

INFORMED SOURCES e-Preview September 2024

This month's column is dominated by the East Coast Main Line, thanks to two Freedom of Information releases. There's also some shock news on the proposed linespeed upgrades on the West Coast.

ECML Timetable – Haines highlights recast challenge.

Woodwalton – the enhancement that never was.

ORR Class 805 Improvement Notice bombshell.

Finally released under a Freedom of Information request from that indefatigable Timetable expert Jonathan Tyler, the final report of Andrew Haines' 'Allocation of Capacity on the East Coast Mainline' is now three years old. But while the railway world has changed in that time, the report is much more in line with the current political climate than that of the Government which commissioned it.

Of course, Mr Haines is an operator by nature, making him the natural choice to produce the requested 'operator agnostic, blank sheet of paper' timetable. And the overall message I drew from this 130 page report is the primacy of the operator in creating timetables that work.

In fact, when you get to it the proposed timetable is just plain common sense. The real meat of the report is the detailing of the multiple factors which were considered in creating the baseline timetable, plus the accompanying analysis of the impact of variations, such as increased reliability, shorter journey times or maximum capacity.

A running theme is that the current timetable has grown organically around British Rail's original 1990s electrification specification. The Report notes, 'current or past timetables do not provide a suitable baseline position for capacity allocation due to the incremental way they have been developed and the resultant mix of services and stopping patterns, which contribute to poor operational performance'.

It argues that a new 'blank sheet' timetable would 'ideally', be based on a repeatable service pattern providing 'a consistent approach to calls at intermediate stations and timings over the various flat crossings on the line'.

This would make the service both easier for passengers to understand and the railway to operate. It would also allow the calling patterns and journey opportunities 'inherent within the timetable' to be coordinated across all services.

When the ECML was electrified, the Government had set BR InterCity a profit target which determined the train plan for the new Timetable. As prime user of the ECML InterCity was 'first on the graph' with other services planned around those that provided the greatest financial return. This changed after privatisation in 1996, when it was almost a case of all franchises are equal.

A return to that earlier simplicity is central to Mr Haines' new 'operator agnostic' timetable. As far as possible, those Long Distance High Speed (LDHS) services with the greatest potential to generate revenue, plus wider benefits, are 'first on the graph'. Local and regional services are planned around this structure.

One exception is the existing commuter timetable at the southern end of the route which remain as is. And among the background material in the report is a new analysis of capacity over two-track Welwyn Viaduct-Woolmer Green 'bottleneck'.

While at the Southern end of the line the key issue is fitting LDHS services round the Great Northern/GTR timetable, in the north the issue is congestion, with TransPennine Express and Cross Country connecting with the ECML at York. A penetrating analysis shows how the franchise replacement free-for-all has, over the years, produced an inefficient, not to say confusing, pattern of northbound departures.

As the Report notes dryly, 'this section is very operationally constrained'. All because operators have increased the number and frequency of direct services from the West Midlands and South Yorkshire (Cross Country) or the North West (TransPennine) to Yorkshire and the Northeast. Mr Haines provides a telling summary of the result.

While the report pre-dates the recent ECML timetable crisis, it highlights its proximate cause, noting that requirements in the 2024 timetable specification 'have the potential to exacerbate the efficient allocation of capacity'. Quite.

Noting that these requirements have not been updated to reflect any post-pandemic changes in demand, the Report adds that attempting to deliver them, utilising the 'prevailing incremental approach,' will be challenging and lead to performance and reliability dis-benefits. Quite, again.

Baseline

So what have all these various considerations produced? The column details a Baseline timetable which aims to deliver a core level of connectivity between all key destinations. It incorporates the performance benefits from the various ECML upgrades which were still underway at the time of the study. The use of capacity is claimed to be approximately in line

with the December 2019 timetable.

But politically, the 'blank-sheet' timetable fails to meet DfT's aspirations for more capacity and faster journey times expected from the East Coast Connectivity Fund (ECCF) and the replacement of the Intercity fleet, as described in last month's Column.

To me, the Baseline timetable looks more Waitrose 'Essentials' than Sainsbury's 'Taste the difference'. But, as the apostle of the 'boringly reliable railway', perhaps I am a fine one to carp. And, in fairness, Mr Haines has managed to cut 10 min off the current all-day London-Edinburgh headline time.

Two variants on this Baseline timetable - higher performance in terms of reliability- and faster Anglo-Scots timings, are evaluated.

Improved reliability would be achieved through longer station dwell times plus greater performance allowances. Slower journey times would be traded for service reliability.

Faster headline Anglo-Scottish journey times would require fewer stops in one of the two trains per hour. Contrarily, to maintain connectivity, stops would be added to the other service.

I mentioned earlier the Government's expectations, including more capacity and the report includes a 'Capacity Max option'. This builds on the Baseline service, while, as far as possible, exploiting the extra two train/h from the ECML Upgrade Programme. In this respect it is the equivalent of the aborted December 2024 timetable.

'Capacity max' includes an additional hourly King's Cross- Newcastle service plus a fast Edinburgh-King's Cross service, calling only at Newcastle. This offers a potential 4h 6min headline journey time.

Challenge

Within the existing regulatory and legal framework, notes the Report, it is likely to be challenging to implement any of the proposed options. The next step should be to discuss the ideas in the Report with ORR and DfT.

Implementing the options would also involve persuading open access operators to seek changes to their existing rights, either by adding station calls, extending the number of trains per day they provide, but in some cases removing certain services.

Let's conclude with a reality check from the Report. 'Taken together, our tentative conclusion so far is that a fundamental change to the access structure is likely to be needed given that the current one is designed to support a different industry model, and therefore the (timetable) Options cannot be delivered within the existing legal and regulatory framework based upon the principle of competition for track capacity'.

Over to you Transport Secretary, as you 'move fast and fix things'.

Woodwalton mystery solved

In the June column, I failed signally to unravel the mystery of the Huntingdon-Woodwalton four-tracking.

In 2012 the Department for Transport's High Level Output Specification (HLOS) for CP5 included a ring-fenced East Coast Connectivity Fund (ECCF). A Network Rail report to the Office of Rail & Road in 2014 listing works under the ECCF, did not include what we now call the Huntingdon-Woodwalton four tracking scheme. However a year later, it did appear in a further Network Rail report to ORR listing seven schemes 'required to unlock ECML capacity'.

And that was it, until in 2020 Network Rail told ORR that 'Cancellation of Huntingdon to Woodwalton 4-tracking has cost the opportunity for 1 Up LDHS path that could overtake a freight path had the project been delivered'. But, hang on, had the scheme even been approved?

Researching the archives showed that the scheme seemed to have been live at some stage because I found a commissioning date for the associated resignalling. But even that came as news to the nominated signalling contractor!

Anyway a reader's Freedom of Information request to DfT has now solved the mystery. The project was never approved in the first place.

In 2018 I quoted an Informed Source as doubting that the financial case for the four-tracking would get past the DfT Board Investment & Commercial Committee (BICC). And this was indeed the case when the scope of the ECML capacity upgrades was put forward for approval.

According to DfT, following the May 2018 BICC decision 'activity was paused on the project'. Odd then, that it was still listed in Network Rail's Enhancements Delivery Programme published in December 2018.

DfT thought the project 'represented poor value for money'. It also claimed that the ECML Enhancements Programme, that went ahead without the Woodwalton four tracking, 'offered greater value for money whilst still being able to deliver the core ECML Enhancements Programme outputs'.

But, as the subsequent cancellation of the December 2024 timetable showed, all the core outputs could not be delivered

after all.

ORR spikes Avanti Class 805

Six weeks after Avanti's Hitachi Class 805 bi-mode trains were cleared to enter service by the Office of Rail & Road (ORR), the Chief Inspecting Officer of Railways issued an Improvement Notice (IN) requiring safety changes to the same trains. This left everyone puzzled, since it allows the trains to remain in service.

For the moment the justification for the IN remains unclear. Because Avanti has appealed against the Notice, ORR is unable to discuss it pending a decision. However, ORR did tell me that it has issued an Improvement Notice to Avanti West Coast 'because, unlike existing trains they are replacing, the new Class 80x trains are not fitted with an automatic speed supervision system'.

Avanti told me, 'Our fleet has the necessary relevant certification and safety systems mandated by industry standards. Avanti West Coast is the most recent train operator to introduce this fleet with agreement with the ORR. During the introduction of our new fleet AWC has liaised with the ORR and continues to do so on the matter contained within the improvement notice.

An equally non-plussed, Hitachi added 'the new Evero fleet is compliant with the latest standards in safety, and approved by ORR. A two-year window has been issued for an improvement notice, which states there is no immediate safety risk'.

So, what's behind the IN? In the absence of any formal explanation, my best assumption is a concern that Avanti drivers signed for both the tilting Class 221 and Class 805 trains will be driving to two different speed profiles.

Currently, both the Class 221 Super Voyagers and Class 390 Pendolinos run to Enhanced Permissible Speeds (EPS) for tilting trains on curves. I suspect that ORR is concerned that a driver signed for Class 221, but driving a Class 805, might lose situational awareness and go barreling into a curve at the Class 221 EPS rather than the signed PS.

But, as I explain in the column, a Class 805 accidentally curving at Class 221 EPS is clearly not a safety risk, although it could be a passenger comfort issue.

I haven't considered how you would retrofit the Class 80x units to have the same speed supervision at Avanti's tilting trains. But I do know it's going to be very expensive.

Has anyone at ORR done the sums on cost per fatality avoided? When the appeal is resolved, I hope to be able to discuss the contents of that six page IN with its authors for a future column.

Roger's blog

At the moment we are still waiting for an announcement on the leadership of the 'Shadow Great British Railways' (SGBR). This was expected earlier but seems to have been held up by the Chancellor's recent statement.

Meanwhile the new Transport Secretary is still making performative announcements on Nationalisation of train operators. But she can't defer dealing with the serious matter of recreating a vertically integrated railway much longer.

Meanwhile, even though August was traditionally the 'silly season' for news, there's new heavy duty stuff arriving most days. A few days back I even got an old fashioned brown paper envelope in the post.

Before the internet, this was the medium of choice for Informed Sources sending me material I wasn't supposed to know about. And, appropriately the contents of the envelope was a technical report from 1991, touching on a subject close to readers' hearts - or rather, another part of their anatomy!

There's also the latest Network Rail Enhancements Delivery Plan to dissect, plus the Transport Secretary's £2.9 billion of unfunded transport projects to unravel, all on top of the Mail Rail analysis held over from this month.

And there wasn't time to examine the Haines Report's approach to freight on the ECML. So I had better finish this blog and get on with next month's column.

Roger