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West Mids reaps the devolution dividend

A new 'metro mayor', growing commuter rail use, light rail expansion projects, HS2... this is a region that's going places

► I was born in Coventry and although my parents moved back to Yorkshire shortly afterwards, they still talk about how, in the early sixties, Coventry embodied something new about Britain: with its new cathedral, one of the first modern gleaming pedestrianised shopping precincts and the first new post war civic theatre (which also established a national reputation). Coventry was the future when the rest of the UK felt grimy and worn out.

Relatives from the North would come to wander round this spacious, modern world - which had with one daring and determined leap become free of all that clapped out Victoriana and its exhausted tropes. In the end of course people also rejected a too crude approach to the remaking of cities around roundabouts and echoing concrete plazas which somewhat unfairly (given the ambition and quality on show) Coventry began to symbolise.

I was thinking about all of that on a snowy March day on a train in the Black Country on my way to meet Malcolm Holmes, the executive director of newly devolved West Midlands Rail. Looking out of the window at the low hills studded with the spires and domes of religious buildings, some now repurposed for different faiths from those that built them. Picked out in black against the white snow. And the chimneys and industrial buildings, unlike elsewhere not all redundant. All mixed in with the suburban semis in a way that always seems to me unique to this part of the world. And I was thinking that in its own unique

industrious 'deeds not words' way how in the last few years it feels like the West Midlands has retaken its rightful place in the world again.

The West Midlands motor trade is on a state-backed mission to be the cockpit for technological change through Connected and Autonomous Vehicles (CAVs), a handsome Birmingham city centre sprouting bold new office blocks (hello Deutsche Bank and HSBC) as well as a sub-region which didn't get the memo about the UK de-industrialising. This is still a place where metal gets bashed. Young people have also spotted something about the West Midlands: around half the population of Birmingham is under 30, much higher than the national average. It's diverse too - the second most ethnically diverse region after London. Someone once said that people move to America to become Americans but they move to the UK to be themselves. And perhaps that's something the West Midlands embodies.

With a pragmatic mayor focused entirely on the day job - but who shares the same political colours as the national government, the investment has also started to flow at a rate more commensurate with the region's economic importance. Hosting the first post-Brexit Commonwealth Games (2022) can't do any harm either in terms of making the case for further investment to ensure the games go without a transport hitch and further showcase the region as it is now - obliterating preconceptions.

This resurgence is also reflected on the extensive local rail network which has been piling on the patronage at an astonishing rate (patronage at New Street is up by a third since 2015 alone!). Indeed, a recent report from the real estate firm Savills found that house prices are rising faster where homes are close to a railway station. Rail has also been steadily eating into the car's share of commuter traffic into Birmingham.

So where next for rail in the West Midlands? In the short term there's a whole new fleet of trains on their way and more to be done to sort out the stations (of which more later). But, looking beyond that, a sure sign of when a city is going places is when it becomes more urgent to bypass city centre termini through more cross city rail capacity (hence Crossrail and Crossrail 2 in London). In case you do not have an abiding interest in mentally juggling the names and locations of various railway junctions (other magazines are available for that) the short version is that Birmingham is already blessed with two through city centre rail corridors - one through a very busy Birmingham New Street and one through a busy Snow Hill. Build a few junctions south of Birmingham (a big project but nothing like building a new tunnel) and more trains could be routed away from the very busy New Street corridor to also make the Snow Hill corridor very busy. The West Midlands is also handily blessed with a multiplicity of junctions and connecting lines which enable you to route trains in all sorts of different directions once out of the core city centre corridors. In short, getting considerably more out of the West Midlands rail infrastructure through an attainable investment budget looks do-able. Attainable indeed when compared with the mega scheme heading the West Midland's way first: HS2. This will reduce journey times from London to Birmingham to 50 minutes and free up capacity on the Coventry/NEC/Birmingham corridor.

Meanwhile, Midland Metro is on its way to at last fulfilling its potential. Instead of stopping at the edge of the centres of both the key cities it serves (Wolverhampton and Birmingham) as it has for too many years, it will soon be snaking its way fully through the increasingly traffic free streets and squares of Birmingham city centre to Edgbaston as well as to a new Wolverhampton station interchange at its other extreme. Funding for

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A visualisation of the Midland Metro terminus at Edgbaston



Line Two (east-west across the Black Country) is now in the bag and the case for a line three to serve first the Birmingham HS2 terminal and second onwards to Solihull (including the NEC and HS2 station there) looks strong.

The growing confidence in the air, plus the manageable scale of the West Midlands local rail network means that Malcolm Holmes is cracking on with some big plans and ideas on branding fares and stations for this newly created and semi-devolved system. On the latter, my trip on the network reminded me how, er, colourful public transport is in the sub-region. All the colours of the rainbow - as brands fight for the love of a largely uninterested if not downright confused public. The aim is to sweep as much of this visual clutter away as possible in favour of a bold and simple new brand identity for transport (and more) in the West Midlands - logos and colours which will appear from the boardroom of the West Midlands Combined Authority down to the platforms of the Midland Metro. The aim is to replicate the TfL way in which it isn't just a public transport brand - but is intrinsic to the way the city thinks of itself.

On stations it's been different strokes for different folks on the approach that devolved authorities around the country are taking to the role they want to play in the future.

The West Midlands Rail approach will be to work with Network Rail and the train operators to establish a masterplan, remedy the most unsavoury examples as a matter of urgency and get a series of new ones put in. Three examples of the where and why on new stations...

Willenhall is a sizeable centre in the Black Country that could do with a boost. A railway runs through it. Meanwhile, it takes a long 50 minutes by bus to get from Willenhall to Birmingham city centre. However, thanks to the aforementioned density of link lines and junctions a new station at Willenhall could be served by a new passenger service on a new Wolverhampton to Birmingham route.

Similarly, to the south of Birmingham, a bit of train scheduling shuffling and lateral thinking in the signal box could re-route a service via a freight-only line to serve new stations at Kings Heath and Moseley where the commuter market is ripe for an alternative to congested roads.

Then there's University station (which also serves the country's biggest single site hospital) whose two narrow platforms, not surprisingly, can't currently cope with a footfall bigger than Crewe or Stoke! A new station building half way along the platforms might be the best option.

As I left Malcolm (who seems like a man happy to be in the right job in the right place at the right time!) to walk through the city centre, I passed the construction works for the Midland Metro extension through to Centenary Square with the hoardings proclaiming that this will be the first UK tram to operate on battery power rather than power from overhead wires. And I thought, as I may have mentioned before, devolution works! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.