

Fraser Pithie joined the meeting as Secretary of the Shakespeare Line Rail User Group (SLRUG).

After being invited by the Chair, Fraser outlined the groups involved in the railway and how that had been and remains vital to maintaining train services to and from Stratford upon Avon.

He explained that there are two organisations, SLRUG, the Rail User Group, and the Friends of the Shakespeare Line (FoSL). SLRUG is a membership group that represents the users of railway services. Its primary role is to liaise with train operators and raise any issues with them on behalf of users, as well as participate in and submit views to consultations regarding local plans related to the Planning Authorities that cover areas served by the railway routes.

These include Stratford on Avon District Council, Solihull Borough Council, Bromsgrove District Council, Warwick District Council and Birmingham City Council. The relevant transport authorities are the West Midlands Combined Authority, West Midlands Rail Executive, Transport for West Midlands and Warwickshire County Council.

The Friends of the Shakespeare Line was formed by SLRUG in 2020 to attract and support around 90 volunteers who look after and volunteer at each of the 18 stations between Birmingham and Stratford upon Avon. FOSL has been very successful and has attracted around £ 0.5 million of inward investment to support local communities and the local economy.

This includes the renovation and repurposing of Henley in Arden station building, which is due to be opened on 22 February 2024, the pioneering of a City & Guilds NVQ 2 course and vocational qualification at Woodrush Academy, Wythall and the conversion of a community room at Stratford upon Avon station with the potential for a Visitor Information point.

Fraser outlined the key issues that SLRUG feel are relevant to Stratford upon Avon and the railway.

- There are plans in the WMRE strategy (reinforced by passenger feedback provided by SLRUG in 2017) to establish three trains an hour service between Birmingham and Stratford upon Avon. This would see one service travel via the Solihull route with the other two services travelling via the Henley in Arden/Shirley route, with one of these each hour travelling semi-fast and only calling at Henley in Arden and Wythall before all stations to/from Whitlocks End.
- SLRUG supports and is inputting to work that WMRE is considering improving rail network connectivity, particularly with Oxford and London. This would likely involve a 2-hour frequency train service provided by GWR between Stratford upon Avon and Oxford by extending some of the current London Paddington >< Oxford train services.

- SLRUG supports and is inputting to work that WMRE is also considering, which would provide a 2-hour frequency train service by extending the current Nuneaton-Coventry-Kenilworth-Leamington Spa train service to and from Stratford upon Avon. This would connect the West Coast Main at Coventry (Birmingham Airport) and Cross-Country services to the East Midlands and East Anglia at Nuneaton.
- SLRUG feels there is a need for rail to play a much larger part in positively contributing towards Stratford's transport needs and desires. Greater use of the Stratford upon Avon Parkway, including between Parkway and the main Stratford station, should be explored with train operators and Warwickshire County Council.
- The environmental benefits of rail travel directly contribute towards the climate change agenda and lower emissions targets and aims of local authorities, so more should be done to attract visitors to Stratford upon Avon by train, which needs to be in places like London.
- Local improvements are also needed to make travelling by train easier and user-friendly. One idea that SLRUG had recently raised with the District Council was to install a large hoarding on the Alcester Road embankment that would show and direct visitors to Stratford's Town Centre as currently, when alighting from a train at Stratford, visitors do not know which way to walk to access the town centre.

These highly desirable train service improvements would place considerable pressure on the current single-line section of the railway between Bearley Junction and Hatton. Consequently, SLRUG would support any proposals developed to redouble the line between Bearley Junction and Hatton.

Reference was made to the "Restoring Your Railway" (RYR) Stratford upon Avon - Honeybourne reopening Strategic Outline Business Case that the DfT dismissed. SLRUG feels that the decision by the DfT should be used to reinforce the case and the need for investment in the current rail infrastructure to address the capacity constraint between Bearley Junction and Hatton.

SLRUG offered to attend the TTG later in the Spring and present a more detailed explanation of the points and ideas raised at the meeting. Fraser thanked the TTG for inviting SLRUG to engage and looked forward to working with the TTG in the future.