

## **ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**21 November 2019 at 6.00pm at the Council House, Walsall**

### **Committee Members**

#### **Present:**

Councillor L. Harrison (Chair)  
Councillor P. Bott  
Councillor S. Craddock  
Councillor C. Creaney  
Councillor P. Kaur  
Councillor K. Sears  
Councillor G. Singh Sohal  
Councillor I. Shires  
Councillor M. Ward

### **Officers Present:**

Tracey Evans	Lead Accountant
Matthew Pain	Senior Transport Planner
Matt Powis	Democratic Services Officer

### **Other Attendee**

#### **Present:**

Malcolm Holmes	Executive Director – West Midlands Rail Executive
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### **26/19 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A. Hicken, Councillor M. Follows and Councillor A. Nazir.

### **27/19 Substitution**

Councillor K. Sears substituted on behalf of Councillor A. Nazir.

### **28/19 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whips.

### **29/19 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items to consider in private session.

### **30/19 Minutes of the previous meetings**

#### **Resolved:**

**That the minutes of the meetings held on 26 September and 17 October copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.**

### **31/19 Presentation from West Midlands Rail Executive**

The Committee received a presentation from the Executive Director of Rail at West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE), which gave an overview of rail transportation in the West Midlands including an update on the performance of the Chase line and the development of Darlaston and Willenhall Train Stations.

The Executive Director informed the Committee that WMRE had been established to provide essential leadership and partnership working to shape better train services in the West Midlands. The Committee noted that the Executive was formed from Local Authorities in the West Midlands and championed by the Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

It was noted that since May 2019, there had been changes with local rail branding and the biggest rail timetable change in a decade. Whilst there had been some performance challenges specifically on the Chase line (Rugeley to Walsall), general timetable changes had been hugely beneficial to Walsall. In particular, Walsall had benefited from a direct link to London Euston.

With reference to Chase line performance, he informed the Committee that problems on the route were a direct result of timetable changes which had made the Chase line fragile to delays on the wider network, in particular, the West Coast mainline. In addition to this, insufficient staffing on the trains had caused issues which had been caused from previous staff leave agreements from the previous franchise owner. The new franchise owner confirmed that worked had commenced to alleviate staffing shortfalls by working with unions to provide additional arrangements to cover shifts using managers and recruiting senior conductors to provide further flexibility on the timetable.

Due to complex timetabling across the country, new timetable planning takes place a year in advance as any changes require consultation with the train operators and Network Rail. As a result, operators were unable to make any rapid timetable changes.

With reference to the new timetable changes from May 2020, the Committee noted the following points:

- Starting in December 2019, Walsall to London rail link would cease to operate. However, the Walsall to Birmingham International Airport link would remain active to allow passengers to depart from Birmingham New Street for trains to London Euston;
- There were proposals for a future London service from Walsall with additional carriages and new electric trains.
- There were planned changes to the trains to Rugeley to allow additional time at Birmingham New Street;

- Additional electric trains would be released onto the Chase line with old diesel trains relocating to Worcester train services;
- There were proposals to implement generic improvement measures in March 2020 to ensure that performance was maximised on the network.

The Committee noted that from May 2021, there were proposals to improve Sunday services to mirror Saturday services.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:-

- A Member highlighted that there were previous proposals for London services to terminate at Walsall instead of Rugeley. In response, the Executive Director confirmed that he was unaware of the proposal and that there had been a view to run services to London Euston so long as the integrity of local services was maintained;
- A Member sought clarification on the amount of delays or cancellation due to people committing suicide. In response, the Executive Director confirmed that the West Coast mainline had a high number of suicides due to trains operating at high speeds on the line. Rugby Train Station had implemented 24HR security around the station to assist with suicide prevention. He highlighted that further work was needed with partners including the Council to investigate effective methods of suicide prevention.
- A Member requested an update on the infrastructure work on Bloxwich Rail Crossing footbridge. In response, the Executive Director confirmed that he only dealt with the electrification on the line and not building infrastructure as the project was Network Rail's responsibility. However, he advised that the footbridge would open at the end of December 2019;
- It was noted that train services had been disrupted across the network due to industrial action by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) which criticised the modernisation of the train guard. Work has commenced between train operators and Network Rail to ensure that minimal disruption occurs on services;
- Willenhall and Darlaston Stations design forecast was due to be completed by early 2020 with the expected build to be completed in 2021;
- Due to existing constraints on the network, the following services were proposed for the Wolverhampton to Walsall line:
  - Wolverhampton to Walsall via Darlaston and Willenhall train stations;
  - Wolverhampton to Birmingham New Street via Darlaston, Willenhall and Tame Bridge Parkway stations.
- A Member sought clarification on the works taken place to strengthen the Railway Lane Bridge in Willenhall. In response, the Executive Director confirmed that no strengthening work had commenced on the bridge as design proposals relocated the end of the proposed station location away from any bridges to maximise the height of the overhead infrastructure;
- A Member welcomed proposals for Willenhall and Darlaston train stations. He sought clarification on whether there could be a train service that provides a circular route across Walsall and the Black Country via Birmingham. In response, the Executive Director confirmed that establishing new stations was the first step in getting new services for the borough.

However, he highlighted that due to the service timetabling, capacity across the network remained an issue;

- A Member requested that the Mayor of the WMCA, Executive Director at WMRE and the Deputy Leader of the Council be invited to attend a question and answer session at a future meeting of the Committee;
- A Member sought clarification about whether the proposed car park at Darlaston Train Station would be free for users. In response, the Executive Director highlighted that the decision on charges for the car parking was yet to be determined;
- Both Darlaston and Willenhall stations would be fully accessible with lifts and covered with 24HR CCTV;
- There was a broad discussion around proposals for High Speed 2 (HS2) and the role the project had in increasing capacity on the existing network;
- A Member informed the Committee about his experience travelling on the Chase line from Cannock to Birmingham and that the train was extremely crowded. In response, the Executive Director confirmed that timetabling changes should alleviate some of the capacity points on the line;
- The Chair informed the Committee about her experiences travelling via train into Birmingham late at night. She highlighted that there was insufficient train services for participants of the night time economy. In response, the Executive Director informed the Committee that a response would be provided in writing on the improvements to train services at night;
- A Member requested further on proposals for a train station at Aldridge. In response, the Executive Director confirmed that a briefing note would be circulated on the strategic business case;
- The Committee noted the ongoing work in Birmingham in preparation for the Commonwealth Games in 2022;
- The Committee noted that double decker trains were unachievable due to Victorian train line infrastructure.

The Committee thanked Malcolm Holmes for his presentation and attendance.

#### **Resolved:**

- 1. That, a briefing note on Aldridge Train Station Business Case be circulated to the Committee in writing;**
- 2. That, the Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority, Executive Director of Rail at WMRE and the Deputy Leader of the Council be invited to attend a question and answer session at a future meeting of the Committee;**
- 3. That, a response on improvements works to train services at night be circulated to the Committee in writing.**

#### **32/19 Quarter 2 Financial Outturn 2019/20**

The Committee considered Quarter 2 Financial Outturn for 2019/20 which was presented by the Lead Accountant.

During this item, it was highlighted that in absence of the relevant Portfolio Holders, this item could not be fully scrutinised. Therefore, the Chair requested that this report be deferred to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee to allow Portfolio Holders to be present and allow questions from Members of the Committee.

The Chair recognised frustrations from Members of the Committee and stated that she would liaise with the Leader of the Council regarding Portfolio Holder attendance at Scrutiny meetings.

**Resolved:**

**That, the Quarter 2, Financial Outturn 2019/20 be deferred to 14 January 2020.**

**33/19 Areas of focus – 2019/20**

The Committee considered its areas of focus and the forward plans of Walsall Council, the Black Country Joint Executive Committee and West Midlands

It was noted that the Committee requested that a report on M6 Junction 10 and Section 106 Funding be presented at the next scheduled meeting of the Committee on 14 January 2020.

The Chair requested that Councillor Bott receive an update on Moxley Park and Ride. In response, the Democratic Services Officer responded that this would be received in writing.

**Resolved:**

- 1. That, areas of focus 2019/20 and forward plans be noted;**
- 2. That, an update on Moxley Park and Ride be provided to Councillor P Bott in writing.**

**34/19 Date of next meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 14 January 2020.

Termination of Meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated 7.12p.m.

Signed: .....

Date: .....