

Two towns, multiple approaches:

Observations from Daventry and Rushden

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About the Author



David Frankal
Joint Chief Executive

David is Joint Chief Executive of Enroute, responsible for research, marketing and communication. He is studying Geography (BA) at Durham University and has spent a year working in Operations & Performance at Northern Trains, learning about how to identify and implement improvements to our complex rail network.

Introduction

Our interest in Daventry and Rushden

This research piece has been adapted from elements of our previous work in Project Development under Sustainable Transport Midlands, as well as our work under the Daventry Transport Development Group. Our most recent report on Daventry Transport Development Group [is available on the Enroute website](#), and this page also includes a brief history of our work in Daventry.

Under Sustainable Transport Midlands, we were actively developing proposals for potential transport solutions for Daventry, working with local stakeholders including West Northamptonshire Council. Our Project Development team were working on initial assessment of other potential projects to develop, following our work in Daventry. We present some of that work here, discuss the process we took, and draw some learnings and observations from both cases.

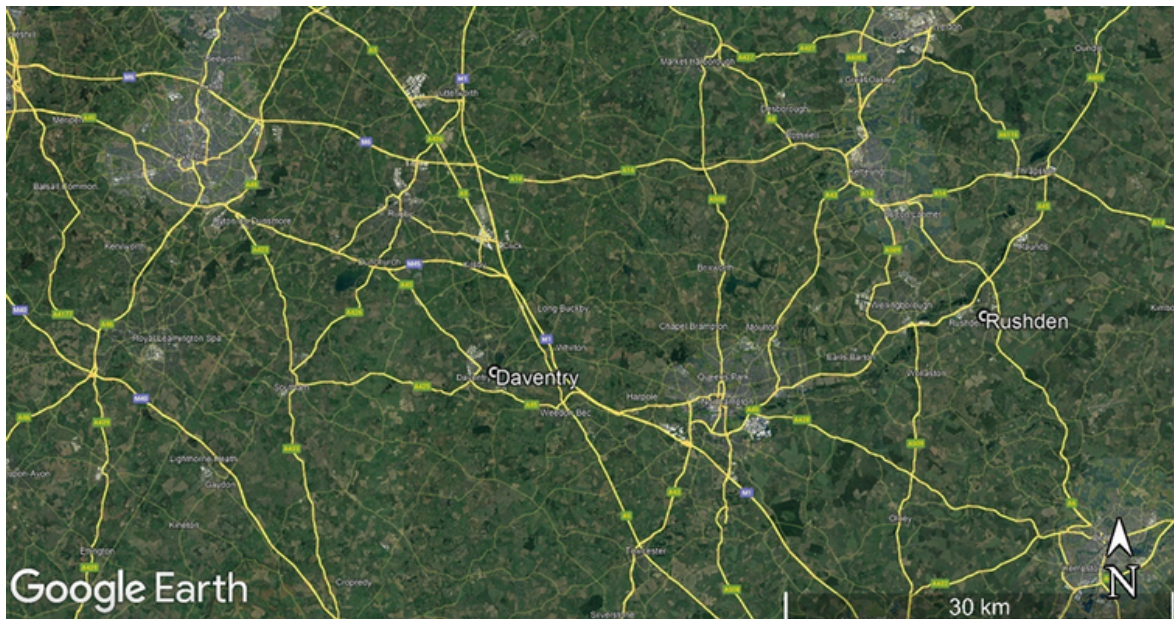


Figure 1: Daventry and Rushden are located in West and North Northamptonshire respectively (source: Google Earth)

Sustainable Transport Midlands grew out of founder Harry Burr's first proposal to build a new railway station to serve Daventry, a town of over 25,000 residents and one of the largest in the country with no rail service. The station would be located in the nearby village of Weedon Bec, on the West Coast Main Line (Northampton avoiding line, taking advantage of released capacity from High Speed 2 (HS2), allowing trains to serve more local stations (source: Modern Railways)



Figure 2: Map showing Daventry (top left) and Weedon Bec (bottom right) with the railway in black (source: Google Earth)

Harry Burr, then aged 13, first launched his campaign for Weedon station in mid-2020. The proposal attracted attention from the press, local authorities, Network Rail and Train Operating Companies. Later that year, the project was renamed to the Daventry Parkway Project, better reflecting its economic purpose.

On the back of the project's early success, Burr launched Sustainable Transport Northamptonshire, which later grew into Sustainable Transport Midlands (STM), with Daventry Parkway Project one of its campaigns. At the same time, he continued his engagement with key stakeholders in evaluating the viability of Daventry Parkway.

Burr was advised, informally, that even after HS2 Phase 1 is completed, it would be a challenge to stop trains at this location due to the particular capacity constraints on this section of the West Coast Main Line. At the same time, proposals were being developed for Rugby Parkway, a new station on the Northampton Loop nearby (close to Daventry International Freight Terminal) (source: Warwickshire County Council and BBC News).

STM therefore adapted Daventry Parkway Project into Daventry Transport Development Group and began early analysis of several alternative options, including two options for a heavy-rail branch-line from Northampton to Daventry (source: Enroute)

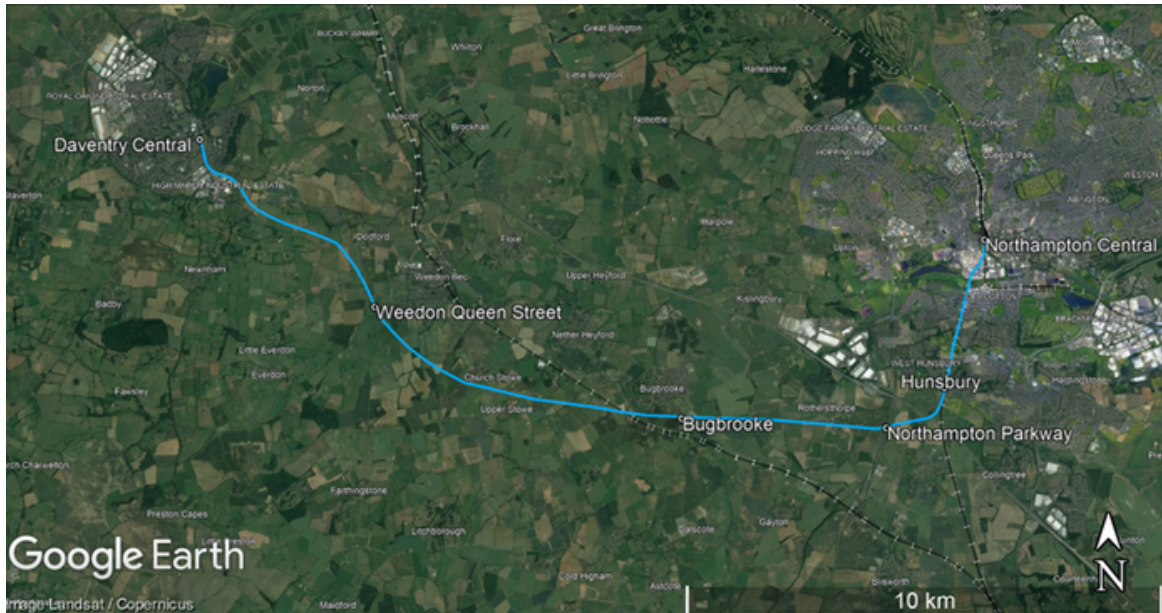


Figure 3: One of the proposed alignments for a Northampton (southern approach) to Daventry line (source: Google Earth/Enroute)

In late 2022, the Project Development Team began early assessment of a similar branch-line proposal to serve the town of Rushden, approximately 4 miles west of Wellingborough, with a population (including Higham Ferrers) of 36,000.



Figure 4: STM's Rushden Rail Link proposal (source: Google Earth/Enroute)



The problem at hand

In Our 2050 Vision, we set out the need for major investment into public transport, including a target to serve towns of 8,000 or more with at least one train per hour to a major nearby station. At present, lacking any rail service at all, Daventry and Rushden are both highly car-dependent settlements, with residents relying on private cars to reach other settlements or rail services from the nearest major stations in Northampton and Wellingborough.

In line with other organisations including the Campaign for Better Transport (see [report](#)) and the Trades Union Congress (see [report](#)), we believe major modal shift away from private cars to public transport is urgently needed, which improvements to buses alone may not achieve due to capacity constraints and slow journey times. We therefore approached both Daventry and Rushden with an eye on potential rail-based solutions.

In our Project Report on Daventry Parkway Project, we set out the case for change in Daventry on the following basis (source: Enroute):

- The road network around Daventry and Northamptonshire is busy and congested.
- The environmental footprint of the road network in Northamptonshire is high.
- Quality of public transport provision right now is poor, with Daventry one of the largest towns in Great Britain without a rail connection.
- Daventry is one of the fastest growing areas in the UK.
- The proposals align with national, regional and local policy.

We identified similarities in the contexts of Daventry (population 25,000) and Rushden (36,000). Like Daventry, Rushden lacks a direct rail connection, despite its vicinity to the Midland Main Line. Its nearest station is Wellingborough, 12 minutes away by car or 33 minutes away by bus (measured using Google Maps from Rushden's old station) via the A45 dual carriageway. Wellingborough, on the Midland Main Line, is served by trains running between London and Corby (source: Wikipedia).





Figure 5: Map of Rushden (right) and vicinity. The Midland Main Line can be seen in black (source: Google Earth)

In the following section we outline our early assessment of the Rushden Rail Link proposal. The purpose of this assessment was to provide the parameters for further development and inform our decision as to whether we (as STM) should develop it further.



Rushden Rail Link

Assessing the alignment

Our proposal would have repurposed the former alignment of the Higham Ferrers branch line, which was closed under the Beeching Axe in 1969 (source: Wikipedia). Our first task in assessing the viability of its reuse was therefore an assessment of the current state of the alignment.



Figure 6: Higham Ferrers branch line (1895) (source: Afterbrunel via Wikimedia Commons)

The Rushden Historical Transport Society (RHTS) operate a heritage railway, the Rushden, Higham & Wellingborough Railway, along a 0.8km section of the former track-bed, which includes the former Rushden station which is used as the society's headquarters and a museum (source: Rushden Historical Transport Society and Wikipedia)

The society own a variety of rolling stock, including former Northern Class 142 'Pacers', and operates trains along their section of track for visitors. The society aims to extend the railway to Higham Ferrers and build a new station halt there (source: Northamptonshire Telegraph). No reference is made on the RHTS website to proposed extension westwards towards Wellingborough, which according to Wikipedia would be too difficult due to developments on the line (no original source provided).

A walking and cycling path, the Greenway, runs along 2.5km of the former alignment, from the end of Paddock's Road (west of Rushden station) to the site of Higham Ferrers station, including running parallel to the heritage railway for the entirety of its length¹¹. The main blockages to the former alignment that we can see are the A45 dual carriageway and development at Rushden Lakes, as well as a missing bridge over the A5028 (High Street – just west of Rushden station).



Figure 7: Rushden, Higham and Wellingborough Railway (source: Sally Kentfield via Flickr/Wikimedia Commons)

A site visit would have been a logical next step in the development of this proposal. In the meantime, however, we made use of two videos posted to YouTube which provide a helpful tour of the heritage railway and the other section of former alignment:

Video 1: Rushden, Higham & Wellingborough Railway - Easter Special 2022 visit. Stephen & Daddy's Adventures. Accessed 6/12/2023.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX0wl3Z_QRg

Video 2: Dismantled Railways walk Wellingborough to Rushden Transport Museum. Purple & Co Railway Adventures. Accessed 6/12/2023.
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7J2dLRWqQ-Q\[HB1\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7J2dLRWqQ-Q[HB1])

Our proposal

The Rushden Rail Link would have been our proposal under STM for a 3-mile branch off the Midland Main Line to three new stations at Rushden Lakes, Rushden Town and Higham Ferrers, mostly reusing the alignment of the former Higham Ferrers branch line, including the section of track currently used by the Rushden, Higham & Wellingborough Railway.

Rushden Lakes would be a new station serving the retail complex of the same name. Rushden Town station would use the existing station at Rushden, retaining its heritage features, whilst Higham Ferrers would be a new station on the site of the former station.

2-4tph would be provided by extending Thameslink services north of Bedford, connecting Rushden and Higham Ferrers directly with Bedford and Central London. A further 1-2tph could be provided using the northern curve, most likely running as a shuttle to Wellingborough, where passengers could change for connections to Kettering, and then on to Derby, Nottingham and Sheffield.



Figure 8: STM's proposed Rushden Rail Link, with stations at Rushden Lakes, Rushden Town and Higham Ferrers (source: Google Earth/Enroute)

We presented two variations for the alignment between the junctions with the Midland Main Line and Rushden Lakes. Alignment A (drawn by Harry Burr) is a new alignment running along the A45 dual carriageway. Alignment B (drawn by David Frankal) would follow the former alignment to the north of the A45, with Rushden Lakes station being located north of the A45, potentially requiring one fewer major bridge.



Figures 9 & 10: Alignment Options A (left) and B (right) (source: Google Earth/Enroute)

Planned expansion of the Rushden Lakes complex towards the west would have a significant impact on Alignment B (though would not necessarily rule it out altogether).



Figure 11: Rushden Lakes, including planned and potential extensions westwards. (source: McMullen). Further development of Rushden Lakes or housing to the north of the Rushden Lakes site is highly unlikely as this area is a designated Nature Reserve. The Nature Reserve does not directly impact on alignment B.

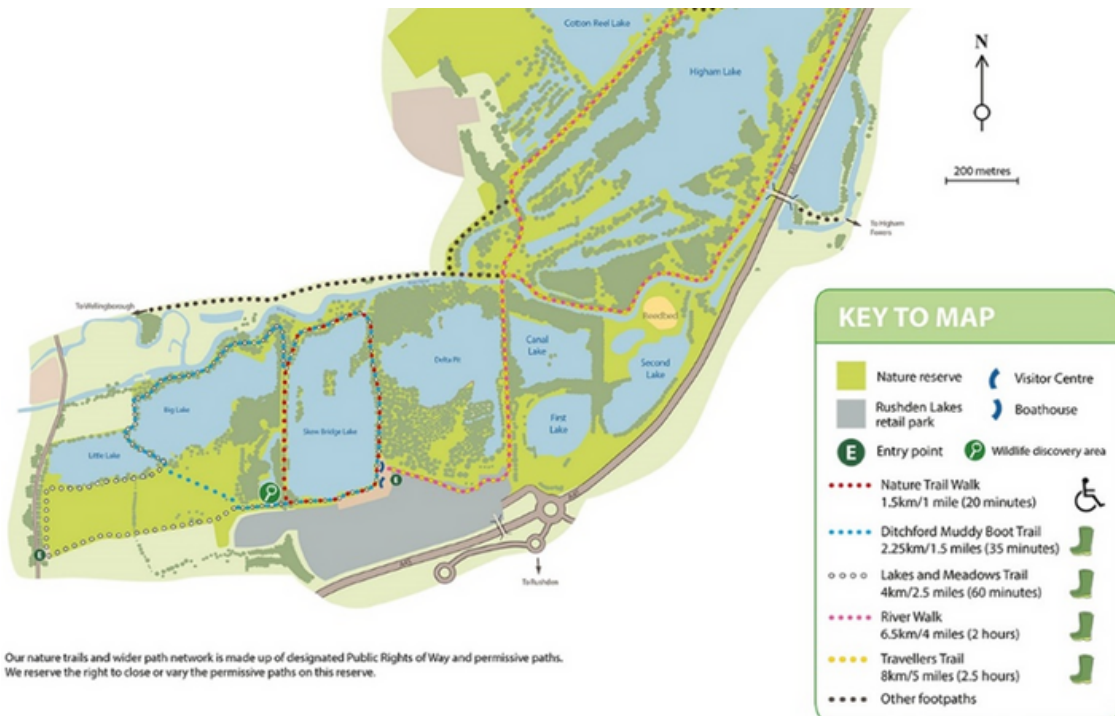


Figure 12: Map (extract) of Nene Valley Wetlands Nature Reserve (source: Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs & Northants)

Considerations for further development

The Rushden Rail Link, with conveniently located stations in the population centres of Rushden and Higham Ferrers, would significantly reduce car dependency by linking residents directly to Rushden Lakes, Wellingborough and London.

The project would have likely relied on the co-operation of the Rushden Historical Transport Society, who own a significant portion of the track-bed currently used as a heritage railway. Our proposal would involve the replacement of the heritage railway with a modernised line, displacing the society's collection of heritage rolling stock. The museum and heritage features at Rushden Town station could potentially be retained within modern standards.

We speculated that the RHTS might oppose our proposal on this basis, but also that it was possible that they may see the value in restoring a heavy rail service to their town. A key part of the next phase of development would have been to contact the society to gauge their support (RHTS were not contacted in connection to this article, but we would certainly welcome their comments or feedback).

Proposed future extension of the Rushden Lakes complex westwards (see Figure 11) may have impacted on the proposed Alignment B. We suggested that it may have been in ours and the RHTS's mutual interest to seek safeguarding of the remaining former alignments of the Higham Ferrers branch line as a priority. This could have been the basis of initial co-operation with the RHTS.

Further work would be needed to establish the viability of our proposal in terms of capacity on the Midland Main Line. Currently, there are 4tph (Thameslink) from London which terminate at Bedford, with 6tph (EMR) continuing north of Bedford, through Wellingborough, of which 2tph run to Corby and 4tph run towards Leicester and beyond to Nottingham, Sheffield and Derby.

As of 2021, as part of electrification and modernisation work, the Midland Main Line has been four-tracked between Bedford and Kettering, with the easternmost two tracks being used as the 'slow lines' for Corby services (source: Rail Engineer).

There is therefore the potential to extend 2-4 Thameslink trains per hour north of Bedford to Higham Ferrers using these slow lines, meaning the junctions we have proposed (see Figures 9 & 10) could be built as flat junctions without impacting on the fast lines.

An important consideration here was how this proposal would fit within not just present service patterns on the Midland Main Line, but potential post-HS2 service patterns, adding a degree of complexity and uncertainty.

Capacity post-HS2

At the time this original proposal was drawn up, under the Integrated Rail Plan, the intention was to build HS2's eastern leg as far as East Midlands Parkway (further north from Wellingborough), from where HS2 services towards Nottingham and Sheffield would continue on the existing infrastructure (source: Department for Transport).

In October 2023, the Prime Minister announced that the planned section of HS2 to East Midlands Parkway would be cancelled (source: The Guardian). There remains the possibility that sections of HS2, potentially even the full eastern leg to Leeds/York, may be reinstated under a future government, but this remains uncertain (source: The Independent). The high degree of uncertainty, including the multiple options and potential timescales, makes the job of predicting what the new baseline timetable on the Midland Main Line may look like very difficult.

Modelling by Mott MacDonald (Figures 13 & 14) as part of their report on strategic alternatives to HS2's eastern leg, commissioned by the Department for Transport in 2021, suggested that there would continue to be 4 fast train paths per hour to Leicester, regardless of whether HS2's eastern leg was built as far as East Midlands Parkway or not.

To our knowledge there has been no other modelling of Midland Main Line service patterns post-HS2, including any proposals to extend Thameslink north of Bedford. The viability of terminating 1-2tph from Higham Ferrers at Wellingborough (or potentially further north) is therefore uncertain. It is not necessarily the case that our proposal is strictly dependent on the delivery of HS2's eastern leg to East Midlands Parkway (or beyond), but without certainty on the future service patterns on the Midland Main Line it is difficult to assess this.

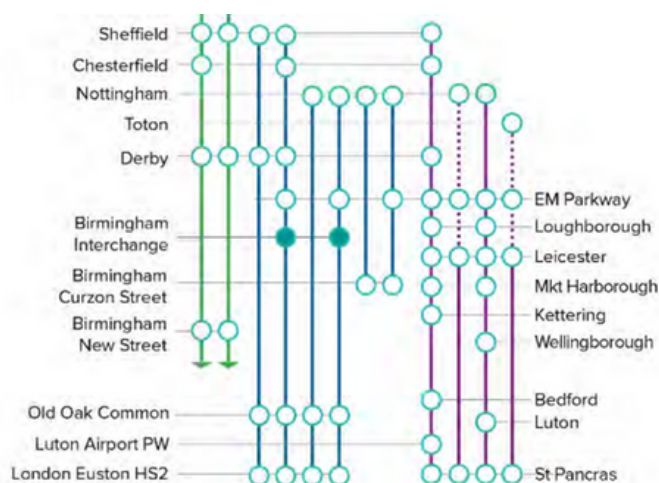


Figure 13: Indicative service pattern for the Midland Main Line (assuming HS2 East is built as far as East Midlands Parkway). Note the continuation of 4tph from London St Pancras to Leicester, in addition to 2tph to Corby (not shown) (source: Mott MacDonald)

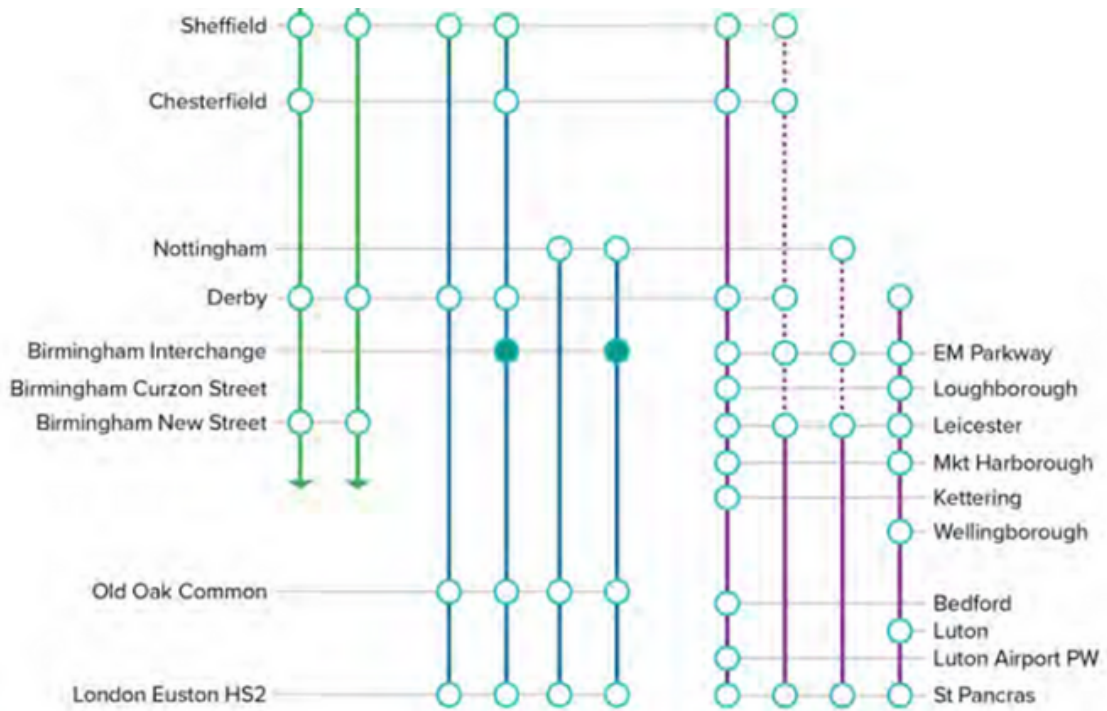


Figure 14: Indicative service pattern for the Midland Main Line (without HS2 East being built to East Midlands Parkway). Note the continuation of 4tph from London St Pancras to Leicester, in addition to 2tph to Corby (not shown) (source: Mott MacDonald)

In our assessment of the initial proposal for the Rushden Rail Link, we identified a potentially strong case for development, on the basis that a rail link to Rushden could offer significant benefits for a town currently served poorly by public transport, and that enough of the track-bed of the former Higham Ferrers branch line was likely to be intact to make the project technically feasible.

We did also, however, identify significant complications, most notably the impact on heritage rail operations and the need for support from the RHTS, potential interactions with further housing developments west of Rushden Lakes, and uncertainties surrounding future Midland Main Line service patterns.

Had STM taken forward further development of the project, following the path of Daventry, we would have focused our effort on these three issues, as well as weighing up the relative strength of our proposal with a potentially cheaper alternative – Rushden Parkway.



A counter-proposal: Rushden Parkway

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to making a strong case for the Rushden Rail Link would not have been any issues directly related to the project itself, but rather the relative strength of a potential counterproposal.

In 2009, the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) proposed the construction of a new parkway station for Rushden, adjacent to the village of Irchester (population 5,700) (source: ATOC and Wikipedia). ATOC (2009) estimated a cost of £6m for the new station. There appears to have been no further development since this initial proposal since the 2009 report (source: Trundleage).

The proposed site is 1.8 miles away from Rushden's old station, 5 minutes by car or 13 minutes by bus (via the present, somewhat indirect route - measured using Google Maps).



Figure 15: Proposed location of Rushden Parkway (source: Wikipedia/Google Earth/Enroute)

For STM to make the case for the Rushden Rail Link, we would have therefore not only needed to make a clear case for its benefits, but also for its benefits compared to those offered by Rushden Parkway instead. Alternatively, rather than pre-emptively selecting one preferred option over the other, STM could have opted to launch a 'Rushden Transport Development Group', following our work in Daventry, co-developing both projects as potential options.

Analysis

The problem of scale: Nodes vs Networks

The parallels between Daventry and Rushden suggest a conceptual tension between orienting proposals around the specific nodes we want to serve (Daventry, Rushden and Higham Ferrers town centres) and minimising required changes to the existing rail network.

Building parkway stations at Weedon Bec (for Daventry) and Irchester (for Rushden) on the existing West Coast Main Line and Midlands Main Line would likely cost significantly less than the substantial new infrastructure proposed to build branches serving the two town centres (even if, in Rushden's case, we are making use of a disused railway alignment).

In addition to considerations of cost, building parkway stations on existing lines presents significantly less operational complexity, with less of a need to consider future service patterns and additional rolling stock requirements. However, as feedback regarding the Daventry Parkway Project showed, even parkway station proposals are not immune from such difficulties, even with the capacity relief offered by HS2 (treated as a given in Daventry's case, highly uncertain in Rushden's case).

For the end users, the parkway station proposals present both advantages and disadvantages. For those living in or around Daventry, Rushden or Higham Ferrers town centres, it is clear that the rail link proposals offer more convenient door-to-door journey opportunities, potentially allowing residents to travel without a car at all.

However, parkway stations also allow those living further away in surrounding rural areas to access the railway, and potentially do so without increasing traffic pressure on town centres.

With Daventry in particular, the various proposals are oriented around different overall priorities in terms of where potential Daventry rail users would be travelling to. A parkway station at Weedon Bec could offer direct trains to London and Birmingham (source: Enroute), but not to the nearest major centre, Northampton, due to the historical rail geography.

A Daventry – Northampton rail link (Figure 3) would be oriented around convenient access to Northampton, with the potential to run through trains to London, Birmingham or Crewe depending on from which direction the line would approach Northampton, and depending on available track capacity (source: Enroute).

The different options presented therefore were not just technical questions of different ends to the same means, but also questions of what Daventry's transport priorities are to begin with (beyond simply having a rail link for its own sake).

One of the strengths of our proposals in Rushden, in contrast, was the ability to serve multiple demands with the same piece of infrastructure, with the branch (as proposed) served both by extensions to existing Thameslink services north of Bedford, and a local link to Wellingborough enabling connections further north.

Because of the configuration of the pre-existing network, with Thameslink services currently terminating at Bedford, running direct trains to London may be significantly easier (though not without any challenges) from Rushden than from Daventry.

Both examples illustrate the importance of the wider network context as well as the technical challenges of a given piece of infrastructure serving a local town. It is not enough (though it is vital) to ask how a piece of infrastructure can be delivered; one must also ask how it will fit into the wider network.

The Ordsall Chord in Manchester, built in 2017 and today serving 1tph between Manchester Airport and Saltburn, can be held up as an example of where projects have failed in their consideration of the wider network, as capacity on the adjacent Castlefield Corridor is so limited that very few trains can make use of it (source: Wikipedia).

Once the wider network is considered either way, the question of whether a parkway station with lower costs and minimum additional infrastructure is preferable to a new line directly serving town centre nodes becomes one that is not necessarily technical, but political. It opens up questions of what towns like Daventry and Rushden need, and how much money a local or national government is willing or able to spend to meet those needs.

The conclusion we came to in both cases of Daventry and Rushden was that there was no obvious right answer.



The problem of inertia

Whilst we weigh up the conceptual questions of how best to serve Daventry, Rushden and the many similar towns across the country, we face the very practical problem that, without support and funding behind one proposal, nothing will be done to improve the situation and benefit the local residents of these towns. Putting an emphasis on delivering benefits sooner may lead us to favour parkway proposals that in theory can be developed and delivered more quickly.

In the case of Rushden Parkway, it does not appear (at least from information available to the public) that any development has taken place since ATOC's proposal in 2009 (source: ATOC and Trundleage). This presents a paradox; Rushden Parkway itself does not appear to have been a strong enough proposal to be developed, yet the potential of building it may prove a major obstacle in making the case for a Rushden Rail Link which better serves the town centres.

In the case of Daventry, as noted in our report (source: Enroute), the progress that has been made developing plans for nearby Rugby Parkway station (source: Warwickshire County Council) has also weakened the relative case for a parkway station in Weedon Bec, contributing to STM's decision to convert the Daventry Parkway Project to the broader Daventry Transport Development Group.

This is a practical phenomenon as well as a theoretical one; one lesson STM learned from its work in Daventry was the challenge in keeping key stakeholders engaged in developing multiple options (beyond just catching their attention to begin with). This is, unfortunately, the practical reality of any local or national government with multiple issues and parties vying for their finite attention. Even the future of Rugby Parkway, the most advanced (and non-STM) proposal in the vicinity of either Daventry or Rushden is far from assured, as it still requires funding (source: Campaign for Better Transport).

There is therefore an inherent risk within the world of transport project development and campaigning that trying to develop a wide range of options may result in none of them being built at all. Returning to Our 2050 Vision, in line with those of other organisations (source: Campaign for Better Transport and Trade Union Congress), we believe that in the contexts of climate change, air pollution and road safety, 'business as usual' cannot be an option for Daventry, Rushden or anywhere else. We must therefore overcome the problem of inertia.

Conclusion

Enroute's predecessor organisation, STM, carried out the case-specific analysis presented here under our guise as a transport development and advocacy group. Although under our new model, we no longer envisage our role being the lead on further development of schemes such as the Rushden Rail Link, we believe our initial work here and our more advanced work on Daventry present a useful case study in-and-of themselves of the process of project development.

In Daventry, Harry Burr was initially successful in building rapport for the Daventry Parkway Project, which presented a clear single option which he argued would benefit the town. This is not to say that, given the advice he was presented with and the complexity (and subjectivity) of Daventry's transport needs, it was not the correct decision to then broaden the project to Daventry Transport Development Group; we do acknowledge, however, that broadening the scope of the project made it harder to keep key stakeholders engaged and present a clear vision of what STM was hoping to achieve.

In Rushden too, the potential of delivering some of the benefits of our proposed rail link with a simpler parkway project may have had the effect of weakening the case we wanted to build.

Both Daventry and Rushden raise conceptual questions of how best to approach small towns that are near to, but practically disconnected from, the rail network. Do we prioritise serving town centres, at the expense of higher costs and increasing network complexity? Or do we add parkway stations to the existing network, minimising cost and complexity but also limiting the benefits to those towns? However, whilst weighing up these important questions, we must also be mindful that without coming up with a clear vision, backed up by support and funding, we risk ending up with the worst possible outcome; no change at all.



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