

A cautionary tale of rail expansion

Kenilworth lost its railway station in 1965 as part of the Beeching cuts, although the line on which it was located between Coventry and Leamington Spa managed to cling on as a freight-only through route.

It was heavily rationalised by British Rail down from a double-track to a single-line branch between Milverton Junction and Kenilworth Common, but would go on to regain passenger services in 1977 - run by BR between Birmingham, Oxford, Paddington and the South Coast, and now operated by CrossCountry.

Since the 1970s, local politicians have made strenuous efforts to reinstate the station, but have met with very little success. A change in fortune finally came with the passage of the Localism Act 2011, which empowered local authorities to play a more significant role in local transport provision and associated infrastructure.

As a result of an £11.3 million funding partnership struck between Warwickshire County Council (WCC), Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership and the Department for Transport's New Stations Fund in 2013, Kenilworth is now on the brink of having a station again. But as a long-time resident of the town, my view is of a story of woe and calamity that does not bode well for the future of similar local authority-sponsored rail enhancement schemes.

That is because from the very outset, when planning permission was granted in 2011, the project to build the station has raised serious questions about the ability of local government to deliver technical schemes where they have no or little experience.

There have also been significant problems concerning cost management of the new station (now estimated at £13.6m), as well as the incredible failure to open it on at least four separate occasions since its original opening date was missed back in December 2016.

Meanwhile, I also have to strongly condemn the apparent lack of transparency in WCC's handling of the process, and what could be interpreted as efforts made to avoid being held properly accountable by station co-funders, local stakeholders and taxpayers alike.

This culminated in me sending a letter to local MP Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth, Conservative) on March 15 to request that the scheme be referred to Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Sajid Javid, Secretary of State Chris Grayling and the Transport Select Committee (RAIL 849).

Local rail campaigner FRASER PITHIE has been among the supporters of the scheme to reopen Kenilworth station, but has been frustrated by a succession of postponements and lack of transparency about the reasons why. He offers his personal insight into the problems

I will now explain the reasons why.

I think the best way to describe the Kenilworth station project is as a 'dog's breakfast'. After all, the station is more than 15 months late, 20% over its original budget, and considerable mistakes were made in its early construction.

One example was the apparent absence in the proposed station plans of knowledge concerning a pre-existing culvert, which meant the whole station had to be moved around 12 metres northwards from its planned site. The responsibility for this oversight has not been divulged.

Local authorities such as WCC rarely possess detailed railway knowledge, so have to buy it in by hiring special consultants. Consequently, as scheme sponsor, they are almost entirely in the hands of the rail consultant and heavily dependent on them.

The consultant in this case is SLC Rail which, according to its website, charges what it describes as "indicative" annual fees of around £700,000.

Frustratingly, it is very difficult to know exactly how much SLC Rail is being paid by WCC, owing to the opaque nature of the local authority's responses to Freedom of Information requests made on this subject.

However, local authorities do not, by hiring external consultants, lose their responsibility and accountability to taxpayers for the efficient and effective use of public funds. It is therefore hard to see any justification for why WCC is withholding basic information about a multimillion-pound infrastructure project such

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as this.

This unwillingness to be open and honest is all the more worrying given that the cost of the station has risen from an original estimate of £11.3m in 2013 to its current level of £13.6m - of which £1.5m is a contingency fee.

With £4.9m funding from the DfT's New Stations Fund and £3.5m from the Coventry & Warwickshire LEP, in addition to the £5.2m made available by WCC, I am surprised that there has not been more public interest from these bodies as to why the cost increases have occurred.

Meanwhile, WCC's decision not to use the industry standard and the Office of Rail and Road's favoured set of management rules and essential guidance for the cost management of construction projects (Rail Method of Measurement) makes a direct comparison with other new station projects difficult.

All I can point to is that 50 miles south of Kenilworth (at Oxford Parkway) and approximately 50 miles north (at Ilkeston), larger station developments with longer platforms and bigger car parks were respectively opened in 2015 and 2017 at a cost considerably less than Kenilworth (£8m in the case of Oxford Parkway, and £10m for Ilkeston).

There may, of course, be mitigating factors. But if so, why has WCC declined to explain the differences?

One reason could be that Kenilworth station is not an out-of-town parkway, and is closer to the town centre than either Oxford Parkway or Ilkeston. It is therefore highly likely that land costs were higher, but in response to an FoI request made by myself, WCC has so far refused to give an actual cost for this on the grounds of "commercial sensitivity".

This decision is made all the more puzzling as the information is already publicly available at the Land Registry, which confirmed the land cost at £1.27m.

But according to the set of figures that WCC has released, £2.31m was given for 'Land and Associated Costs', which begs the question →



Colas 70816 and 66037 pass the new Kenilworth station (which is 20% over budget and 15 months late) with a Westbury to Bescot engineers train on February 12. FRASER PITHIE.

➔ of what the other £1.04m was for? Similarly, I have discovered that the construction contract awarded to Graham Construction to build Kenilworth was £5.73m, yet WCC shows £7.78m for 'Scheme Construction'.

This puts more than £2.05m with someone other than the building contractor, which WCC says is covered by utility diversions, consultant fees, WCC internal costs and Network Rail fees payable for associated track and signalling works.

None has been itemised. And to make matters worse, an FOI request made to NR to get more detail about the works was refused to me "on the grounds of national security".

In fairness to WCC, the project has also fallen foul of decisions outside of its control.

It was conceived on the basis that the line would be redoubled through Kenilworth and electrified as part of NR's North-South 'Electric Spine' scheme for completion in Control Period 5 (April 2014-March 2019).

The Hendy Review published in November 2015 put an end to these plans (at least in the short term), leaving WCC to foot the bill for a footbridge and lifts leading to the foundations to a second platform which will not be used for the foreseeable future.

What is less easy to forgive is WCC Joint Managing Director Monica Fogarty's decision to blame the DfT when the station failed for a second time in December 2017.

Having said that "the station is completed and looks amazing" just days earlier, Fogarty then hit out at the DfT for not supplying sufficient drivers or rolling stock to start the hourly service that West Midlands Trains (WMT) had applied to the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) to operate.

The DfT issued a firm denial of the accusation, and a succession of revised opening dates was given by WCC for February and then March. All were missed.

The DfT's position was subsequently fully

vindicated by an email I received from ORR Chief Executive Joanna Whittington on March 16. In it, she confirmed that ORR was still waiting to receive information from WCC that is needed to ensure that the station complies with safety standards (RAIL 849).

She added: "Once we have received all of the information... we will be able to complete our authorisation of the station in order that it can come into service. We do not have a date from the project team regarding when they would like to open the station."

On March 20, Fogarty said on local radio that the outstanding information would be submitted later that day. But why did WCC attempt to blame others for its failure to open the station in December, when it is clear that fault lay at the council's door?

To add insult to injury, WCC stonewalled press and residents' enquiries repeatedly throughout the month of March, leading to an information vacuum and heaping further

⚡ Kenilworth has to serve as a warning to local authorities across the UK not to commit to schemes unless they have clear understanding regarding rail construction and operations, and are assured through robust scrutiny procedures that those managing schemes on their behalf are effective in meeting deliverables on time and on budget. ⚡