

How HS2 can benefit Milton Keynes, Buckingham and South Northants.

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In South Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire, virtually all the debate on HS2 focuses on the relatively few people who will be directly affected by the route of the new line. Something that receives much less attention from the elected representatives of those areas is the issue of how the lives of the many of their constituents who already use the West Coast Main Line will be improved day in, day out once that route is free to focus on serving local and regional needs. Buckinghamshire County Council still resents Milton Keynes "declaring UDI" to become a unitary authority, and seems not to understand that its residents use Milton Keynes as a railhead regardless, as still less does Buckingham MP John Bercow. South Northamptonshire, with the sizable and growing towns of Towcester and Brackley, but having no stations of its own, has not caught up with the fact that it is firmly in London commuter territory in terms of distance if not facilities.

So what sort of service should be provided on the WCML South of Birmingham once the first phase of HS2 is in place? The role of the WCML will be to connect intermediate locations directly with London and Birmingham and with each other, and to connect those locations with the rest of the rail network either directly or by reasonable interchange.

Which intermediate locations are we talking about? The biggest conurbation between London and Birmingham is Coventry, with a population of about 300,000, but a good deal of the London business from Coventry will be served by way of HS2 and the Birmingham interchange. Next in size on the direct route comes Milton Keynes, currently 185,000, then Watford (120,000) Rugby (90,000), and Hemel Hempstead (80,000) which now almost forms a single conurbation with St Albans (64,000). On the Northampton loop, Northampton itself has a population of nearly 200,000.

Milton Keynes, if growing as forecast to a quarter of a million, will be in the same league as Newcastle and Nottingham. As the railhead for Buckingham and South Northamptonshire, with another 100,000 or so in its catchment area, it really becomes the key objective of the line. Commuting to Milton Keynes is also significant – after about half past eight in the morning there are more people coming up the stairs from the platforms than going down them, and this will increase with the Network Rail move from its London, Birmingham and Leeds bases.

How then has Milton Keynes fared since the WCML upgrade? Badly, if passenger footfall is any guide. Whilst stations that have benefitted from the Very High Frequency timetable introduced early in 2009 have seen increases in passenger numbers of as much as 60%, Milton Keynes actually dropped by 3% in 2008/9 compared with 2007/8. Watford Junction fared even worse with a drop of 20%. Whilst this may partly be explained by the impact of emerging recession on London commuting, commuter-dominated Northampton at least stayed steady.

The reasons are not hard to find. Watford, so far as the WCML is concerned, is now served simply by an hourly Birmingham train. Milton Keynes has benefitted from a doubling of its Manchester service, albeit to hourly from a ludicrous 2-hourly interval, but virtually all direct trains to Liverpool and Glasgow have gone. Although London Midland and Virgin both provide an hourly train between Milton Keynes and Birmingham, the Virgin service passes the London Midland so that the effective service for passengers remains hourly, which is quite uncompetitive with road for a 65-mile journey between two locations well served by motorways.

As for the London commuter service, when the commuter and InterCity peaks overlap in the evening, and Virgin trains "pick up only" at Milton Keynes, there are only two fast trains per hour from Euston to Leighton Buzzard, Milton Keynes and Northampton, provided by London Midland. Despite evening peak ticket restrictions and use of the 350/2 units with 3+2 seating, they are overcrowded. To get anything like a decent standard class seat you need to be on the platform almost as the previous train leaves.

Even off-peak, when Virgin trains do serve Milton Keynes, what seems to be a total of 5 trains per hour, isn't. The xx46 London Midland immediately follows the xx43 Virgin service to Birmingham which is faster so the LM train only picks up people who decide not to run for the Virgin. And not only does the xx13 LM follow very

closely the xx10 Virgin to Chester, but is passed by the xx20 Virgin Manchester. The result is that the effective service is only 3 tph.

It is also peculiarly difficult to make a rail journey between not just Milton Keynes itself but the whole South Midlands growth area and Yorkshire and the North East. There is no obvious good route. Drive to Peterborough over horrible roads and not be able to park if you get there later than 0715? Catch a train at 90 degrees to your intended direction and change at Birmingham? Slow slow slow cross-country from Banbury? Wellingborough stands out as a well-placed station with adequate car parking, but its service to Derby to access the Cross Country route halved in December 2008 when trains were diverted to serve Corby. I have been known to drive from Towcester to Tamworth to pick up the cross-country service, mainly because you could get a good bacon sandwich there before they turned it into a Lemon Tree (I'm not sure how conventional demand modelling reflects that) but in the end changed my job to avoid having to go to York at all.

Some other stations that may not have done well directly out of the VHF timetable, such as Lichfield, have, however, seen dramatic increases in patronage. This probably indicates the extent of suppressed demand for more local flows, as in place of WCML expresses the local service provided by London Midland has improved their connectivity with nearby locations and with Northampton.

So what Milton Keynes wants after HS2 is:

- A commuter service to London with capacity to meet demand
- A direct service to Birmingham with frequency to offer an attractive alternative to driving
- Commuter services from nearby major locations including the West Midlands
- Improved links to Glasgow, the North West, Yorkshire and the North East.

Providing this depends on two key principles for the post-HS2 situation, once there is no distinction between Virgin and London Midland trains – the residual WCML services will be run by one franchise;

1. London to Birmingham journey times no longer matter;
2. In generating local and regional demand, frequency is more important than speed.

Let's start, then, with 2 tph London – Birmingham, calling (as well as at Coventry and Birmingham International as now) at Watford, Milton Keynes and Rugby. This doubles the Birmingham service for those stations, as well as doing the same for direct London trains to Rugby. A simple calculation of "what's left" may point to just one residual Birmingham train per hour on the WCML, but the dramatically improved frequency will capture traffic from road (Principle 2), and other locations such as Hemel Hempstead (for St Albans) may merit stops (Principle 1) to contribute further traffic.

On the opposite quarters there will be one Chester and one Manchester, also stopping at Watford and Milton Keynes. That's four fast trains per hour at Milton Keynes as the core of the service, with, depending on the stops chosen, a journey time of about 35 minutes.

What do we then need to add to make a commuter service for Northampton, Milton Keynes and stations South thereof? Currently, 11 London Midland trains arrive at Euston between 0800 and 0900. The RUS forecasts 30% growth, so turning that into 14 would be plausible. But the "core 4" will be partly filled already on arrival at Milton Keynes, albeit many passengers will alight there, and there is current overcrowding to be dealt with, so a total of 16 arrivals per peak hour at Euston off the classic WCML seems a realistic objective.

For Northampton, then, let's bid two fasts calling at Milton Keynes and Leighton Buzzard. These will start back at Birmingham, and make up 4 tph between Birmingham Interchange and Milton Keynes. As the "Core 4" will draw Milton Keynes business disproportionately, Leighton Buzzard passengers stand a chance of sitting down on these two.

Then add two semi-fast and two stoppers to lift the present service level from Northampton from four to six in a peak hour, and provide for commuting to non-London locations. One or more of these can start back from the Trent Valley or Points North. The rest of the 16 will be two trains per hour starting from each of Milton Keynes, Tring and Watford. In addition, everyone knows that 2 tph between the WCML and Croydon via the West London Line are needed now. These two West London Line trains also help out with the commuting to locations such as Watford and Hemel Hempstead, so that some Euston trains can skip more stops than now, but all stations South of Milton Keynes should keep their present service level if not actually gaining.

To reduce the service to appropriate off-peak levels, the Watford starters and two of the Northampton trains would be missed out, with additional stops made by the remaining trains as necessary.

Maybe the Milton Keynes starters could start back from Birmingham International running direct rather than via Northampton – that would give four direct trains per hour connecting with HS2 at Birmingham Interchange to link with trains to the North West and Glasgow, and after Phase 2 of HS2, to Leeds and the North East. So by connection Milton Keynes gains an accelerated service by connection to Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and in due course Yorkshire and the North-East. All that of course depends on a sufficient sample of HS2 services actually stopping at the Interchange – the service there must not be confined to the Birmingham trains only.

Coventry may be unhappy, having in place of three fast Londons per hour just two slower ones. But its principal London business will be served via the Birmingham Interchange and HS2, with the further option of trains via the Chiltern line, and its prime need is for commuter services to Birmingham, Northampton and Milton Keynes, all of which improve in this scheme.

But we can be even more imaginative.

South Northamptonshire currently has no station within its boundaries. Accessing Milton Keynes in peak hours is tedious – a journey that should take 20 minutes on clear roads can easily take twice that in the commuter peak, so by the time residents of South Northants are on their train they have suffered a journey that for many people would be the limit of their commuting. For those heading North, this journey is even going in the wrong direction.

Stations serving South Northants more directly have been suggested in the past. A site near Hunsbury on the Northampton loop could be accessed from M1 Junction 15A, the A43 interchange, and as well as serving local commuters could act as a Parkway for travellers from the North and West of the site. Its value for travellers to the North, however, would be limited.

But Blisworth on the main line itself has extensive ex-railway lands in the vicinity that could be converted to car parking, and could easily be accessed from the A43. With the current service pattern, stops at a new station on the main line would be impossible, but with the transfer of long-distance trains to HS2 this objection vapourises. Blisworth could then serve the Parkway functions, as well as providing South Northamptonshire with direct services to Birmingham and possibly Manchester as well as avoiding the need to drive to Milton Keynes to make a journey to London, relieving congestion on the A5.

South of Hanslope Junction, the fast lines are on the West side of the WCML, and Slow lines on the East side. This dates from the time when the current Slow lines were in fact goods lines serving the Willesden yards, and most passenger trains used the Fast lines. But is that the right pattern for the future?

Today's freight trains, running non-stop at 60 or 75 mph can coexist quite happily with a limited-stop outer-suburban service, which will be in effect what the WCML provides. Mixing either with stopping passenger trains is the problem. So perhaps the outer suburban and regional trains should use upgraded Slow lines, whilst the present Fasts are given over to the local service. This would simplify and speed up the access to and from the West London Line for the Croydon trains, offering a much-needed improvement in journey times.

The intriguing possibility then also arises of making a connection North of Harrow with the current DC pair of tracks, shamefully underused with just three 4-car trains per hour on an all-stations service to Euston. We can easily visualise a pattern of services from Watford Junction, running all stations to Harrow then fast to Euston

on the AC lines, or perhaps running to Croydon as the dual-voltage stock already in use would then avoid conversion of the line from DC to AC. Or even a pattern using the link to the Dudding Hill line North of Willesden, to reach the Great Western line and serve Heathrow, by connections at the very least.

So the up side of HS2 for the counties it passes through could be a commuter service to London that a normal person might choose to use, improved links to Birmingham and the North West / North East, better commuting opportunities to Milton Keynes, more trains to West and South London, and even a link to Heathrow that avoids crossing London.

This is all somewhere between speculation and specification, and just as no plan of battle survives first contact with the enemy, no train service specification survives first contact with the timing graph. I'm sure I've overlooked someone else's local station. It may not all be possible. Other things may be possible instead – for instance, maybe the Euston – Chester service could be formed of two IEP sets (one diesel, one electric?) and split to serve Liverpool as well. A second Manchester train per hour (or perhaps combined Liverpool and Manchester), albeit stopping more often than now, would be attractive.

The challenge to the elected representatives of Milton Keynes, Buckingham and South Northants is to accept that HS2 might happen, and put their political clout into securing and developing residual services on the WCML to meet local and regional needs. If they win their fight against HS2, they will still face the responsibility of finding a solution to problems facing their commuting constituents now that can only get worse without it. If they fight against HS2 until the last ditch and lose, it may then be too late to influence that debate. Are they up to that challenge?