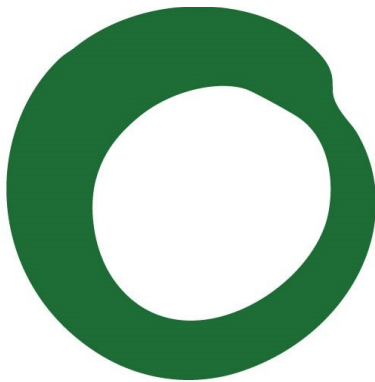


# **West Midlands Rail Investment Strategy 2022 to 2050**

## **West Midlands Rail Executive**

November 2022 consultation



**Birmingham  
Friends  
of the Earth**

**Response of Birmingham Friends of the Earth**  
November 2022

## Executive Summary

Birmingham Friends of the Earth supports rail development measures affecting Birmingham, in the belief that the city and the region must adapt to changing commitments around resource depletion and the climate emergency.

The existing rail network fails to carry its necessary modal share. Current levels of car use are not sustainable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and past projections of use should be discarded in the light of the urgent need for carbon reductions and quality of life.

The number of people within walking or cycling distance of the station should be major criteria for funding. This requires more stations in the urban area, including resumption of passenger train service on routes such as Stourbridge to Burton on Trent, and extension in rural areas such as south of Redditch and South of Stratford on Avon. Some bus routes should be part of the rail franchise with guaranteed seven days a week service (Kidderminster to Ludlow, Nuneaton to Ashby, Wolverhampton to Bridgnorth, for instance).

## Foreword

Birmingham Friends of the Earth (BFOE) would like to thank West Midlands Rail Executive for the opportunity to comment on this important document.



Figure 1 - West Midlands Rail Map

## **Introduction**

Transport has to play its part in meeting our commitments under the Climate Change Act of 2008. Within this there is a long term target of cutting our Carbon Dioxide equivalent emissions by 80% by 2050 and there was an interim target of 34% by 2020. The science and FOE and others were calling for cuts of at least 40% by 2020 and many are concerned that even this will not be enough. The COP 27 held in Egypt, is generally not felt to have achieved the necessary outcome to limit the damage resulting from rise in Global temperatures.

## **Effect of Climate Change**

The effect of climate change has been variously interpreted. For the rail network, having a human presence is probably prudent. For this reason, removing such on the spot monitoring such as that from signal boxes and staffed stations, should be undertaken with caution. Sensors can detect failures of earthworks and surcharging of drainage, but such problems are not in the same predictable locations as they once were.

What in the past were predictions of extreme weather conditions such as intense rain that overwhelms drainage and damages signalling, and intensely hot summers that result in rail expansion, extreme storms bringing down trees, seem to be with us now. We are surprised that there is no identification of the issue in the strategy. If there is unavoidable disruption to the West Midlands Rail network, on an increasingly frequent cycle, contingency measures need to be in place.

Passenger rail services in the West Midlands County have been a great success story of the last quarter century, the investment made by local authority funded bodies and cooperation with British Rail (and to a lesser extent with successor railway infrastructure owners), deserving credit. Nationally during the last 20 years, carbon emissions have been growing from the transport sector and this trend has to be reversed. In the West Midlands, since the electrification with great success of the Cross City Line, there has been infill electrification between Walsall and Rugeley and Barnt Green to Bromsgrove. It is suggested that the immediate resumption of a steady programme of electrification, would retain the skills and control the costs.

The WMRE planning for transport investment, is only one of the policies that is consulted upon and adopted. All such policies lose some of their legitimacy when there is no statement made of reasons for changes suggested by consultees to be adopted.

Within the conurbation formed of Birmingham and the Black Country, an important mode of public transport is the bus. The linkages between bus and train are now poorer than they have been. There has been a reluctance to reallocate road space from general traffic to buses, and this makes journey times unreliable. There is some scope to add a significant number of people to the rail network by some reinstatement of passenger train services and the construction of a few new stations is welcome. Past local plans have called for reinstatement of passenger train services to Dudley, an important town in the West Midlands. There is also the issue of modal shift for freight where the current limited success at Telford should not be taken as a reason not to make progress in other locations.

## **Related policies and other perspectives**

From the Institution of Civil Engineers' comes the following: 'Integration is key to ending dependency on the private car and effective regional delivery is a vital part of ensuring effective integrated transport. ICE supports the introduction of integrated transport authorities, based on the London model. This would give metropolitan, urban and other areas in the West Midlands across-the-board control of regional transport: buses, trains, highways and road traffic.'

Aside from integration, some perspectives that Birmingham FOE believe could figure more powerfully in the strategy are:

- Delivering improvements in the quality of life
- Addressing carbon targets
- Accommodating population growth and changing characteristics of the population
- Making rail more resilient against extreme weather events
- Making rail more accessible to passenger and freight customers and more affordable
- Reinstatement of closed routes

The approach taken by Birmingham City Council is embodied in their planning policy as included below:

### Policy TP38 A sustainable transport network

The development of a sustainable, high quality, integrated transport system, where the most sustainable mode choices also offer the most convenient means of travel, will be supported.

The delivery of a sustainable transport network will require:

- Improved choice by developing and improving public transport, cycling and walking networks.
- The facilitation of modes of transport that reduce carbon emissions and improve air quality.
- Improvements and development of road, rail and water freight routes to support the sustainable and efficient movement of goods.
- Reduction in the negative impact of road traffic, for example, congestion and road accidents.
- Working with partners to support and promote sustainable modes and low emission travel choices.
- Ensuring that land use planning decisions support and promote sustainable travel.
- Building, maintaining and managing the transport network in a way that reduces CO2, addresses air quality problems and minimises transport's impact on the environment.
- In some circumstances, the re-allocation of existing roadspace to more sustainable transport modes.

#### Implementation

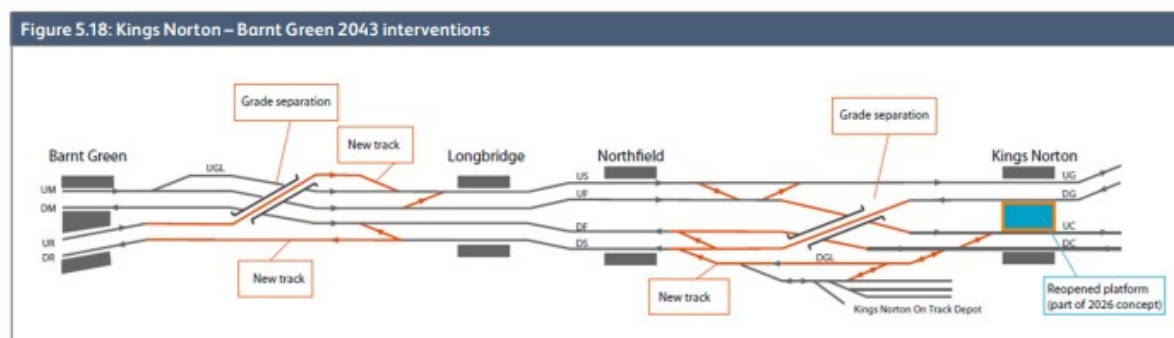
	Local/ National Funding	Partnerships	CPO	CIL/ Section 106	Planning Management	Other Local Plan/ SPD/Regeneration Framework
Policy TP38	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

## Rail Freight

The market for rail is large, Rail is fixed infrastructure that is expensive to install but because of this, customers and users have confidence that it will remain in place.

Access to the railways for potential freight in Birmingham is currently very limited as the provision is for large volumes to a limited number of destinations. To achieve the Climate Change mitigation targets, the current arrangements whereby goods are moved principally by road and over long distances, has to change.

## Network Rail's West Midlands proposals



Grade separation at junctions Kings Norton and Barnt Green.

The Railways Act 2005 envisaged that the railway infrastructure owner, Network Rail, would be given instructions when it came to strategic planning decisions. Network Rail's role is to manage the railway as a 'steady state'. It was envisaged that the a Strategy would be imposed by Government and its direction adopted by NR and reflected in the Route Utilisation Strategies.

The RUS (Route Utilisation Strategy) is a mechanism set up under the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) to plan maximum return from the existing rail network. In the days of the SRA, there was a degree of involvement in RUS preparation from transport planners and some consideration of the Local Transport Plan (LTP). Abolition of the SRA has meant that the RUS preparation has passed to Network Rail who have not had a duty to consider strategic rail planning.

Some train services have been reshaped (for instance to accommodate additional long distance trains whilst avoiding addition of new track). There is a need to address lack of capacity rather than to continue practices that render some local journeys impractical. Examples include the skip stop service and irregular intervals on the Birmingham to Coventry route. Dispensing with the old fashioned hierarchy of displacement of local train services to suit long distance trains (rather than building capacity and signalling that copes), should be a priority of WMRE.

### Schemes necessary for modal shift

High priority schemes are therefore as follows;

1. Enhanced pedestrian link between Moor Street and New Street stations
2. Cycle and pedestrian access at suburban stations and interchange with bus services
3. Platform and signalling improvements at Moor Street to allow expansion of local rail services.
4. New chord to complement new stations on the 'Camp Hill' line across South Birmingham

5. Stations on the Sutton Park line across North Birmingham
6. New service from Snow Hill via Jewellery Quarter and a new Benson Road curve to join the line to Walsall with a station at Soho Road, Handsworth
7. Bus links
8. Reinstatement of the 'out of use' railway line from Stourbridge to Walsall.
9. Train services from Minworth through Sutton Park to Walsall.
10. A new curve in North Wolverhampton to facilitate Telford to Walsall services and more local stations in the Black Country.
11. Tunnel for cross city rail services at New Street station to build capacity.



Railtrack's scheme for a North of Wolverhampton link railway (not enacted)

### **Looking to the future**

Planning for population growth Forecasts show that growth will be concentrated in urban centres in the coming years. We need to undertake upgrade works now to meet the needs of cities and their growing populations. Rail provision in urban areas needs to account for both population growth and modal shift. There also needs to be a new way of thinking that values what we have in the West Midlands and retains and develops tourism.

The doubling of passengers in just twenty years is putting a strain on our railway. The most cost effective way of increasing capacity is using longer trains, Where this isn't possible, infrastructure based projects are required, but these are expensive and disruptive to existing passengers. Schemes considered in other rail documents (such as the Rail Utilisation Strategy, RUS), need to be included in this strategy and their designs developed in time for implementation.

Visitors to Birmingham are deterred from arriving by train because the local rail network is geographically incomplete. The Rail Strategy has to acknowledge that businesses operate in parts of the city served by a railway but with no local station or with an infrequent service. For the city to exploit its rail infrastructure, this needs to be addressed. There are opportunities for businesses to locate to Birmingham if local rail services are available. Local rail provided by the Docklands Light Railway was a major factor in East London regeneration.

Department for Transport statistics on bus travel indicates that of non bus users, half would be willing to use buses. This indicates that there is potential for growth in bus as collector for the rail network (and for journeys wholly undertaken by bus). Currently residents of Birmingham communities suffer the severance resulting from high volumes of car traffic; reduction in traffic levels and transfer to bus and train can improve road conditions for other travellers (including pedestrians and cyclists) and enhance journey time reliability.

Contact with the public by Birmingham Friends of the Earth has clearly established that there is strong support for available rail transport within walking distance of homes and workplaces at such places as Balsall Heath and Kings Heath. The case for reviewing past studies such as the Multi Modal Study for the West Midlands (that advocated Benson Road Curve, Bordesley Chord and other passenger train enhancements including stations), should be undertaken but with a fresh perspective.

The market for rail to serve journeys for recreation has barely been explored: many attractions that target Birmingham residents are genuinely (or are perceived to be) not easily accessible by rail. This applies also to some towns that are not served by a rail station such as Market Drayton, Alcester, Newport (Shropshire).

Specific and detailed responses are attached as follows;  
Appendix A - 'Camp Hill line' local service across South Birmingham .  
Appendix B - Sutton Park line, local service for North Birmingham.  
Appendix C - Potential Snow Hill to Walsall route via Handsworth, using the Benson Road Curve, Soho.



## **Response of Birmingham Friends of the Earth (November 2022) continued**

### **Appendix A - 'Camp Hill line' local service across South Birmingham**

A comprehensive rail network for moving around Birmingham is a vital element in providing efficient, low carbon transport.

Demand for rail travel is strongly suppressed in Birmingham. The cross-city line saw steadily growing passenger demand. Services on the line were increased in frequency from 15 minutes to 10 minutes to cope, with only Covid reversing some of the growth. The Bordesley chord and stations will allow virtually a new transport system for South Birmingham to be created.

Air quality is poor on Kings Heath High Street A435, also on the A34 Stratford Road also High St Deritend and Digbeth in the city centre. The line can be part of many journeys around the city and the new stations be destinations in themselves, which we describe below.

#### **The new South Birmingham stations**

##### **Moseley**

There is a sizeable residential catchment, with several thousand people living east of the line, so the station is closer to their homes than the 50 bus.

Moseley village centre is popular for pubs and restaurants. There are events, such as the Farmers' market, Moseley Festival and Moseley Folk Festival, which draw in people from a wide area. This underlines the importance of the train service being part of a local network.

##### **Kings Heath**

High Street is the third largest concentration of businesses, visitors and employees after the City centre and Sutton Coldfield. It serves a large area of South Birmingham, and is effectively a town within the conurbation.

Queensbridge secondary school and Fox Hollies school both close to the station need to be accessed by pupils.

For South Birmingham residents and visitors to businesses, a train service that offers seamless connections into the South West and South Wales, will be most welcome. To the North, the proposed Bordesley Chord and the Benson Road (Soho Pool Link) will give access to the West Coast Main Line at Rugeley.

## **Appendix B - Sutton Park line, local service for North Birmingham**

New local stations would provide effectively a new transport system in North Birmingham.

### **St Andrew's**

Home of Birmingham City football club, whose stadium has been rebuilt and expanded.

A station would be particularly heavily used on match days by fans.

### **Fort Dunlop**

A regenerated retail area beside the M6, which should have a station to reduce car movements.

### **Castle Vale**

A large 20<sup>th</sup> century housing development that should have its own railway station to add to its desirability as a residential area..

### **Walmley**

A large number of homes added in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Long bus journey. Needs a commuter station.

### **Sutton Park**

This country park within Birmingham used to be a major leisure destination accessed by rail. A new rail service could allow many people to enjoy this facility from other parts of the city. A short walking route between Sutton Park station and the existing Sutton town station can be re-instated giving interchange with Cross city services.

### **Streetley**

A large number of homes added in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Long bus journey. Needs a commuter station.

### **Aldridge**

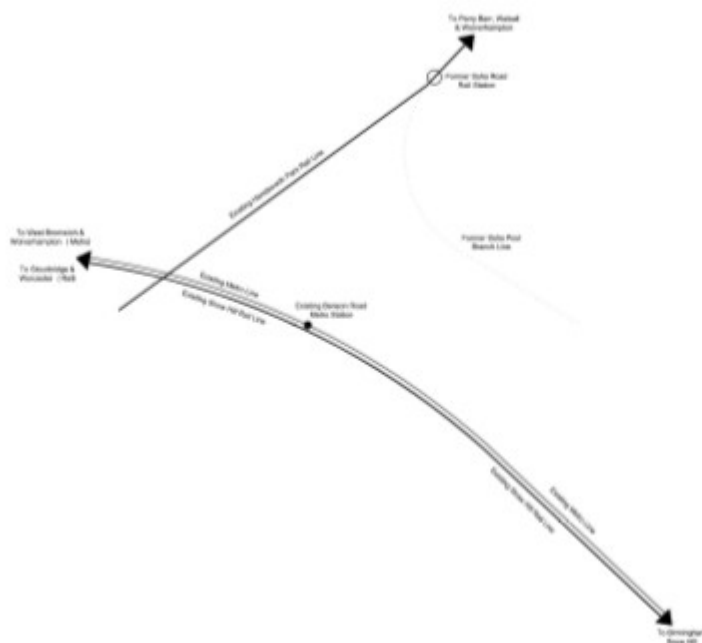
A town without a station. People would make journeys to both Sutton and Walsall. A feasibility study is currently in development for this location

### **Walsall**

The existing station has the potential to be a hub for rail services. It is a major destination for work and shopping. The WMRE scheme is adding a direct link to Wolverhampton for connections to Telford and Mid Wales.

## Appendix C of Birmingham Friends of the Earth response Benson Road Curve

Potential Snow Hill to Walsall route via Handsworth using the Benson Road Curve, Soho



Benson Road Curve

### Summary

Birmingham Friends of the Earth looks to a near future in which oil will no longer be cheap and transport has to reduce its carbon emissions very significantly. A comprehensive local rail network must be reinstated for Birmingham. For better connectivity, more needs to be made of the network based on Birmingham's Snow Hill Station. New connections should be planned to achieve a Snow Hill Network with a frequent service, at the same time designed in such a way as to be a major element of regeneration of areas outside the City Centre.

We identify in this study an important opportunity to be taken, to bring trains from Walsall, via Bescot, into Snow Hill, to allow additional trains to run. This can be done by building a new curve in the Soho area, known as the Benson Road curve.

The benefits of this project will be as follows

- A. A better rail network affording links within Birmingham and between Birmingham and the Black Country
- B. Addition of thousands of people and hundreds of people to the rail network

C. Flexibility to introduce through train services such as Walsall to Solihull (with easy transfer to other services) via Birmingham Moor St

D. Re-opening of the former Handsworth station at Soho Road. Handsworth was originally developed around its railway station at this site. This is a thriving part of Birmingham, it with businesses such as shops and restaurants and important visitor attractions, being effectively a town within Birmingham. It is part of the North West Birmingham Regeneration zone. The proposed Soho Road station would add residents of the densely populated area of Soho, Handsworth and Lozells to the rail network, and make business based there more attractive and accessible for customers and employees. The A41 Soho Road is served by a number of bus routes that can feed passengers into the rail network. The Soho Road is, however, very busy and congested, so a real alternative is urgently needed for journeys toward Birmingham City Centre in this corridor. Another station at Handsworth Wood may also be justified for commuters from this residential area.

The economic recession is an opportunity to acquire key parcels of land, currently underused at reasonable prices, so as to allow the new rail curve to be built for the future.

### **History – separate rail systems**

The railways in Birmingham were constructed by a number of separate companies seeking to serve either different markets or the same markets in competition with each other. A key role was carriage of freight, usually very lucrative, a legacy of which is land alongside railways that once accommodated sidings.

The confusion of having such a multiplicity of railways was addressed in 1923 by the grouping of the companies into the 'Big Four'. In Birmingham, this resulted in routes running into and through Birmingham New Street Station being the LMS company, routes through Birmingham Snow Hill Station being the GWR company. The two companies thereafter operated with a degree of competition as they served some of the same centres though by different routes.

In North Birmingham, for goods (freight), the GWR company had yards in Hockley and the LMS company had a branch to a yard at Soho Pool.

The Second World War demanded a great deal of the railways that were also targets for attack by enemy aircraft. Within a few years of the end of the war, the railways were amalgamated and had to come to terms with loss of freight traffic and being in a run down condition. In the following years, loss of passenger traffic and railway closures were partly offset by some modernisation measures including electrification of the principal route through Birmingham New Street. As a part of the railway rationalisation, train services that had been GWR were diverted to Birmingham New Street or the terminus station Birmingham Snow Hill. Train services that could not be diverted were withdrawn, this allowing total closure of Birmingham Snow Hill and removal of the track.

## **Potential for development**

The West Midlands County had a vigorous Passenger Transport Authority (PTA) which from the 1970s, was anxious to develop the local rail network. Through the PTA and their part funding, new stations were built at Moor Street and at Snow Hill (Phase 1) and a new route northward (Phase 2) added stations and created a second cross city line that included an interchange station at Smethwick Galton Bridge. The main GWR route northward was reinstated as a separate railway 'Midland Metro' under PTA control on land leased from British Rail.

Multi Modal Studies followed a Government realisation that road traffic growth had a downside. A number of transport studies were commissioned with the specific object of identifying all the transport opportunities. In most cases the authors of these were in their comfort zone undertaking road traffic predictions with their computer models, but less so with public transport. A further complication came from different funding arrangements for road and rail and the perceived high cost of even the simplest project if undertaken on the railway.

The West Midlands Area Multi Modal Study, when published, advocated a great deal of road building, but it also argued that some railway improvements were needed. Of greatest relevance to Birmingham, the Multi Modal Study recommended a Snow Hill Network with lengths of new linking railways so that former LMS routes could be integrated. One of the linking routes named was the Benson Road curve.

Birmingham City Council's Unitary Development Plan (the Birmingham Plan) in the past mentioned the Benson Road curve, and its provision was a consideration in the renewal of the Central Trains franchise a few years ago, when outline alignments were drafted by a consulting civil engineering practice.

In recent years, expansion of rail based public transport in Birmingham has centred on Midland Metro, leaving proposals for Benson Road curve in abeyance.

## **A proposed solution**

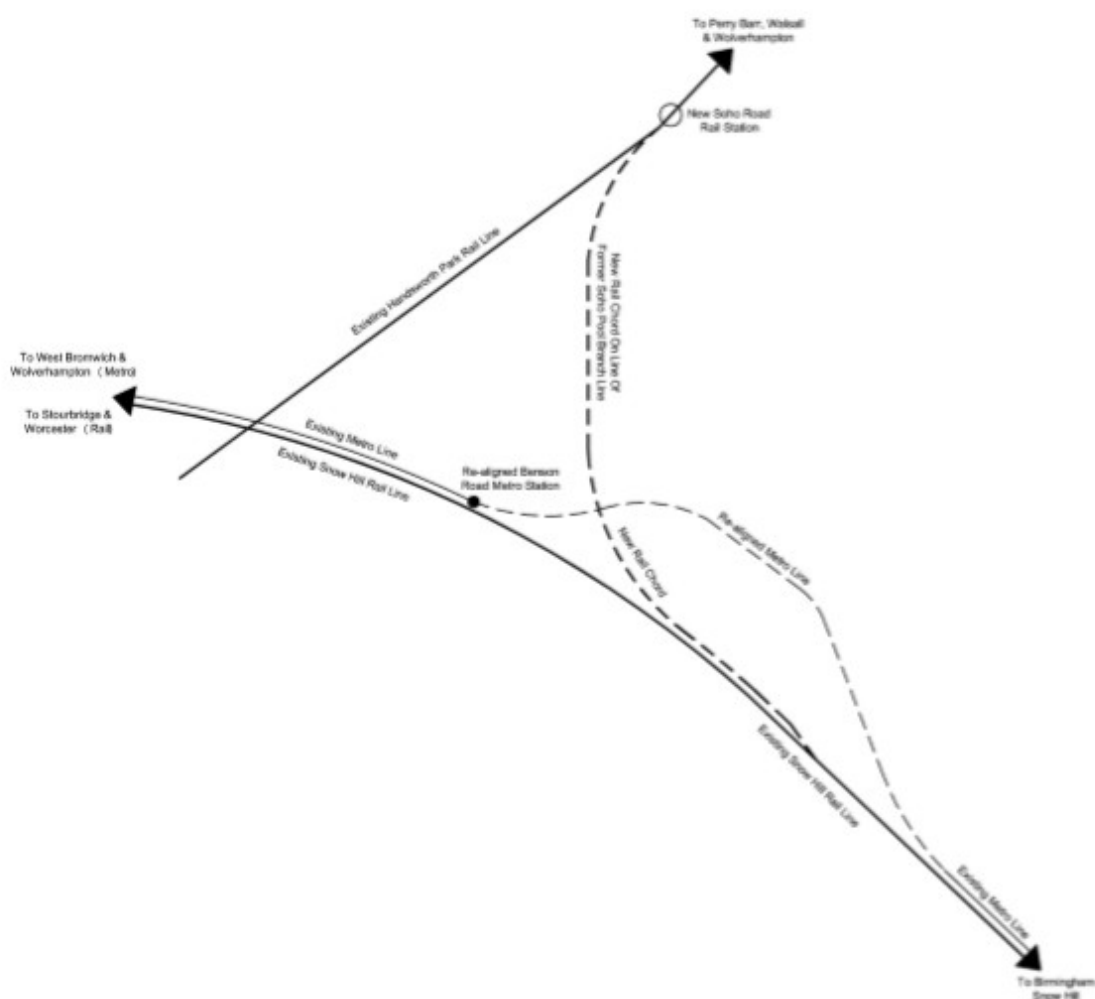
In railway parlance, one direction is usually UP and the other DOWN. On a two track UK railway, the convention is the same as the road (ie on the left hand side travelling forwards). On the route from Birmingham Snow Hill, UP is to Solihull and the South, DOWN is towards Smethwick.

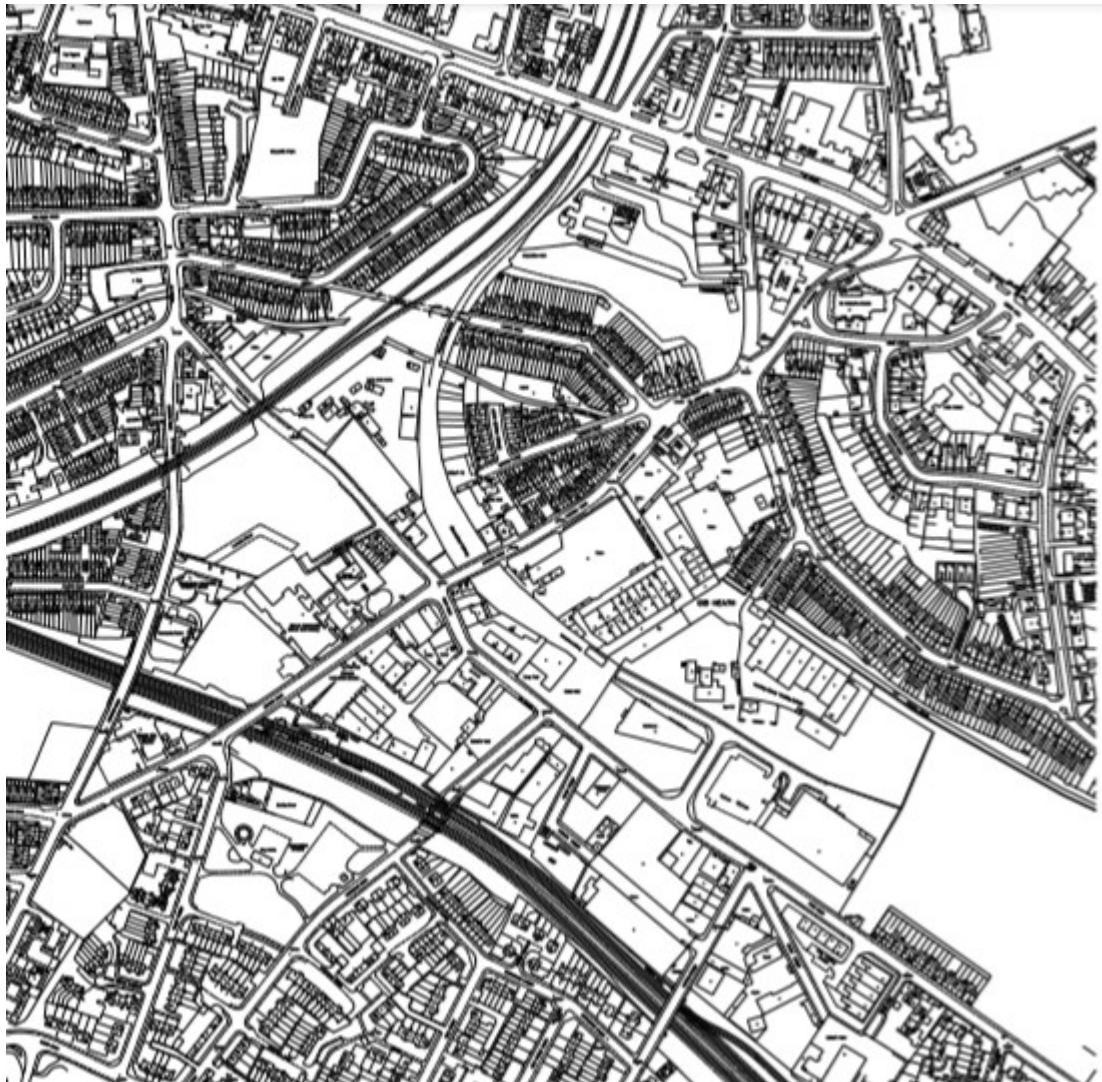
To the North of Jewellery Quarter Station, the Network Rail railway is two track (not electrified) . Adjacent to it on the Upside (East) is Midland Metro which is overhead electrified and carrying a frequent passenger service. This arrangement persists throughout the study area that extends from Jewellery Quarter in the South to Winson Green Metro stop in the North.

Towards the North of the section, a metal bridge carries Network Rail's Soho South to Perry Barr Railway SSP (electrified route) over the GWR line and Midland Metro. The Benson Road curve has been envisaged as the missing connection between the two railway lines.

This study envisages a new connecting curve to be built as follows (from the South)

1. The Network Rail line from Snow Hill to have a new junction at Lodge Road.
2. The new track diverging, to occupy some of the space currently occupied by Midland Metro, whilst climbing above it.
3. An altered route for Midland Metro would take the tram on a deviation to Park Road, so that the new railway could cross above the new Midland Metro route.
4. The new railway would pass over Park Road and Factory Road, before using the corridor of the closed Soho Pool Goods railway branch beyond Factory Road
5. The branch would then join the Network Rail SSP line close to the A41 Soho Road, where the lines would meet.
6. Handsworth railway station be reinstated at Soho Road.
7. Trains would continue towards Walsall.





Existing layout at Soho Pool with the Metro (tram) running alongside the railway from base of page to the left of the page



Proposed arrangement at Soho Pool. Metro diverted (a cutting and a road running section) to allow the new link railway to cross over Metro to join the railway to Walsall