He also enquired about expediting work at Solihull Station, to which the Managing Director responded that funding and desired outcomes needed to be confirmed before any work could commence and welcomed a more detailed conversation on the topic.

In response to Councillor Pervez Akhtar, the Managing Director confirmed that all of Chiltern's Class 168 trains were being refurbished. In response to a question about whether Chiltern could buy new trains, he explained that the current contract with the government did not allow for asset purchases. On the subject of ticket prices, he advised that Chiltern were competitive against Avanti on the route between London and Birmingham.

Resolved:

- (1) The Board noted the update.

Cllr Phil Larratt asked about Chiltern's plans for the operation of the new East-West Rail line. The Managing Director confirmed that Chiltern had been selected as the operator (subject to contract), and that the government had decided to use six 2-car Class 196 trains currently in use in the West Midlands for the service.

6. West Midlands Trains

The Managing Director of West Midlands Trains gave a presentation. He provided an update on the company, explaining that West Midlands Trains operates under one company with two brands. He noted that many WMT stations are ungated, which presents its own challenges for revenue protection and security. He shared various facts and figures about the operation of WMT, including jobs and apprenticeships.

He then gave an overview of WMT's performance over the last five years, sharing data on punctuality and cancellations. He noted that cancellation performance was slightly worse than the industry average, but mitigation efforts were both planned and in progress. He mentioned that the last few months had seen better-than-average performance. He raised the issue of TOC-on-self-cancellations but also shared positive news, particularly on the Elephant and Bear line. He discussed the challenges WMT faced with driver availability and its impact on performance, which they hoped to mitigate and improve. He reported that other issues included drivers moving to different operators but confirmed recruitment of drivers was ongoing, and efforts were being made to manage sickness, reduce poaching, and reduce illegitimate sickness.

He reported on the introduction of new trains, noting that performance was in line with expectations and that good progress was being made in driver training.

He provided an update on passenger information during disruptions and acknowledged that there was significant opportunity to improve the joint approach between regional operators, Network Rail, and WMRE.

Future plans and opportunities included initiatives to increase revenue protection and the implementation of gates at stations. He mentioned that help could be offered in delivering regional devolution and expressed a desire to improve services and unlock connectivity between the West Midlands and the Northwest.

He also highlighted key work being conducted in workplace reform, noting that the terms and conditions for drivers would be reformed. He pointed out the outdated conditions currently in place and highlighted the benefits to performance.

Cllr Majid Mahmood asked about the possibility of using agency workers to replace the absent workforce, to which the Managing Director responded that this was not feasible as it would result in industrial action. Cllr Mahmood also enquired whether the 28% of unavailable drivers at Worcester depot was in line with industry

standards. The Managing Director confirmed that it was not, with sickness at 5% and 9% unavailable for the rest of the workforce.

In response to the Mayor, he shared insights into the grey areas around driver unavailability and mentioned a new internal governance system in place to review the reasons behind it. He acknowledged that WMT was behind the curve in modernising the workforce but confirmed that driver recruitment and training were ongoing.

Cllr Philip Price emphasised the importance of delivering an effective public transport service and its role in reducing car usage. He raised the need to improve performance on the line between Birmingham and Hereford, which was seconded by the Chair and acknowledged by the Managing Director. He shared the one-year and five-year plans in place and assured that actions were being taken to improve performance.

Cllr Peter Hughes asked whether a cooperative model could be considered. The Managing Director explained the process of how profits are used and how other operators have gained efficiencies, but improvements would be made.

Cllr Pervez Akhtar thanked the Managing Director for acknowledging the company's faults with performance and the need to improve relationships with drivers. He asked about the number of cancellations due to WMT. In response, the Managing Director confirmed that WMT was still one of the best performing operators in the region and that industrial action had damaged relationships, but there was an opportunity to improve them now.

Cllr Timothy Huxtable enquired about quick wins for the Midlands Rail Hub, specifically Snow Hill and Kings Norton, and asked about community rail. The Managing Director stated that community rail would be discussed at the next meeting.

Cllr Peter Butlin asked whether there was an appetite to address the terms and conditions now that a wage increase had been confirmed. The Managing Director acknowledged the potential difficulties but remained positive, seeing it as an opportunity for open communication.

Resolved:

(1) That the Managing Director West Midlands Trains would bring a detailed action plan for the Birmingham-Worcester/Hereford route to the next Board.

7. Network Rail

The Managing Director of Network Rail's Central Route delivered a presentation to the board. She expressed support for Chiltern Railways in improving their rolling stock and was happy to collaborate with both Chiltern and WMT to enhance customer service delivery. She provided an overview of her role and responsibilities regarding the rail network. She explained that the wide range of

infrastructure, including Victorian stations, lever signalling, level crossings, and trees, made it complex to manage.

She shared a performance update, noting that over the last two years, performance had improved and was on track to continue improving. She acknowledged that assets do fail but emphasised the importance of constant recovery efforts and successful collaboration with operators.

She reported on customer handling during disruption, emphasizing communication through various methods such as social media and platform announcements, as well as integrating transport systems to mitigate network disruption. She highlighted the importance of passenger safety, ensured through the presence of staff at stations. She also mentioned the introduction of the ASBO team to the station and the positive benefits they had brought.

She addressed air quality issues due to diesel traction within the sub-platforms. She shared the impact of the Pluvo system at the platform level, noting that air quality had improved by 25% in the last six months and confirmed investment was being sought to expand the number of Pluvo systems on the platforms.

Regarding Control Period 7 (CP7), she stated that the next five years were fully funded for renewals to ensure safety, high performance, infrastructure resilience, and improved passenger experience. She mentioned integrating renewals with enhancements, such as the Midlands Rail Hub (MRH), to drive efficiency.

In preparation for Great British Railways, the Chair asked about the preparatory work being undertaken. The Managing Director confirmed she was involved in discussions with WMRE and Great British Railways, which included looking at different models of operation and specification.

She also discussed community rail initiatives, including working with schools for apprenticeships in business and engineering, and partnering with heritage and volunteering days to make the network more attractive through activities like tree planting.

Cllr Majid Mahmood expressed thanks to the ASBO team and requested details on costing to be shared offline.

Cllr Peter Butlin raised the issue of trespass, noting it as the biggest issue on the network due to trespass, fatalities, and vandalism. The Managing Director mentioned that Central Route were the first to trial beyond visual line of sight drones to monitor trespass and network failures.

In response to Cllr Timothy Huxtable, the Managing Director confirmed that air quality at Moor Street and Snow Hill stations was better than that of New Street as they were not underground, but collaboration could occur to try and get Pluvo systems in those stations. She also confirmed that work was being conducted on how the stations would be linked together as part of the MRH, emphasizing the importance of a unified station team.

Cllr Philip Price asked if the Managing Director could help Herefordshire Council engage with the other parts of Network Rail that were working with the Council on the Hereford station transport interchange. Finally, Cllr Pervez Akhtar asked about Network Rail representation at local authority meetings and noted that air quality levels at New Street station were not compliant. The Managing Director confirmed that work was being done to see how further air quality improvements could be made through costing and other methods.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Managing Director Network Rail Central Route would share details of the ASB team at New Street station with the Board;
- (2) That the Managing Director Network Rail Central Route would speak to Herefordshire Council to understand issues and see how help could best be provided; and
- (3) That presentations from guests would be circulated in advance of the meeting in order to give Directors the opportunity to review and compose questions

8. Fares and Ticketing update

Cllr Majid Mahmood provided an update on the latest developments in the fares and ticketing simplification programme. He mentioned that feedback from the Department for Transport (DfT) was still awaited regarding their reluctant acceptance to include single leg pricing with evening peak restrictions in the Full Business Case (FBC) for the pay-as-you-go scheme.

He shared that a recent letter from the DfT indicated that if the removal of evening peak restrictions was to be pursued, a business case justifying the rationale and reasoning would be required. He highlighted the benefits of having an independently written document that robustly supported their rationale, stating that it could strengthen the argument for removing evening peak restrictions.

Finally, he confirmed that the next steps involved getting the pay-as-you-go scheme signed off and fully funded for implementation.

Resolved:

- (1) The Board endorsed the recommendation that a Business Case be commissioned, using the financial provisions already made in the budget.

9. WMRE Business Update Report

Mal Drury-Rose highlighted key points from the WMRE Business Update Report. He raised the successes achieved since the last board meeting, which had been added to the report in response to feedback. He also confirmed that WMRE had improved its data analysis capability, and that this would enable the company to better scrutinise the figures put forward by train operators. It was noted that WMRE was the client partner to the Midlands Rail Hub (MRH).

Resolved:

- (1) The Board noted the report.

10. **Forward Plan and Any Other Business**

The forward plan included a board leadership update, an update from West Midlands Trains (WMT), and updates from Cross Country Trains and Avanti West Coast would be coming to the board. It was noted that Cross Country Trains was operating under a remedial plan due to driver shortages, with a temporarily reduced timetable until November.

Cllr Pervez Akhtar asked if trade union representatives and freight rail representatives could be invited to the board. In response, the Executive Director for WMRE confirmed that work was underway to identify the best way to engage with the rail unions, whilst freight representatives would be invited to a future board meeting and that engagement had already started to increase.

Cllr Phillip Larratt asked if London Northwestern could be covered during the next meeting. He also asked if the impact of freight on West Northamptonshire could be given some consideration.

The forward plan was approved as set out, subject to the above additions.

Under Any Other Business (AOB), the potential for a steering group for a prospective rail line from the Midlands to Manchester was discussed, along with hopes that the Secretary of State would attend a future board. It was also explored if anyone was keen to host a meeting outside Birmingham.

Resolved:

- (1) That representatives from rail freight would be invited to a future Board meeting;
- (2) That the emerging work on engagement with the rail unions would be shared with Directors at the future Board;
- (3) That London Northwestern Railway performance would be given greater consideration in future data analysis and reporting;
- (4) That rail freight impacts in West Northamptonshire would be given considerations at a future Board; and
- (5) That the forward plan be approved subject to the inclusion of the suggestions made.

Meeting Close

The next meeting would be held 17 December 2024.

[The meeting ended at 4.00pm]