

16th June 2003

Final West Coast Main Line Strategy: No Surprises, Just Progress

Substantial benefits for passengers and freight customers have been confirmed in the West Coast Strategy published by the SRA today.

The Strategy sets out a clear set of objectives and outputs for the West Coast Route Modernisation (WCRM) project, including specification of future use of capacity; a policy on performance and maintenance, a clear programme of infrastructure enhancements, and an agreed plan for delivery.

In addition the Strategy will deliver greater output and better value, with a £9.9 billion cost cap, representing value for money for taxpayers, passengers and freight customers. The SRA estimates that the total cost of the WCML upgrade (enhancements) as defined in the Strategy will now be approximately £2.3 billion. The remainder of the project comprises a major programme of asset renewals, making good the backlog that has accumulated over several decades of indecision and neglect. The total cost of enhancements and renewals is therefore estimated to be £9.9 billion.

140mph tilt running on the WCML continues to be the subject of further analysis and examination and has not been ruled out for the future.

The key components of the Strategy are:

- 125 mile/h route capability for tilting trains delivering much faster journey times between London and the West Midlands, Manchester, Liverpool, the North West, North Wales and Scotland;
- Capacity for 80% more long distance passenger trains than today;
- Capacity for 60-70% more freight traffic than at present;
- Capacity for other users of the route, in some cases with enhanced capacity and in others with faster journey times;
- Better and more resilient performance;
- Improved safety measures.

The first improvements will come on stream in Autumn 2004:

- Doubling, to four trains an hour at peak times, the existing London-Birmingham service to boost frequency and provide 125 mile/h service;
- 125 mile/h running - taking half an hour off the Manchester-London journey time;
- Faster timings between Glasgow and London - reducing the journey time from five and a half hours to about four and a half hours.

Key changes

The key changes proposed in the final Strategy document compared to the draft are:

Priority in capacity allocation has been confirmed as being directed towards longer distance passenger and freight markets and to improving London area peak commuter services to achieve best value for money;

Cross Country services have been revised with a focus on longer distance flows and a set of complementary high quality interurban services allocated to other franchises;

A revision of the Strategy for key areas such as Rugby, Stafford, Stockport, Stoke-Macclesfield. In changing the specification the SRA has been able to either increase outputs at no additional cost, reduce the cost of outputs or take advantage of the blockade strategy to enhance project scope in a cost-effective manner;

The draft Strategy did not make it wholly clear that the acceleration to services to and from Liverpool and Glasgow was in two stages, with the main stage in September 2004 and final further improvements shortly afterwards, in 2005.

Notes

1. The final West Coast Strategy takes into account the updated 2003 Strategic Plan, and the SRA's Capacity Utilisation Policy. It is consistent with the SRA's Network Utilisation Strategy. It constitutes a formal Strategy of the SRA under section 206 of the Transport Act 2000 with respect to the SRA's statutory purposes.
2. In order to give effect to the Strategy, there will be new and amended track access agreements negotiated by train operators and Network Rail. The track access agreements will be submitted to the Rail Regulator for approval. Clearly, this Strategy means that commitments made by parties to the PUG 2 contract will need to be revised. The SRA will guide Network Rail and Virgin Rail Group towards a new track access agreement, using the Rail Regulator's Model clause format and with outputs consistent with this Strategy. The SRA will also define new franchise agreements, or renegotiate existing franchise agreements as appropriate, so that these reflect the overall updated 2003 Strategic Plan and this West Coast Route Modernisation Strategy.
3. Throughout the route modernisation process, the principal long distance network will be kept in place - every day - for the main routes, London-Birmingham; London-Manchester; London-Glasgow. A new service operated by Midland Mainline Limited has recently been introduced for Manchester-London (operating to St Pancras) for 2003/04 which will help sustain and develop this key rail market in advance of the major uplift to follow in Autumn 2004 on the West Coast itself.
4. Apart from part of the Trent Valley multiple tracking project (which has recently received TWA powers) and completion of the revised Stafford area work, the upgrade programme is to be completed under this Strategy by 31 March 2006. Thereafter, the WCML will become like all

- other parts of the national network, with proper renewals and maintenance activities carried out as a matter of course.
5. The SRA published a consultation document on the West Coast Strategy in October 2002. The consultation period ended in December 2002. Nearly 30 presentations were made, 3,000 copies of the draft printed and 350 sent to organisations including statutory consultees, regional and local authorities, user groups and the rail industry. Just under half those consulted responded.
 6. The draft Strategy document itself focussed on the plan to deliver the infrastructure project, and its impact on services, and the increase in capacity and performance generated by the project. The final outputs in terms of service specifications were described as indicative and subject to change through the timetable development and implementation process.
 7. The West Coast Main Line (WCML) is the most important trunk route on Britain's rail network. It links London and the South East with the largest English conurbations (Birmingham and Manchester), as well as with Liverpool, North Wales, the North West, Cumbria and Scotland. The route is the core national long distance freight route (carrying over 40% of all UK freight traffic), and has significant commuting flows around London, Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham

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