

Dear Charlotte,

As I mentioned at the last Stakeholder Meeting with you, I am forwarding the WMT/WMR-related inputs to you for broader circulation within your organisation.

These comments come from a survey of members carried out by SLRUG at the end of 2023 and early 2024, with the express aim of seeking our members' thoughts on the future structure and direction of SLRUG, including our membership rates, etc. We were surprised that so many respondents used our questionnaire's 'Other' column to lambast you – the operator of train services between Stratford upon Avon and Birmingham. Of course, we would not hesitate to forward any positive comments received; alas, there were none!

Here are some of the comments verbatim; we list only ten here, numbered and made anonymous, but similar views are communicated to us on an almost daily basis from many more through other channels. Let the horror story begin.....

1) "At the outset, I commend the efforts of those committed "few" who battle to keep the line open and berate West Midlands Trains for poor performance. Like so many members, I am guilty of not being proactive, but I fully support your actions. Perhaps a New Year Resolution from myself should be to attend at least one meeting in 2024".

2) *"I firmly believe the SLRUG needs to continue, hopefully in its present form. I agree we need more and younger members to join, but we need a group to apply the pressure required to West Midlands Trains, which is, more often than not, not only to seek improvements to train services to and from Stratford but also actually to run the trains in their current timetable. I agree this all costs money, and I'm quite prepared to pay an increase in subscriptions if necessary.*

There's also the topic of alterations to services, the potential of once again having a direct service to Oxford and possibly Nuneaton. We need to be represented in any discussions on these matters.

Cancellations the night before - How can they get away with this procedural con? Arrangements made in advance, like hospital appointments, business meetings, concert/theatre tickets, etc., must be abandoned, and alternative travel sought. I could go on about the issues here, like disabilities, not having a car, rescheduling hospital appointments in the current climate, etc., etc?"

3)"Suggesting we check trains are running on our phones is a cop-out as checking late at night does not help as alternative arrangements need advance warning. There has to be a later evening train to Stratford. Going to concerts, theatres, public meetings, and events means it is impossible to catch the 22.25. I suggest adding a 23.00.

The train via Solihull from Stratford should stop at Wilmcote, not just for access to shopping but also because many people in the Wilmcote area work in Solihull and have relatives there. There is a growing older population where services outside of rush hour should be considered with more priority."

As volunteers at a station, we are disheartened and considering giving up withdraw because of the apparent lack of concern for a **Service**. There appears to be no pride in running a good service."

4) *"I use WMR a lot, and every time I walk to the station, I feel the stress build up. How can a company in this day and age be so utterly useless?"*

I was waiting for one train and surprise, surprise, it was late. It was an hourly service. I appreciate what the RUG is trying to do, but I feel when you try to communicate with WMT, they are like those nodding dogs you used to see in the back of cars, and all they want to do is for you to finish so they can get back to doing other things and think up some new excuses for not running trains."

5) "A few words by way of explanation as to why I have not renewed my membership. Quite simply, I am completely disillusioned with the train service. How can I support something that has frequently let me down? I am fed up with the general situation, with cancellations, ever-rising fares, booking office closures, strike action, and NO STAFF to ask!

I have lost count of the occasions at Stratford I've found the booking office closed, toilets closed, trains incorrectly directed to the wrong platforms (according to the screens), confused passengers and nobody there to help (except myself). Quite frankly, train travel now is rubbish, managers patting themselves on the back for failure to provide a service to long-suffering would-be passengers. But they, the managers, do not need to worry. To them, passengers are just figures on a graph - I've deserted the trains for the bus".

6)*"I have been put off from using the train. I use the bus now because my wife is fed up with having to collect me when trains are cancelled or don't turn up. "I have been a lifelong railway user and have always been happy to support my local line. I've tried talking to acquaintances about using the train, but I no longer do. The reason is the total unreliability of the train service.*

My life partner uses Porridge to Birmingham, and I use Hall Green; when we meet at Moor Street, it is (or seems to be) 50/50 that one of us will suffer problems, if not on the way out, then on our return. I'm lucky; living in Birmingham, I can jump on a bus; my partner has Chiltern and will use Chiltern out of choice. I will only use the train when I can see it on Real Time Trains, even that is not infallible when a train is cancelled at Snow Hill!

Knowing the railway timetable, I cringe when I see a Stratford-upon-Avon train has been cancelled. We are members of a walking group and have started many a circular walk from Wood End, Danzey or Earlswood; how do you explain to a party of tired walkers that they are stuck in a windswept and barren station for up to 2 hours with no escape except at Earlswood when we can huddle in the garden centre café. We no longer risk it. Sorry, this is so downbeat, but no matter how good and well-intentioned SLRUG is, many people's expectation of the product "Railway" is at an all-time low and not getting any better".

7) "The complete inability to provide a reliable train service since it (WMT) took on the West Midlands franchise in 2017 should have meant it was removed as the train operator. Every September to December period in the last seven years has seen train crew shortages and short notice train services increase as Christmas approaches. The DfT is failing the travelling public by not dealing with WMT. The level of unreliability is now pushing people away from using the train as they cannot face all the disruption and associated anguish in their lives. SLRUG must prevail, but more users must be encouraged to join to give it more clout and influence. There would be merit in a federation of rail user groups from across the midlands; this could encourage more passengers to join their local group and reinforce and give more gravitas to a federation dealing with train companies and transport authorities. I think Railfuture is a natural organisation that's the best place to fulfil such a role".

8) "*Rail journeys increased by 14% in July to September 2023 compared to the same quarter in 2022, yet WMR was one of only two operators that failed to show any growth (I have not established whether there is a decline or whether the figures are the same as last year). If you are aware of the issue, my apologies for bothering you. I think it is highly likely that WMR's unreliable service and the lack of revenue protection resulting in passengers travelling fraudulently not being accounted for amongst the number of journeys recorded are factors in this poor overall performance. WMR's efforts at drumming up new trade may also be seen as woefully inadequate.*"

9) "I have used railways ever since I can remember and have travelled extensively by rail for work and pleasure in my 75-year history. I lived in East Kent, Newcastle, East Anglia, Stockport, Hull, Merseyside, and Hampshire before moving to Stratford some 11 years ago. I can honestly say that throughout my life, I have never experienced such a consistently unacceptable train service provided to the town where I live, as is currently being provided by WMR.

At your AGM, the WMR representative claimed that they were working hard to minimise the disruption due to staff shortages, but whilst they might be, it is hard to see that when trying to use the train. Fortunately, one can usually avoid extreme inconvenience by checking the website for cancellations, but not everyone can do so. Things must have reached an all-time low on Christmas Eve when Chiltern ran buses to Leamington all day, and WMR cancelled the first three trains out of Stratford despite advertising a full service

on their website (although with a caveat that up to 50% of the trains on the Snow Hill lines might be cancelled!). While I understand alternative road services would be provided, the website did not advertise them. I suspect, therefore, that the use was minimal. Whilst WMR claims that they have introduced a more robust timetable from May, there is nothing robust about a timetable plagued with cancellations.

I cannot remember when my tickets were last checked on a WMR journey; the guards/conductors?) seemingly had no interest in on-train ticket checks. I last experienced such a check before the pandemic - Chiltern are much better in this respect.

The lack of checks must have led to increased fraudulent travel. I am sure that the passenger usage figures reflect the lack of revenue protection measures."

10) There is an absolute need for the SLRUG to continue to apply pressure on the train operators, who merely send a bill to the government for the costs of running the railway. The performance of this company in managing staff holidays and sickness looks pretty questionable.

The railway deserves to be fought for and supported, even if WMR themselves do not deserve it."

You have to take these comments seriously, and both manage and act upon our members' (not unreasonable) expectations expressed here so eloquently. They, along with all other WMT passengers and SLRUG, are utterly disheartened by the disdain with which they feel they are being treated and the quality of the service provided. The promise of 'jam tomorrow' each time we engage with you over these prolonged failings is no longer credible or acceptable. Passengers are deserting the railway, and we are losing members due to **our** perceived lack of performance holding WMR to account!

It should not come as any surprise that we will be using this information to alert other bodies that have a more substantial influence over you, such as WMR, WMRE, DfT, local MPs, 'Transport Focus' and if necessary the media, to bear down on WMR to bring about change to address the intolerable level of unreliability faced by passengers.

We look forward to hearing from the Directors about this.

Yours sincerely

Peter Morris
Chair
Shakespeare Line Rail User Group