



**REGENERATION, ENVIRONMENT,
HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY
SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

19 MAY 2005

**Agenda
Item No.**

**THE STRATEGIC RAIL AUTHORITY'S WEST MIDLANDS ROUTE
UTILISATION STRATEGY CONSULTATION**

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor M Longhi - Environment

Summary of Report

This report is to advise Members about the Strategic Rail Authority's consultation on its Draft West Midlands Rail Utilisation Strategy, set out the implications for Walsall, and provide a suggested response. The details of how the plans affect Walsall and the recommended response, is contained in the annex. The consultation finishes on the 27 May 2005. Cabinet meets on 15 June 2005. In view of this timescale, officers will, with the agreement of the SRA, make a holding response based on the unanimously-endorsed Notice of Motion on 25 April 2005, with the full response following after the Cabinet meeting.

The main issues for discussion are:

- The proposal to **extend Walsall-Birmingham New Street rail services to Birmingham International station** (see paragraph 9). This is a fast growing travel and employment destination and the provision of direct services will help travellers and expand Walsall's employment catchment. The recommended response is to **welcome** this proposal.
- The proposal (subject to funds being available for the required infrastructure improvements) to **increase frequencies on the Walsall-Rugeley line** (see paragraphs 10). This would help to improve Walsall Town Centre's relationship with its wider catchment, and **should also be welcomed**. It would be even better, however, if the improvement programme took account of the need to re-site Bloxwich rail station to a more central location (see paragraph 11).
- The intention, possibly as part of future timetable changes, to **redirect Walsall-Birmingham services from New Street to Snow Hill** (see paragraph 12). As this would severely disadvantage both the Borough's travellers who need to use New Street to connect with other services, and set back economic regeneration prospects, the recommended response is to **object strongly**.

- The proposal to **withdraw the Walsall-Wolverhampton service** (see paragraph 14) is unreasonable; a better way forward would be to improve services and reopen stations on the route in order to increase patronage and help alleviate traffic congestion on the A454 and A461. Again, the recommendation is to **object**.
- The **extra capacity that Walsall's presently underused rail network could offer**, especially in alleviating operational problems around the Birmingham area (see paragraphs 4, 7, 16 and 17). It is recommended to urge the SRA to review the potential for this, particularly by **considering the case for reopening the safeguarded Stourbridge-Walsall-Lichfield line**.

Background Papers

The Strategic Rail Authority: Consultation – West Midlands Route Utilisation Strategy

Reason for Scrutiny

The Strategic Rail Authority's consultation has implications for the overall regeneration and diversification of the Borough's economy as well as the transport network.

Resource and Legal Considerations

None.

Citizen impact

There will be significant impacts to help some citizens by the provision of direct rail services to Birmingham International/NEC station from Walsall; and also to improve frequencies to Rugeley. On the other hand, other citizens would lose out if services to Wolverhampton were to be terminated, and particularly for longer-distance travellers if Walsall-Birmingham trains were to be located away from Birmingham New Street, which is the nation's rail hub.

Environmental impact

Some people will be attracted from cars to rail by better services on the Rugeley-Walsall-Birmingham line whilst others will have to use other forms of transport between Wolverhampton and Walsall. More generally, rail investment could make a big impact in taking traffic off the roads, particularly the A454 and the A461 through the Borough; but to judge by the RUS consultation, there is little interest on the part of the SRA in restoring rail services to make a positive impact

Performance Management

The Council does not operate rail services, so none.

Equality Implications

Rail transport is crucial to help people who do not have access to a car make longer-distance journeys. On balance the local effects probably cancel out – the proposed extension of direct services to Birmingham Airport, a fast-growing employment destination, is cancelled out by the withdrawal of Walsall-Wolverhampton services. However, relocating the Walsall-Birmingham services from New Street to Snow Hill would make it more difficult for people to gain access to the national rail network. Disabled people in particular would be seriously disadvantaged in having to cross Birmingham City Centre to make onward journeys.

Consultation

In view of the fact that the consultation deadline ends on 27 May 2005 and Cabinet does not meet until 15 June 2005, officers will send a holding reply, based on the Council-endorsed Notice of Motion, to the SRA, which is a shortened form of the attached annex. The SRA has extended its consultation to ensure that Cabinet can give this matter due consideration and respond accordingly

Vision 2008

Improved rail services are important to help achieve the Vision in a number of ways. Some elements of the proposed RUS, such as the proposed improvements on the Rugeley – Walsall – Birmingham – Birmingham International, will aid progress. Other proposals will imply a setback to the relevant parts of the Vision.

- Ensure a clean and green borough – rail is a relatively clean mode of travel, and generally rail will continue to perform a modest though significant role in certain corridors. However this role will not increase greatly.
- Make it easier for people to get around. The RUS will certainly make it easier for some people to get around in the Rugeley-Walsall-Birmingham corridor. On the other hand it will be more difficult to reach Wolverhampton, and (if proposals to disconnect Walsall-Birmingham New Street services go ahead) to connect with the national rail network at Birmingham.
- Ensure all people are safe and secure. Rail is a very safe mode of transport. Making more of Walsall's underused rail network would help make the Borough even safer. However the RUS has no plans to do this.

- Encourage everyone to feel proud of Walsall – good rail services, particularly inter-city services, would put Walsall on the map for investment. Unfortunately inter-city and long-distance rail services to the Borough seem as far off as ever.
- Make it easier to gain access to local services. Rail tends to cater for journeys that go outside the Borough. But there is potential for new rail stations in Brownhills, Pelsall, Streetly, Aldridge, Rushall, Willenhall and Pleck. To judge by the RUS Consultation, this potential will not be realised in the near future.
- Strengthen the local economy. Longer distance rail services could be a catalyst for diversification of uses in Walsall Town Centre. For example office developers – badly needed in Walsall - typically prefer towns with a choice of rail as well as road infrastructure. But there are no plans to bring long-distance services to Walsall. This will make this element of the Vision even more difficult to achieve.
- Listen to what local people want – there is wide evidence that people want better rail services, particularly in the Aldridge and Brownhills area. The attached recommended response takes this on board, and provides the opportunity to communicate their wishes to those managing the national rail network.

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Annex

Proposed response to the Strategic Rail Authority

1. The Council would like to thank the SRA for giving it the opportunity to comment on the Draft Rail Utilisation Strategy for the West Midlands and to extend the deadline to enable the issues and response to be carefully considered. This is the Council's own response, which expands on an earlier holding response, but the SRA will be aware that we have discussed the issues and implications with other stakeholders in the area and region, who will make a combined response. It gives a general overview, then deals with overarching issues and then those to do with specific rail lines.

General matters

2. Walsall Borough in the West Midlands currently has a population of over 250,000 and forms part of the largest conurbation outside London. The Borough forms part of an older industrial area, and as such has to struggle against, and try to reverse, adverse economic trends that continue to affect it. It must improve its transport network as much as possible in order to be able to attract the kind of investment that can help it diversify its economic base. Maintaining and improving the transport network is critical to the success of our regeneration efforts. Rail services form an essential part of this strategic transport network. Equally importantly, given that Walsall's car ownership is lower than average, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, good rail services are essential to give people who do not have access to a car a reasonable choice of longer distance destinations by public transport.
3. Walsall Borough is roughly the size of a city like Portsmouth and larger than, for example, Derby. Yet it has currently to make do with only local rail services that connect it with the inter-city trains serving Wolverhampton and Birmingham. In consequence, many passengers whose journeys originate in Walsall have to join trains at other stations such as Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Sutton Coldfield and Lichfield. These journeys are then counted as originating from these other stations, making Walsall's rail use seem smaller as a proportion of its total travel than it actually is. Consequently this effectively adds to patronage at these other stations, adding to pressure to prioritise improvements there rather than in Walsall, even though Walsall has useful spare capacity at a time when the network is under pressure. Meanwhile, other people have to use their cars because Walsall is underprovided with rail services. It remains our long-term goal to achieve inter-city services for the Borough, not just because we think it is what the Borough's traveling public deserve, but also because they would assist in putting the Borough more firmly on the investment map, attracting commercial development that would otherwise go to more favoured areas, whilst contributing to the overall government objective of an urban renaissance in the area. The benefits of this would be unquantified but real and substantial. Recent work on regional futures, prepared for the Government, states that economic competitiveness of peripheral parts of the country is impeded by poor transport connections and long journey times to

London.¹ Our view on rail issues, and hence our response to the RUS Strategy consultation, is guided by the need to work to fulfill regeneration priorities and achieve the urban renaissance to benefit people in Walsall.

4. Walsall also sits at the hub of actual and potential rail lines that radiate out to Wolverhampton, Stafford, Lichfield, Sutton Coldfield/Nuneaton, Birmingham, and Dudley/Stourbridge. Some of these are disused, and reopening them and improving services on existing ones could help to take commuter traffic off the roads, helping achieve local economic and environmental objectives, and also improving accessibility to jobs and services for people who do not have access to a car. Again, this is in tune with overall objectives to reduce social polarisation and social exclusion. Whilst we are aware that the remit of the RUS is to make better use of existing lines, we would point out that reopening rail lines in the Walsall area could also add capacity around the extremely congested rail hub in the Birmingham area, and should be considered as an integral part of the exercise.

Overarching Issues

5. We appreciate that the main remit of this exercise is to make better use of resources and increase the overall efficiency of the network, rather than to set out overall improvement priorities. Whilst there is much to welcome in terms of improvements affecting Walsall, we are disappointed with the terms of reference of this consultation in three main overarching respects. In the first place, the consultation focuses on individual lines (or, in the Walsall to Wolverhampton case, parts of lines) and services. However, and aside from the issue to do with the calculation of rail demand in the Walsall area being understated, as discussed in paragraph 3 above, we would point out that seemingly marginal adjustments to the rail network, as viewed from a national perspective, could have a significant effect on local areas, for better or worse. There is a need to consider the effect on the local areas, not just the lines or even the local rail network. Of course, it is acknowledged that many of these effects are unquantifiable. But the SRA's consultation does not appear to have considered the RUS strategy in the light of these broader or strategic issues².
6. Secondly, and following on from this, the SRA, in this consultation, appears implicitly to view Walsall's rail facilities as essentially functioning for the benefit of the wider network rather than for the people of Walsall, except to the extent that they affect demand for the service in question. Even the proposed improvements appear simply to be by-products of rearrangements to provide for more capacity for certain kinds of services, such as Virgin's Inter-city services, rather than being seen as necessary improvements to help travelers in their own right. We consider that the starting point for rail consultations, even those which have a basically operational remit, should be how to improve rail services to residents of the borough or area in question, not just respond to demand affecting a line or station in question.

¹ Regional Futures: England's Regions in 2030, Arup/Oxford Economic Forecasting, para 7.4.2 p65. This part is mainly concerned with the periphery of the south-east, but the point applies equally to areas in the West Midlands such as Walsall.

² We understand that the SRA will be conducting a Regional Planning Assessment in the near future which will deal with these matters. But since actions proposed in the RUS will have strategic impact on the Metropolitan Area, it is necessary that the Council's response deals with the strategic implications.

7. Thirdly, we are concerned about the overall logic of allocating numbers of people on certain train services on certain routes and parts of routes, with some routes therefore deserving improvements and some services being earmarked for reductions in frequencies or outright closure (the most obvious local example being the Walsall-Wolverhampton service). In the early 1990s Walsall's train patronage was declining. However, the brave step was taken actually to improve frequencies, and this was followed by a jump of 180% in passenger numbers from Walsall station, as shown in fig3.1 of the Consultation. This shows that the improvement in numbers using Walsall was far above the general surge in passenger numbers across the rail network in this period – indeed, it appears that Walsall had the biggest jump in patronage outside central Birmingham. It also shows that positive improvements and investment yield positive results, whether an increase in rail usage itself or an indirectly with a beneficial effect on the alleviation of road congestion. On the other hand, reducing frequencies and cutting services is likely to deter existing passengers, forcing them onto other modes, especially their cars. This simply transfers rail congestion problems onto the highway network. It does not solve the overall problem. Moreover, this locks present poorly performing services into a spiral of decline, rendering them vulnerable to closure on narrow value for money terms. This can hardly be helpful in meeting rail growth targets, as well as wider ones in relation to an integrated transport policy.

Specific rail corridors

8. The main rail corridor on which Walsall is situated is the **Birmingham – Walsall - Rugeley - Stafford corridor**, which forms the double function of linking Walsall to the nation's Inter-City rail hub at Birmingham New Street and connects Walsall Town Centre to the northern part of its wider catchment in South Staffordshire and the Cannock area. This is widely regarded as a success story that demonstrates that positive investment pays dividends in terms of adding patronage to trains and consequently relieving the road network, as well as providing a greater choice of destinations served by public transport for people who do not have access to a car. In the longer run Walsall Council would wish to see direct services to London and Birmingham International airport, together with improved frequencies northwards.
9. The Consultation proposes, in paragraph 7.8 A, to extend services from Walsall to Birmingham International. Passengers from Walsall to the airport, whether to catch a flight or for employment purposes, will benefit greatly from this. This is all the more welcome given that the airport will be an expanding travel and employment destination over the coming years. **The Council warmly welcomes this proposal, which will provide the potential not only to help existing and potential travellers from Walsall but also improve job opportunities for Borough residents and economic diversification.** However, we have two caveats: first, as pointed out in paragraph 6 above, this change should be seen for what it actually is: a genuine improvement to make Birmingham International Airport and the NEC more easily accessible to a larger part of its catchment by rail, rather than simply a rationalisation of existing services to deliver greater operational efficiency. It should therefore not be seen simply as a temporary measure subject to further rationalisation in future. Second, the consultation is unclear about how this proposal actually fits into the service pattern between Birmingham New Street and Birmingham International, for example in paragraph A2.5 on p54. We would like to have further guidance on the timetable details of this proposal.

10. Also on this corridor, option I2.2, p65, proposes to evaluate the case for increased service frequencies between Walsall and Rugeley, subject to funds being available to improve signaling and capacity. **Improving service frequencies will connect Walsall Town Centre even better to its wider catchment in the Cannock and Rugeley area, and as such is also to be welcomed.** However, we note that option 12.1 proposes, from 2008, to terminate the Birmingham-Walsall-Stafford service at Rugeley, and replace the Rugeley to Stafford portion with other semi-fast services on the West Coast Main Line. It is unclear whether trains from Walsall would still run through to Rugeley Trent Valley, in order to connect with these services. If they were to terminate at Rugeley Town, short of Rugeley Trent Valley, and if the proposed closure of the Wolverhampton – Walsall service were also to go ahead (see below), this would sever Walsall's direct rail connections to the whole of north-western Britain, and make it necessary for passengers to go south to change trains at Birmingham New Street, adding to the problems of overcrowding there, or travel by other means to the nearest railhead, or transfer their whole journey by car along already congested motorways by default. Even if the Walsall-Rugeley service were to connect with trains to Stafford at Rugeley, people travelling from Walsall northwards would have to change at Rugeley and Stafford to reach an inter-city service.
11. A further issue in relation to the Walsall-Rugeley section is the poor passenger numbers for Bloxwich and Bloxwich North. In the case of Bloxwich this is due partly to the hourly frequency but also to siting of the station in a location that is considered out of the way and insecure. The Council takes the view that if the station were to be re-sited closer to Bloxwich District Centre it would not only help to maintain the centre's vitality and viability (an objective of planning guidance) but tap into a greater residential catchment, increasing patronage. Accordingly, the new Unitary Development Plan, Policy BX9, indicates a suitable site to construct a re-sited station. **The Council would like the SRA to consider the merits of re-siting Bloxwich station in its plans to assess the prospects for improving the route, in order to make the most of signaling and other capacity improvements.**
12. Meanwhile, we note with concern that the SRA assumes that there is a consensus of stakeholders in favour of relocating Walsall-Birmingham New Street services to Birmingham Snow Hill, albeit only as part of a radical timetable change. The SRA appears to consider that providing the necessary link to enable this to happen would cost less than providing capacity at New Street. Walsall Council, as a prominent though indirect rail stakeholder in the area, strongly dissents from a consensus that such a course of action is desirable now or in the future. Moreover, it would, in combination with proposals to cut direct links to the Inter-City stations of Birmingham New Street, Wolverhampton and Stafford, leave Walsall not only without an Inter-City service itself but without even a direct connection to an inter-city station. This would make things more difficult for travellers to and from Walsall from outside the immediate catchment, for the sake of operating convenience. It would also be a severely disadvantageous position for a large urban area that depends on good strategic communications as an essential prerequisite for a healthy economy. Moreover, it would result in a missed opportunity to realise the potential of the Walsall market for rail services, some of which, as pointed out above, currently manifests itself at other railheads. **Walsall Council therefore opposes any attempt to relocate its Birmingham New Street services to Birmingham Snow Hill.**

13. The second rail corridor serving the Borough is between **Wolverhampton, Walsall and Sutton Coldfield**. Passenger services currently run between Walsall and Wolverhampton, and on to Wellington in Shropshire. Between Walsall and Sutton Coldfield the line is freight only. Walsall, Wolverhampton and Birmingham Councils all promote the improvement of this route in their UDPs. There is potential, and space, for a new station at Willenhall, one of Walsall's District Centres with a commercial focus and a residential catchment. As with Bloxwich, the UDP Proposals Map indicates a location for a station and park and ride site. Planning permission has also been granted for a rail station and park and ride site to serve Aldridge, a large residential area. There is also potential for stations at Pleck, Streetly and Sutton Coldfield³, all of which have substantial surrounding residential catchments. There may also be potential for a station serving the Darlaston Strategic Development Area, which is the focus of an emerging Regeneration Framework. A through service would be very useful in relieving heavy commuting flows on the A454, which crosses the M6 Junction 10, one of the most congested points in the UK, and also help to relieve severe congestion on the A461 as it approaches Walsall Town Centre from the north. Opening the whole line to rail services, and improving frequencies, would also improve patronage figures which are currently very low on the Walsall-Wolverhampton section of the Walsall-Wellington service.
14. However, we are disappointed to note that, far from proposing to improve or extend this service, the SRA, in G2.1, advocates the complete withdrawal of the service. In combination with the recommendation to cut the direct service between Rugeley and Stafford, this would deprive the Borough's residents of a direct link into the network serving north and West Britain via Wolverhampton. The SRA considers that only 200 journeys a day are made on these trains. However this poor level of patronage is clearly caused in part by the relative infrequency of the service, and also the lack of intermediate stations serving large residential catchments. This would be remedied by improving frequencies and opening Willenhall, Aldridge and possibly Pleck, Streetly and Sutton Coldfield stations. Meanwhile, the consultation assesses passenger flows between Walsall and Stafford separately because there are two lines serving these points, one via Rugeley and one via Wolverhampton. But, taken together, they could improve numbers on the Wolverhampton route still further. If Walsall is to lose its direct service to Stafford, it is all the more reason to keep the Walsall to Wolverhampton train service open, in order to maintain the indirect rail connection to Stafford, but also to keep the connection to points north. **For all these reasons, Walsall Council strongly opposes the proposed termination of the Walsall to Wolverhampton rail service.**
15. The SRA is silent on the rest of this route, between Walsall and Sutton Coldfield, except for infrastructure measures to improve freight flows. The Council considers that, as a residential commuter area, this line would produce good passenger figures for people wishing to travel by train from Sutton, Streetly and Aldridge to Walsall, Wolverhampton and Birmingham, whilst providing relief for the local road system. Again, there is an opportunity to be grasped here. **The Council considers that it is appropriate for the Route Utilisation Strategy to consider the prospects and issues associated with making best use of this important route for passengers as well as freight.**

³ It is however acknowledged that there would need to be capacity improvements at Sutton Coldfield to accommodate terminating trains.

16. The third main route crossing Walsall is the currently disused Stourbridge – Walsall - Lichfield route. It connects Walsall, and the Black Country, with Stourbridge Junction, and hence the south and south-west, and with Lichfield, for connections to Yorkshire and the North-East. As with Walsall in particular, the Black Country has very poor rail connections to the north-east and south-west for what is a population unit of 1 million (i.e. more than Birmingham). Many Black Country residents, as well as those from Walsall, have to go to or change at Birmingham New Street to catch trains to other places. But Birmingham New Street is reportedly at the limits of its passenger capacity already. Not only could the line be reopened in order to take some of the current pressure off Birmingham New Street and provide a freight facility to help reduce such train movements around central Birmingham; it could perform an important safety valve for diverting trains for the duration of the improvement of Birmingham New Street. It should therefore be considered for reopening before work starts to improve New Street. On a more local level, the restoration of train services would ameliorate traffic conditions on the A461 between Walsall and Brownhills, and provide greater accessibility to Walsall, Birmingham and the Black Country for people without the use of a car. It could therefore contribute to the overall efficiency of the network as well as being in tune with wider transport and regeneration objectives. In consequence, it is relevant for consideration as part of the RUS. There continues to be strong public support from residents to reopen the line.
17. With this in mind, the Council, in its newly-adopted UDP, has safeguarded the rail formation between Ryecroft Walsall and Brownhills as part of a strategically important route for the future. The SRA, in its Land Use Planning Guide, supports this general approach, and indeed specifically mentions the Stourbridge-Walsall-Lichfield line as an example of a capacity improvement necessary to provide for future growth. The SRA has stated in its previous planning documents that it wishes to reopen the Stourbridge to Walsall section as a freight avoiding line for Birmingham, presumably as a first step. The logical extension of this would be to re-open the line between Walsall and Lichfield in order to reap the greatest benefits; and then to restore passenger services. Rail freight operators have recognised this and have strongly supported the Council's rail policies in this regard. However the RUS is silent on the potential contribution of this important route, notwithstanding its previous support for the restoration of freight and its own Land Use Planning Guide.

The Council considers that the network benefits of restoring the Stourbridge to Lichfield line are so significant that they should be considered in the RUS strategy. The SRA should give a high priority to reopen this line, both to aid the operation of the network and to give passengers in the area, who support rail investment in their taxes yet do not have access to rail services, a better deal.

Conclusion

18. The SRA's RUS Consultation contains much to welcome for the Walsall area, such as the intention to improve frequencies and extend services on the Rugeley-Walsall-Birmingham-Birmingham airport route. However, in overall terms the Council is disappointed that the SRA has not recognised either the impact of rationalising rail services on the economy of the Borough or its travellers. Neither has it recognised the spare capacity that Walsall can offer the wider network, as well as the consequent opportunities for attracting more passengers to rail. The specific intentions to close the Walsall-Wolverhampton service and relocate Walsall-New Street services to Snow Hill would be highly damaging; indeed, if they went ahead it would be a severe setback to Walsall's regeneration hopes. There needs to be a positive message about the role of the rail network as a catalyst for urban regeneration and environmental improvement, and the implications of this need to be carried through even into documents that have an operational remit.
19. At present the Borough has three direct links into the inter-city rail network. One is via Rugeley and Stafford, another via Wolverhampton and the third via Birmingham New Street. We recognise the priorities have to be made and would invite the SRA to enter into a dialogue with the Council to consider further its response to the consultation.