

TRACKS TO
TRANSFORMATION:

UNLOCKING GROWTH ON
THE SHREWSBURY TO
BIRMINGHAM RAIL LINE

August 2024

Foreword



As the MP for Telford, I wholeheartedly support Midlands Connect's outline business case for funding to improve the Birmingham to Telford to Shrewsbury rail line, allowing for faster and more frequent trains along the route.

Local firms have clearly outlined the importance of these rail improvements to the future growth of their businesses, providing them with better access to markets, talent, and resources in the West Midlands and beyond.

By investing in the Birmingham to Telford to Shrewsbury rail line, we would lay the groundwork for a more integrated and prosperous regional economy - encouraging tourism, attracting trade, and supporting our businesses to flourish.

The support for these plans in the local business community is resounding and shows that this funding is not just about improving rail transport; it's about unlocking economic growth and driving success for our region's business sector.

Midlands Connect's plans have my full support, and I urge the Department for Transport to proceed with funding these much-needed improvements.



- **Shaun Davies MP, Telford**



1.0 Introduction

The Shrewsbury to Birmingham line is a key strategic link between Shropshire and the economic hub that is England's second city. It is a vital line in enabling tourists, employees and services to flow between Birmingham and Shrewsbury. The line is however frequently subject to delays and overcrowding.

Earlier this summer, the timetable was improved to provide a second hourly West Midlands Railway service running between Birmingham – Black Country – Shrewsbury. This train provides an additional fast service, but further investment is needed to unlock economic potential across the region.

Cavendish was commissioned by Midlands Connect to undertake qualitative research with local firms and organisations to get a more thorough understanding of how they, and the region, are being held back by the lack of investment in the rail corridor connecting Birmingham to Shrewsbury.

Through these interviews, Cavendish sought to understand, through the opinions of those in strategic leadership roles in organisations with a regional presence, how an improved rail line would better the economic prospects of the county.

The businesses and stakeholders who participated in the research were clear that despite the rail line's role as a connector to Birmingham and the wider country, the current unpredictability and overcrowding is standing in the way of unlocking the full potential of the region.

2.0 Executive Summary


2.1 Overview

This report provides a summary of insights, including quotes, gathered from local organisations and firms via one-to-one interviews conducted on Microsoft Teams during June, July and August 2024.

Cavendish, on behalf of Midlands Connect, conducted in-depth interviews with a range of organisations, including local branches of public sector bodies, businesses and local tourism organisations, and interest groups. Through these discussions, we have gained insights into the challenges presented by the current rail service between Birmingham and Shrewsbury for local firms, and the urgent need for investment as part of the next round of rail infrastructure funding.

The research and interviews undertaken during June, July and August 2024 included:

Name	Role	Sector
Alastair Godfrey	Head of Major Projects, Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings Project	Heritage
Amy Cole	National Projects Officer, Historic England	Heritage
Charlie Lloyd	Mercia District Employer Partnership Leader, Department for Work and Pensions	Government department
Niki Davies	Mercia District Senior Partnership Manager, Department for Work and Pensions	Government department
Louise Johnson	Mercia Partnership Manager, Department for Work and Pensions	Government department
Sarah Crook	Head of Regional Delivery West Midlands, HM Revenue & Customs	Government department
Mark Hooper	Project Lead, Visit Shropshire	Tourism
Paul Atkins	HR Director - Heritage Division, Phoenix Group	Financial
Emily Dackombe	Business Manager, Phoenix Group	Financial



Sophie Dwerryhouse	Regional Director, Country Land and Agriculture Business Association (CLA) Midlands	
Joel Campbell	CEO, Cove Group	Tourism

2.2 Key Findings

Through these discussions, organisations and firms outlined six consistent themes:

- The current rail service is negatively affecting business confidence, while limiting the local employment pool.
- An improved rail service would benefit centrally located businesses, by increasing accessibility for visitors and tourism.
- An improved rail service would help organisations reach sustainability targets by reducing emissions and limiting congestion.
- There is a lack of equity of use across the line, with businesses in Telford being disproportionately affected and lack of investment.
- Improvements to the rail line would attract regional investment and be a driver of local economic growth.
- Though some stated that to truly unlock the area's economic potential, it would require a direct service from Shrewsbury to London.

3.0 Interview Analysis

This section provides detailed analysis of the key themes outlined above, as established from the interviews undertaken. Respondents represented a wide array of interests and sectors with a geographical base near to one of the stations on the Shrewsbury to Birmingham line.

3.1 The current rail service is negatively affecting business confidence, while limiting the local employment pool.

Local firms were unanimous in expressing their discontent with the current service operating between Shrewsbury and Birmingham. The main issues identified were the poor timetable pattern (which has recently been improved), capacity of the trains and reliability of the service.

"The reliability of the line, and the fact that most trains run with only two carriages, presents a capacity challenge." **Joel Campbell, Cove Group.**

Other respondents agreed, with **Sophie Dwerryhouse, Country Land and Business Association (CLA) Midlands** saying:

"The service is always incredibly busy at commuter times, and with often just two carriages to supply the demand of all the stops from Shrewsbury to Birmingham, the train isn't large enough."

Alastair Godfrey, Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings Project also agreed with concerns about capacity and reliability, outlining the need for more regular services to connect with onward journeys from Birmingham.

"More regular services would certainly help boost confidence in the reliability of the rail network as a mode of travel. Currently, if someone experiences a delay in Shrewsbury, they'll miss an onward connection in Birmingham, leaving them waiting at the station for an extended period."

Three colleagues from the Mercia District of the Department for Work and Pensions all agreed that this had a tangible impact on local unemployed people being able to find work in the county.

"Those using our services can often experience the rail network in the area as a barrier to their participation in job centre appointments, interviews and accessing other developmental opportunities. We often attribute lack of attendance at

appointments due to disruption in transport.” **Charlie Lloyd, Department for Work and Pensions.**

They went on to add that this had a knock-on negative impact on economic activity in Shropshire, by reducing the pool of jobs people might feel confident in applying for.

“If people don’t feel confident about how they could travel to work using the rail network, this will act as a barrier to them applying to certain roles, especially if they don’t have access to a car. If there is disruption on the rail line, they will be left with no other transport option.” **Louise Johnson, Department for Work and Pensions.**

3.2 An improved rail service would benefit centrally located businesses, by increasing accessibility for visitors and tourism.

While there was consensus that the current service is inadequate, all respondents spoke with a sense of optimism for the economic benefits an improved rail system would bring, particularly for the tourism industry and nighttime economy.

“The positioning of the train station in the heart of the Shrewsbury puts tourists who visit in the centre of the main attractions when they arrive.” **Mark Hooper, Visit Shropshire.**

Joel Campbell, Cove Group also spoke about the relationship between the rail line and local tourism, saying that:

“A better service on the line would help attract more visitors to Shrewsbury Prison and to the wider area.”

When considering the night-time economy, **Mark Hooper, Visit Shropshire** pointed out that the last train to Birmingham leaving at 10pm prevented visitors from enjoying a full evening in Shrewsbury, and linked this to reducing expenditure.

“We are always hoping to secure later nighttime services, because Shrewsbury and Telford now host quite a few big, late-night events. For example, JLS are coming to Shrewsbury and will attract a crowd of circa 20,000 people, and as this is a music concert it goes late into the evening. I’ve heard many anecdotes where people either have to not drink, which of course means they spend less money in the local economy, or they have to end their evening short, leaving before the concert ends.”

Of course, if these connections were better, we would likely see more people travel to Shropshire from outside of the county to attend events here."

This sentiment was echoed by **Louise Johnson, Department for Work and Pensions**, who said:

"The last trains to Birmingham are at 10pm. The nighttime economy is flourishing at that point, especially in Shrewsbury. So, to have trains go after that time would be fantastic."

Joel Campbell, operating Shrewsbury Prison, outlined that the benefits of more visitors coming to the town by rail would be felt beyond just tourism attractions, but in all areas of town centre commerce:

"Better rail connectivity will only improve the visitor numbers to Shrewsbury, regardless of the demographic. It will only improve, and that's just better for everybody, whether you're a tourist attraction, whether you're a hotel, whether you're a pub, whether you're a shop, a restaurant or cafe. The more people visiting an area, the better it is."

Something which was echoed by **Sarah Crook, HM Revenue & Customs**:

"If rail links to Telford were consistently reliable, that would of course boost local spending, as people come into the office more readily and spend money in the local shops and town centre."

3.3 An improved rail service would help organisations reach sustainability targets by reducing emissions and limiting congestion.

All firms and organisations outlined how improved rail services would assist them in meeting their sustainability targets, with increased confidence in the line helping them to encourage employees to use the train for their commute, and for visiting other offices or customers.

Charlie Lloyd, Department for Work and Pensions:

"Quite often, people choose to drive instead of taking the train due to lack of sensible connections. For example, if you live in Kiddminster and work in Telford, to do that journey by train you have to go into Birmingham, change there, and then on to Telford. Whereas you can just drive directly, saving considerable time and hassle. Of course though, this has a knock on effect for sustainability, and when we are trying to operate

as a net zero organisation ourselves, improvements to the line would help with that mission."

Alastair Godfrey, Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings Project shared a similar experience:

"Choosing to use the train rather than the car will be due to the quality of service on the train line. I previously tried commuting from Shrewsbury to Bristol on the train, but gave up due to the unreliable service and lengthy connection times. But if that service were good, there are obvious benefits of using the train, such as not having to park in a city centre at the other end, avoiding traffic and travelling sustainably."

As too did **Sarah Crook, Head of Regional Delivery West Midlands, HM Revenue & Customs:**

"We aim to support our people to reach their own carbon neutrality, by encouraging them to use the train and other public transport. However, we do have an issue with doing this with confidence, given the frequent disruption to the line and unreliable service it experiences."

Joel Campbell, Cove Group, also spoke about how improvements to the train service could help improve congestion issues in Shrewsbury.

"Visitors arriving by train would be our preferred method of arrival. We have very limited spaces and therefore there is congestion for local residents, with cars waiting to access our car park. Better rail connections would create an overall better visitor experience. There is an example of a company who held an event here, and all their customers came from Birmingham, but due to lack of confidence in the rail system they hired and used coaches."

Joel went on to outline how a better rail service is needed to help support more sustainable transport decision-making:

"From a tourism perspective, if the trains are better, more frequent, more reliable, have greater capacity and are cost effective, then more people will travel like that, instead of by car."

Mark Hooper, Visit Shropshire outlined how congestion in Shrewsbury could reduce its appeal for visitors:

"We're fully supportive of sustainable transport. Shrewsbury's medieval, so it's not really built for the car. It's built for a horse and cart. The more people we can get to

the train station, that's in the centre of the town, the better, because it doesn't clog up our town. What we definitely don't want is more tourists come in but saying, Shrewsbury's a beautiful place, but all we did was sit in traffic."

3.4 There is a lack of equity of use across the line, with businesses in Telford being disproportionately affected by congestion and lack of investment.

A recurring issue noted by the firms was that rail passengers getting on at Telford are disproportionately affected by the current service, with prevalent overcrowding by the time it reaches the station.

Louise Johnson, Department for Work and Pensions, outlined that this congestion would cause additional confidence issues for those travelling from and to Telford.

"If you're going from Shrewsbury to Birmingham, you can probably get a seat at Shrewsbury. But by the time you get to Telford Central, all the seats have gone. This poses a significant issue in the confidence of people who might have mobility issues or anxiety issues in accessing the service from Telford, as they would have to stand for their journey."

Sophie Dwerryhouse, Country Land and Business Association (CLA) Midlands agreed:

"I wouldn't use the service if I had to get on at Telford, I would feel forced to find an alternative, because there is so little chance of getting a seat, and if people need to work on the train or read for work, that can have a knock-on impact on the productivity of their day."

With **Paul Atkins, Phoenix Group** commenting on the lack of investment into this particular section of the line, having an impact on the train station amenities in Telford:

"We have two office locations in Telford and Birmingham and would like to see the transport links between these improved. But currently, it feels like the Telford train station is neglected, with facilities like a coffee shop being closed down. It's a small issue but exemplifies the lack of investment in the line."

Emily Dackombe, Phoenix Group also noted that while the Telford train station is well located geographically for their office, a more regular and reliable service would help attract employees from a wider geography.

"Any improvements to rail services would add massive value in extending the geographical pool from which you can attract employees. If people rely on local rail to travel to Telford, before getting onwards trains to Birmingham, more regular Telford to Birmingham services would help reduce waiting times and travel feasibility."

Sarah Crook, HM Revenue & Customs spoke about the reliability of the service as well. She mentioned how Telford is disproportionately affected when there is disruption on the line, creating a tangibly worse experience for those accessing rail services at Telford:

"I now travel to Wolverhampton to get the train into Birmingham, rather than travelling to Telford, due to the service of the line at that station. While staff are incredibly friendly and helpful, the disruption is disproportionately felt in Telford. Just the other morning, after getting on the train and the train leaving Birmingham, I was notified that it wouldn't stop at Telford. If I had parked at Telford as I used to, I would then have to fund, by myself, a taxi from the nearest station the train did stop at back to Telford. Something I have had to do previously, and which does cost me £40 personally each time it happens."

Charlie Lloyd, Department for Work and Pensions raised significant concern that a lack of rail connectivity in Telford could be driving away skilled workers.

"Access to cost effective rail connections would enable employees in Telford to access opportunities and find higher paid jobs and more skilled work."

He went on to outline how this could also result in young people leaving for better opportunities.

"There are communities across Shropshire, such as Telford, with high levels of youth unemployment. Without better transport connectivity, they are going to feel that they can't access the different opportunities out there."

"They might fancy going on a night out in Shrewsbury from Telford but can't because all the trains end at a certain time. So, they'll consider moving to a bigger city, like Birmingham or Manchester. It shows the importance of seeing some kind of improvements to this line, particularly for levelling up our rural areas."

3.5 Improvements to the rail line would attract regional investment and be a driver of local economic growth

The firms and organisations outlined that investment in this rail corridor would be a driver of local economic growth, attracting new people, businesses, and investment, with **Alastair Godfrey, Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings Project**, saying:

"Shrewsbury is potentially a really attractive place for businesses to move from the major conurbations of Chester, Manchester, Birmingham, due to the lower rents for office spaces and the overall quality of life, which is exceptional compared with other places in the country."

"Shrewsbury does benefit from a good strategic location geographically and if the rail services were improved, we would likely see increased interest in investment, as we would have those sustainable connections that businesses want."

Mark Hooper, Visit Shropshire added to this, mentioning that investment in local rail is essential to attracting the workforce that Shropshire needs to thrive.

"To have a strong local economy that's actually growing, we need adequate local transport connectivity. We need to be able to access a workforce that can help us meet our economic growth targets."

Alastair Godfrey, Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings Project, went on to say:

"Investment in rail is going to make Shropshire a lot more attractive place to move your business to and make it a lot more attractive for people to live, work and play, so it that just helps every aspect of the economy."

"It is all about delivering on the government's agenda for levelling up. Investment in this rail line helps to meet net zero targets and deliver economic growth. That's why I would argue that the investment in the line is vital."

3.6 Though some stated that to truly unlock the area's economic potential, it would require a direct service from Shrewsbury to London.

Many respondents mentioned that while investment in the Shrewsbury to Birmingham rail line was much needed; to fully unlock the economic potential of the area, it would require a direct and regular service between Shrewsbury and London.

Sophie Dwerryhouse, Country Land and Business Association (CLA) Midlands:

"Services from Shropshire to London go only as far as Birmingham before you have to change. I have heard that we are the only county in the whole of the country without a direct line to London."

"We represent what we term 'the rural powerhouse' and having better connections from the rural economy to London would help us level up and unlock our regional potential."

On the theme of accessing opportunity, **Louise Johnson, Department for Work and Pensions**, commented that a line from Shrewsbury to London might help encourage people to live in Shrewsbury, but commute out for work. Potentially, bringing a higher London salary back with them to spend locally.

"I think a direct line from Shrewsbury to London would help open up opportunities for people who want to live in the countryside but who would work, when they go into the office, in London or Birmingham."

Similarly, **Alastair Godfrey, Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings Project**, believed that a Shrewsbury to London line would help connect Shrewsbury, both literally and metaphorically:

"Shrewsbury has always been out on a limb, and it can feel quite cut off. An improved train service would definitely help the delivery of the regeneration corridor, and also help people who live here to not feel so cut off from the rest of the country."

4.0 Conclusions

Through discussions with key local firms and organisations across various sectors, it is evident that the current rail provision is presenting a challenge to business operations, and the economic prospects of the region.

Key issues such as insufficient capacity, and a generally unreliable service was contributing to a lack of business and organizational use, with it affecting everything from employee's daily commutes to strategic business decisions. Some firms even outlined how this was impacting the local hiring pool, and their ability to attract staff.

Another key issue was in reference to the poor timetable pattern, which has since been improved, with a second hourly fast service running along the rail line.

It was clear that growth of hospitality, tourism and the nighttime economy was being constrained by an unappealing service, with some organisations outlining that better rail connectivity could be a catalyst for Shropshire's growing role in the national tourism sector.

The firms and organisations have sustainability targets and feel that better rail connectivity would help them to meet these, while reducing emissions and congestion in Shropshire's town centres.

Firms felt that Telford was disproportionately affected by the quality of the line, with trains often overcrowded by the time they reached Telford Central, and amenities at the station also lacking.

All organisations unanimously agreed that a more attractive rail connection between Shrewsbury and Birmingham would be a catalyst for growth in the region, delivering economic and social benefits. However, it also felt that while investment in this corridor was important, firms truly felt that to be connected to the wider economy, they would require a direct service to London.

The findings of this report outline a strong appeal from the local business and economic community in Shropshire that investment in this rail line is critical for Shropshire's economy to grow and thrive.

Local firms and organisations are clear that improving the Birmingham to Shrewsbury rail service is not just a matter of convenience; but a strategic imperative for boosting the region's economy.



Lezley Picton, Leader of Shropshire Council

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Boosting line speeds on this important route is vital to fulfil Shropshire's economic growth potential, enabling faster and more direct journey opportunities for passengers and businesses alike.

But that's not all, better rail links could also mean more people taking the train and relying less on their cars.

I fully support Midlands Connect's proposal and would ask the Transport Minister to give the green light to this important project.

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